

John Preston

Is my Mobile part of my Mind?

Abstract

Andy Clark and David Chalmer's theses of 'active externalism' and 'the extended mind' ('The Extended Mind', Analysis, 58, 1998) claim that (a) when humans are appropriately linked with 'external' entities, the whole arrangement constitutes a cognitive system in its own right, and (b) some of a subject's mental phenomena are constituted partly by features of that subject's environment. One consequence of this, followed up in Clark's more recent work (e.g. Natural-Born Cyborgs, (Oxford University Press, 2003)), is the suggestion that that my mobile phone is a genuinely cognitive component of a cognitive system of which I am merely another component, that my mobile constitutes part of my mind.

I take issue with such ideas, challenging Clark and Chalmers' argument for active externalism, their claims about computation and cognition, and their concept of a cognitive system. Active externalism is right to focus on cognitive systems constituted by organisms in appropriate relations to extra-bodily resources. But it wrongly portrays the relationship between an organism's mind and its faculties as causal rather than constitutive, and wrongly portrays the relationship between an organism's cognition and the extra-bodily resources it might use in cognition as purely causal rather than normative. Along the way, I defend the deflationary (and common sense) alternative, according to which such resources count as *tools*, rather than parts of one's mind. All that is needed to make sense of the acceptable parts of active externalism is that idea that extra-bodily resources (and implants) can be components of cognitive systems, systems which *are* thereby extended beyond the body. They figure in cognitive processes not just as objects of cognition, but also in an active capacity, as scaffolding. Nevertheless, these extra-bodily resources aren't made genuinely cognitive by their being components of cognitive systems. They're cognitive only in a derivative way, and they aren't parts of one's mind.

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