

Active Externalism
Arguments for and Against
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According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “*Externalism* with regard to mental content says that in order to have certain types of intentional mental states (e.g. beliefs), it is necessary to be related to the environment in the right way.” There are a few “flavors” of externalism, such as semantic externalism and active externalism. Clark and Chalmers argue for the side of active externalism. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy also defines active externalism: “*active externalism* asserts that the environment can play an active role in constituting and driving cognitive processes.” In Clark and Chalmers’ paper defending active externalism, they propose two thought experiments; one situation has a person consider how a physical program could take the place of a mental process such as mental rotation, while the other situation proposes using a notebook as a medium for memories. This argument, while decent, has some major flaws. These flaws are exposed in Adams and Aizawa’s response paper, which proposes an alternative theory, intercranialism. This is more of an internalist viewpoint, as it challenges some of the crucial points that Clark and Chalmers use to prove their theory. By the end of their retort, they provide a better theory than Clark and Chalmers provides.

To understand why Adams and Aizawa provide a better theory, we must first understand what Clark and Chalmers claim. Their first thought experiment asks the reader to imagine a game of tetris with three different scenarios. The first asks that the reader imagine the game of tetris being played where they have to perform the mental rotations of the pieces in their mind to determine if the piece would fit. The second has the same scenario, but instead of mentally rotating, they can instead press a button that would rotate the tetromino for them, while still maintaining the ability to do the rotations themselves. The third case is sort of a mirror of the first two, in that it proposes that there is an implanted brain chip that performs the function of

rotating as fast as case two, with the ability to still do the rotations mentally like in case one.

Clark and Chalmers claim that case three mimics case one, and that people would agree that case one definitely is a cognitive process. With that in mind, they make the inference that case three, then, must too be a cognitive process. They justify this claim when they write, “We cannot simply point to the skin/skull boundary as justification, since the legitimacy of that boundary is precisely what is at issue. But nothing else seems different.” (Clark & Chalmers, 2005) This implies that case one and three are the same.

Clark and Chalmers then proceed to take their theory beyond mental processes to a place that covers the mind. They want to prove that “...the mind extends into the world.” They accomplish this through their second thought experiment by analyzing a flaw they see in their argument, and determining that there actually is no issue. The thought experiment involves two individuals, Inga and Otto. Inga, a person with normal memory, intends to go to the MoMa. She recalls where it is located, and goes there. This shows that she believes that she remembers where it is located. This belief was already there, in one of her memories. They then talk about Otto. Otto has Alzheimer’s disease, which means that his memory is being lost, and has a hard time retaining new memories. To compensate for this, Otto carries a notebook with him that contains information he has learned so he will not forget. When Otto wants to go to the MoMa, he consults the notebook, finds the entry for the location, and then goes there. This is where Clark and Chalmers’ argument lies. They propose that it would be incorrect for people to assume that without memory, people have no beliefs, as they clearly exhibit having it. From this, they show that Otto, with bad memory, can still believe that the MoMa is located at the place written in the book. This shows that the mind is extending into the environment.

This is where Adams and Aizawa start to have problems with Clark and Chalmers' assertions. Adams and Aizawa make the case that Clark and Chalmers' arguments are not complex enough to sufficiently prove their theory. Their theory hinges on the assumption that the notebook constitutes a replacement for Otto's memory. To Adams and Aizawa, this conclusion is incomplete in its very nature. Adams and Aizawa define some key concepts which they use to finalize Clark and Chalmers' argument, thus showing its incompatibility with their theory as a whole. They define derived and non-derived content, and show that the notebook constitutes a form of derived content. From this, Adams and Aizawa make that claim that the notebook is insufficient for use as a replacement for a mental process. This is because they show that mental processes require non-derived content to function, as the process works without the need for context information. By showing that Clark and Chalmers' use of a process using derived content for the replacement of non-derived content, they sufficiently disprove Clark and Chalmers.

From here, Adams and Aizawa can disprove the first thought experiment. The issue remains the same with these cases. Firstly, they confirm that there is cognitive processes occurring in all 3 cases. However, they take exception to case two. As they defined earlier, non-derived content requires that there be no dependence on other content to maintain itself. Cognitive processes depend on this type of representation. With this in mind, Adams and Aizawa bring up the issue with the blocks in the example. The blocks being rotated in case one are ones that are mental representations of the blocks, so their nature is clearly non-derived. In case two, the blocks are being rotated on the screen. This is where the issue lies; the blocks aren't representations anymore, but rather are distinct physical objects. This makes the blocks a

form of derived content, and therefore unsuitable for use in place of the mental rotation. This alone shows that case one and two do not fulfil Clark and Chalmers' claim for the cases having "no principled difference" (Clark & Chalmers, 2005).

Where Adams and Aizawa go wrong is when they try to refute the derived conditions Clark and Chalmers propose for what constitutes as a physical part of the mind. Clark and Chalmers define the conditions necessary in terms of the Otto experiment: "First, the notebook is a constant in Otto's life - in cases where the information in the notebook would be relevant, he will rarely take action without consulting it. Second, the information in the notebook is directly available without difficulty. Third, upon retrieving information from the notebook he automatically endorses it. Fourth, the information in the notebook has been consciously endorsed at some point in the past, and indeed is there as a consequence of this endorsement." (Clark & Chalmers, 2005) Upon meeting these conditions, the physical object is causally connected. It is here that Adams and Aizawa believe it is sufficient to disprove the argument by saying that under these conditions, there would be an overload of cognitive bleeding. This is not a provocative claim. This is not a sufficiently complex retort to Clark and Chalmers list of conditions. Adams and Aizawa use the lack of complexity on the part of Clark and Chalmers, yet in the same paper, Adams and Aizawa are guilty of falling into the same trap of simplistic arguments.

Even with this criticism in mind, Adams and Aizawa succinctly and satisfactorily show why Clark and Chalmers are unable to prove their theory of active externalism. They show that all of their thought experiments fail at supporting with accuracy their claims for the mind extending to the environment. Rather, their own logical approach of intercranialism is well

received as a more compelling alternative. With their disputes to the tetris experiment and to Otto's notebook, Clark and Chalmers' assertions fall apart, while actually further proving Adams and Aizawa's claims.

References

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