



In here and out there

## Description

The theory of [extended mind](#), elaborated by philosophers David Chalmers and Andy Clark, appeals to anyone involved in the built environment. The theory proposes that cognitive functioning (reasoning, perceiving, remembering) rely on various augmentations from the environment we are in. Hence, we have notepads, drawing tools, computers, smartphones, the Internet. These extensions are not just supplements to the mind, but are part of it. We think as we do in large part due to the tools of which we avail ourselves. Clark proposes a "porous" view of mind, in which

the actual local operations that make cognizing possible and that give content and character to our mental life include inextricable tangles of feedback, feedforward, and feedaround loops that promiscuously criss-cross the boundaries of brain, body, and world (277).

Not least, the extended mind proposition challenges aspects of cartesian dualism, and speaks to a world of engagement, of "being in the world," rather than apart from it, concepts relevant to anyone interested in designing for bodies, spatiality, environment, place, landscape and architecture.

## Proof of an external world

Chalmers reprises the extended mind theory in his recent book *Reality+* which ostensibly addresses the question "Can we prove there is an external world?" (61). He enlists the hypothetical *simulation hypothesis* to animate the inquiry – that is, the (unlikely) prospect that we might all be living in a simulated reality generated within some highly sophisticated computer system.

The question is an update on Descartes' skepticism about the reality of the world. How do we know it is not all an illusion perpetrated by an evil demon? According to Descartes I know the world is real because I am the one doubting its reality. That establishes my own subjective being. Descartes then argues for the existence of an external reality. Chalmers discusses variations on the Cartesian formulation and attempts at resolving the problems it entails.

A search on my Kindle edition reveals that Chalmers uses the phrase "external world" in that book at least 167 times, coupled with questions such as: does it exist? how do we know it exists? how do we know what it is like? can it be known? can it be replicated? is it the only reality?

Dare I say, I think these variants around the Cartesian anxiety already presume too much in the way they are framed. To ask about proof of an "external world" already validates the concepts of an internal and an external world. I think the legitimacy of the extended mind theory can be bolstered further by recruiting philosophies that resist that framing.

## Beyond object and subject

One of the first serious books on philosophy I read was Richard J. Bernstein's *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* in which he attacks the framing of the problem of internal versus external worlds, subjectivity versus objectivity, subject versus object and the "anxieties" that flow from that.

Objectivism has frequently been used to designate metaphysical realism, the claim that there is a world of objective reality that exists independently of us and that has a determinate nature or essence that we can know. In modern times objectivism has been closely linked with an acceptance of a basic metaphysical or epistemological distinction between the subject and the object. What is "out there" (objective) is presumed to be independent of us (subjects), and knowledge is achieved when a subject correctly mirrors or represents objective reality. This dominant form of objectivism is only one variety of the species (9).

Philosophers like thought experiments, such as the simulation hypothesis. Here is another thought experiment: what if there existed an alien race of beings that had no conceptual framing of inside versus outside? How far could such a species go in developing a language and a repertoire of actions that make sense in their world. Richard Rorty bases his philosophical argument in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* on what difference it would make for such an alien race that

had not formulated the problem of subject and object, nor that of mind and matter (71).

Appealing to peculiarities of such a hypothetical alien species is not so far fetched. Humans are adept at deliberately selecting some terms and avoiding others to help construct or bolster a particular world view. Psychological counsellors and educators encourage a positive mind set by avoiding words like "hate," "correct," "must," "duty," in favour of terms such as "respect," "agreement," "divergence."

Terms such as "subjectivity" and "objectivity" are easily avoided in a context such as academic or artistic assessment and have substitutes that are more precise and specific to the situation at hand. Some philosophers of mind and of science (e.g. Bernstein, Rorty, Kuhn) can be equally adept at this avoidance and increased precision in talking about their domains, other than when addressing historically the "Cartesian anxiety."

To invoke distinctions on the basis of subject and object is a way of talking, historically contingent, convenient in some cases, less in others. I feel that the framing suggested by Bernstein and Rorty could potentially do service to Chalmers and Clark's extended mind theory, as could a guarded use of terms such as "external world."

## Bibliography

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- Clark, Andy. "Embodied, embedded, and extended cognition." In *The Cambridge Handbook of Cognitive Science*, edited by Keith Frankish, and William Ramsey, 276-291. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Kuhn, Thomas. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1970.
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## Note

- Featured image is animated projection mapping Rouen Cathedral, August 2019.

## Category

1. Architecture

## Tags

1. Descartes
2. extended mind
3. reality

## Date Created

August 13, 2022

## Author

rcoyne99