

## Feeling Extended

### A book review of *Feeling Extended: Sociality as Extended Body-Becoming-Mind*

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**Patricia Grosse**  
Department of Philosophy,  
Villanova University  
[patricia.grosse@gmail.com](mailto:patricia.grosse@gmail.com)

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In their (in)famous work, “The Extended Mind” (1998), Andy Clark and David Chalmers introduce the Extended Mind Hypothesis (henceforth, EMT) by means of a famous example: Otto and his notebook<sup>61</sup>. This notebook ought to be considered as an extension of Otto’s mind, they claim, as he uses it as a functional equivalent of certain cognitive capacities that are normally lodged inside the head. Clark and Chalmers have to do the hard work of laying the groundwork for getting cognition out of the head. However, EMT is missing something that Clark and Chalmers find pernicious. In fact, if this review were a proper space for joking, I would say that Clark and Chalmers do not want to include into their theory what many men do not like to even talk about: their feelings. That is, they seek to avoid the “qualia trap,” by which they mean the question of how we feel about our experiences (qualia). In his recent book *Feeling Extended: Sociality as Extended Body-Becoming-Mind*, Douglas Robinson introduces “feeling” back into the extended mind in a compelling and effective way. Currently Chair Professor of English and Dean of the Arts Faculty at Hong Kong Baptist University, Robinson’s varied research interests and publications are all found by the common thread of inter- (and perhaps intra-) communication. Robinson is in the difficult position of strad-

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dling two worlds: Materialism and Idealism. He writes of himself in the Introduction to *Feeling Extended...*, that he is “a materialist who recognizes that everything we know about material reality is a quale, and an idealist who recognizes that qualia are human groups’ ultimately inadequate attempts to represent and control material reality” (15).

As a general note, the author’s style is florid and convivial. This book is truly a pleasure to read (or at least feels that way). The author’s personal accounts are a pleasant surprise—his novel method of counting laps while swimming, a fight with his (now ex-) wife in Note 12 of Chapter One that leads to a broken fender and a psychically wounded arm, his feeling at home with the Spanish language despite his lack of ability to communicate in it. He is able to paint a picture so vivid that the reader too must find herself victim to the conative force of his writing. Included in this text is a delightful Appendix called “Liar-Paradox Monism.” This Appendix should be read as soon as possible upon picking up the text. In it Robinson addresses Chalmers’ Hard Problem of Consciousness (“the problem not only of *how* but of *why* certain physical structures give rise to consciousness (or experience, or qualia)” (Robinson 179)). That is, we cannot get at an understanding of qualia from the standpoint of the “real,” physical world. The two options we are left with to make sense of qualia, on Robinson’s account, are “a naturalistic or interactive dualism that posits two realms, the physical and the mental, and builds bridges between them, and a panpsychic monism that explains the physical as proto-experiential” (179). Robinson’s answer to the Problem is to lie—a philosophical position that he has playfully termed “Liar-Paradox monism (LP monism).” By giving an analysis of Oscar Wilde’s “The Decay of Lying,” Robinson offers a way out of the problem by postulating the possibility of maintaining a position while acknowledging that one may be lying to oneself or others about the veracity of said position. That is, “what LP monism does ... is embrace the dissonances, embrace the complex phenomenally and rhetoricity of our engagement with the world, and so offer a truer account of the world as we experience it” (203). If one were to make sense of this Appendix one would make sense of the overall force of the text. We cannot give a “real” account of the world—we are always-already in a situation that is determined by myriad factors beyond our capacity to fully understand, though it is possible that we might tell ourselves some sort of sense-making narrative based upon our experiences. But, “I could be lying to myself” (206). Robinson gives a clearer example of what he means by the liar-paradox in Chapter One: “my computer, who is my friend, sometimes unaccountably acts like an inanimate object. As a result, I form a belief that it probably *is* an inanimate object, and keep provisionally contrasting that belief with my strong *feeling* that it is alive and friendly and there to help me do my work till I am willing to say, tentatively, that probably only *seems* to be alive” (66). That is, my interaction with my computer is as-if it were really alive and not merely a mechanical extension of

myself. While I know “intellectually” that I am the one who set up applications on my computer that make writing easier and also that I am the one who interacts with the interface meaningfully, when my computer breaks down I am forced to see the lie I’ve been telling myself.

In Chapter One of his book, Robinson gives an account of the central concepts of the EMT. He undergirds his argument with Hegel’s philosophy of mind regarding the interaction between mind and tools. While the bulk of the work done by proponent of within Philosophy of Mind has been to articulate and defend the claim that our consciousness—at least, parts of our cognitive apparatus—extends into the world, outside of the brain and even outside of the skin, Robinson offers an “as-if” (to borrow from Damasio 1999) EMT—we feel our consciousness as-if it were extended. Though the chapter is titled “Inside Out,” Robinson suggests that a fuller title would be “Inside Out and Outside In” (34). In elucidating these two points I will turn to the examples Robinson uses: his two wives. In “Outside in,” which refers to one’s feelings towards the things outside of us, he gives the example of his own experience of learning Russian: Russian was a foreign tongue to him until he heard his second wife “speaking loving Russian” to their daughter (53). Once he heard the language in this loving context, he *felt* more at home with it. He writes, “If learning is largely an outside-in operation—the internalization of words, numbers, images, ideas to which we are exposed outside our heads—there must be a process by which things that are alien to us because they are outside us gradually become part of our affective-becoming-conative ‘tissue’” (55). By “inside out,” Robinson engages with the Hegelian notion of tools and cognition as extended desire (or, “interactive affect-becoming-conation” (55)). There is a revealing section in this chapter in which he discusses “Proprioceptively extended cognition,” whereby the individual throws out their mind-map, for want of a better expression, onto the world at large. Robinson and his first wife, evidently, had a contentious relationship. One argument ended with their car fender being dented. Although he was outside the car watching the accident unfold, he “felt a stabbing pain in my left shoulder. My nervous system, mapping my body onto the car’s, lying prone with my wife “steering” me, simulated in my body the “pain” “felt” by the car’s body. Antonio Damasio (1999: 80) calls the neuronal system that makes this simulation possible the “as-if body loop,” but mainly means by it our bodies’ tendency to mimic the body states of other *people*. The possibility that we also simulate the “body states” of inanimate objects would be a materialist explanation of the pathetic fallacy” (Robinson 2013, n.1.12, 211). The extension of one’s body to an inanimate object is intriguing in its obviousness. When one sees one’s car with scrapes on the side after a particularly terrible parking job, one winces, regardless of whether the scrape happened yesterday or three years ago. Why is that?

In Chapter Two, “Language as Cognitive Labels” Robinson engages with Adams and Aizawa, who so dearly seek to keep cognition in the head. He offers “a counter model (to Fodor’s language-of-thought hypothesis and the Computational Theory of Mind) by tracing the actual emergence of thought out of embodied (affective-becoming-cognitive) communication with others” (28). Robinson seeks to problematize what he sees as the “binarization in terms of cognition and noncognition” of the “spectrum of thought and language” by appealing to “fuzzy logic” (78). That is, Robinson claims that Adams and Aizawa do an injustice to the inexorably intertwined nature of thought and language. To put it plainly, Robinson sees a difficulty with the claim that thought stays in the head and affects language and is not in turn affected by our own use of language or other transcranial forces (i.e. the language of other people). Following Robinson’s example in this chapter, I say something rude to my friend. He asks me if I am hungry and therefore “hangry” and I say “Yes.” He offers a cookie and things are resolved. Where did the realization occur in me - the realization that I was angry because I was hungry? It was only upon further reflection *due to his comment* that I realized that I was indeed being aggressive because my blood sugar was low and I desperately needed to eat something. The force of this argument in this chapter is thus: it is silly to divide up this interaction into “discrete chunks labeled ‘cognition’ and ‘noncognition’” because that would be like trying to separate the “white” from the “rice” (84). Basically, Robinson claim is that there needs to be more acceptance of the fact that we not only are embodied creatures who think, but also thinking embodied creatures who interact with and are affected by the world and others.

In Chapter Three, “Language as Conative Force,” Robinson critiques the limited notion of language as merely verbal labels (what Robinson considers the rationalist philosophy of language) he outlines in Chapter Two. Robinson delves into what he calls “the focal claim” of his book: “that *something* connects us, non semantically (non propositionally)—that sociality really is a form of extended body-becoming-mind” (28). This connection can be seen in the simple fact that there is much more to communication than simple words. The meaning of a simple sentence is closely bound with the performance of that utterance. Anyone that has inadvertently started a fight with a loved one through text message knows the importance of tone and body language all too well. And how are we to describe this connection between speakers that makes them able to understand each other’s meanings? Throughout this text Robinson brings key figures in the history of philosophy, religion, and literature into conversation with more “scientific” theories of cognition and communication in order to better develop his project. In this chapter, he develops his theory of conative *force* by engaging with Jacques Derrida’s *iterability*, Mikhail Bakhtin’s *internal dialogism*, and Pierre Bourdieu’s *habitus*. In doing so, Robinson is better able to engage with “the possibility that there are other

channels of communication, especially some sort of affective-becoming-conative *force* that is often directly verbalized as speech acts, but, as indirect speech acts suggest, need not be verbalized in order to be transmitted” (118).

These forces which are passed person to person are qualia, Robinson claims in Chapter Four, “Qualia as Interpretants.” When I yawn I cause my friend to yawn; this transomatic, transcranial activity is an interpretant that has a “qualia” force. As we all know, yawning is highly contagious. I am yawning as I write this sentence—not because I am tired, but because I am contemplating just the word itself. When I gave the example of yawning in order to describe the nature of the interrelation between qualia and interpretants with a colleague over the phone, she yawned as well. Transcraniality thus need not be local. Not surprisingly, Robinson relies on the foundational work of Charles Sanders Peirce to gird his views. What Robinson has to contend with is the seeming absurdity of qualia. Is this because men don’t like to talk about feelings? Or at least take them as seriously as they do more rational things? Daniel Dennett certainly doesn’t, when he calls us to “‘quine’ (deny the existence of) qualia” (Robinson 119; see Dennett 1988). However, by denying qualia as mere phantasms, Dennett, Clark, et al. ignore the force that these qualia have on bodies-becoming-minds. When arguing with a lover, after all, it is best to use “subjective” language that swerves around “objective” reality. As a case in point, “I felt like you don’t respect my work when you ask me to watch our child when I’m trying to write,” is a more effective form of communication than “you don’t respect my work because you asked me to take care of the kid.” In Robinson’s words, “The notion that mind-as-qualia is somehow too ethereal to guide or steer the body is sheer atavistic Cartesianism” (145). A theory of cognition that doesn’t account for affect, or the fact that human beings are bodied and always surrounded by other bodied human beings, is unavoidably negligent and lacking. How I experience the world ought not to be discarded, and to do so would be to claim a strong distinction between the purity of mind and the muddiness of feeling, emotional bodies.

The affective embodiment theory Robinson promotes need not be completely baseless and outside of contemporary research in neuroscience. In Chapter Five, “Empathy, Face, and Ritual,” Robinson engages with social neuroscience in order to further explicate his thesis. “What this empirical research strongly suggests,” says Robinson, “is that we don’t necessarily *know* what others are feeling, but we do tend to *feel* what they are feeling” (153). Once Robinson lays out the “empirical evidence” for bodily and mental representations as qualia, he turns to speculation. In an extensive section on the Ancient Greek—by way of Aristotle—notion of *doxa*, Robinson notes that “face” is a useful alternative translation for *doxa*, which my Ancient Greek lexicon enumerates as the opinion which others have of one, estimation, reputation, credit, honor, glory, etc. *Doxa* is related to one’s situated identity. That is, the individual is interested in maintaining face, maintaining her ability to have a certain social standing, by

any means necessary. And this “face” she wishes to keep is dependent on how others perceive her. This account of Ancient Greek *doxa* is a lovely way to demonstrate his general theory of bodies-becoming-mind converting qualia into collective behavioral pressure (145). Let us unpack this: qualia is how we feel about things in the world. Some call this fleeting, ethereal, not “really real” But how we feel about the world informs how we think and act at a deep level, perhaps even all the way down. We are bodies-becoming-mind, in Robinson’s view, because of the complex interweaving and enmeshing of cognitive and non-cognitive. Indeed things are so mixed up between body and mind that separating the two in order to contemplate and catalog either ends up in poor science. Robinson thinks that this enmeshing is also extended to societal interactions - as already in a social group, we convert qualia - how we feel about the world - into collective behavioral pressure. An example of this can be seen in Robinson’s discussion of the conflation of feeling and looking in the context of mirror neurons: “what enables us to distinguish my moment from yours, the individual from the group, is in fact a secondary cognitive (meta)qualia that is belatedly imposed on transcranial proprioception.” (166). To Robinson, feeling caught up in an event such as the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics is not to be unconscious and unmindful, it is a distinctive mode of being—body-becoming-mind. Thus the “I” in the *Cogito* is an I that is after, an I that is already extended body-becoming-mind, an I that thinks it has stripped itself bare of everything but the essential. But to be human is not to be a mature mind fleshed in a body sitting comfortably by a fire, but to a being who once was an infant, who learned to talk, and, hopefully, has loved and been loved in return. To be human is to be already enmeshed in the world.

Perhaps the most shocking claim of the book (even more shocking than Chapter Four’s nearly *ad hominem* attacks against Andy Clark, which include accusations of Clark inhabiting Plato’s cave) is a very innocent remark in Chapter One concerning our use of tools: while extending mind to tools makes Otto’s day easier and his capacity for cognition greater, not all tool use ends up with sharper users. It’s the dark secret of the EMT, on Robinson’s view, that the very nature of the human-tool interaction can lead to “brain-fried zombies” (42). That is, not all extension of mind need make one more intelligent, it may make one duller. This is not at all to undermine the EMT, as while Google may make out memory retention duller, it can arguably lead to more successful being-in-the-world (see also Carr 2011 and Sparrow & Wegner 2011).

Robinson seeks to inhabit a between place between pure extension and pure “flesh-box.” In doing so he does not do himself any favors with potential readers thoroughly entrenched in this or that camp within the Philosophy of Mind. Perhaps his insistence on not denying or fully ascribing to the EMT is not convincing enough for either hardline externalist (e.g. Clark) or internalist (e.g. A&A) camps. However, doesn’t his between position relieve us of a great burden: the burden of proof? If we know at base that cognition *feels* extended, is

that not enough? Robert Rupert, a critic of the EMT, argues in his *Cognitive Systems and the Extended Mind* that the thinkers such as Wheeler and other neo-Heideggerians are mistaken in their view that we should take into account our alreadiness, the fact that we are always-already in a culture, when positing accounts of the extension of mind. He claims that this phenomenological view “suffers from an obvious and crippling foundational problem that the filling in of further details does not alleviate. The Heideggerian view offers no explanation of how the human internalizes social norms or of how social norms come into existence” (Rupert 2009: 162) Robinson gets around the difficulty of coming up with a proper syllogism to withstand Rupert’s critique by rejecting the need for strong, hard science to back him up. There are plenty of studies he can point to in support of his claims (which he does at length in Chapter Five), but his appeal to fuzzy logic as well as LP monism relieves him of that burden of proof.

In *Feeling Extended...*, Robinson misses the opportunity to bring Feminist Epistemology in conversation with EMT and Affect Theory. In Chapter Four, Robinson really drives the stake into the heart of the primacy of science: “Empirical testing, after all, might reveal the extent to which empirical science rests on the gossamer foundation of qualia” (Robinson 143). He brings Thomas Kuhn’s work into the conversation as a way of problematizing the way in which “Science” is enshrined in our culture. This distrust of the “objectivity” which empirical science lays claim to has long been discussed in Feminist Epistemology. The moves Robinson makes, while interesting and important, are not earth-shattering when read against such figures as Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, or Susan Bordo, to name but a few. That being said, it is not possible to engage with the entire history of philosophy in a given text, even for a text that engages so heavily with the literature spanning several fields, disciplines, and theoretical approaches. Robinson has cleared the ground—if you could forgive the Heideggerian phrase—for research that remains to be done in this area, i.e. the linking and critical interrogation of theories of Extended Mind from the perspective of Feminist Epistemology. After all, what is missing in classical approaches to Extended Mind? How we feel, how we interact with others, basically, how “we” are in the world.

*Feeling Extended...* is well-researched, well-written, and one of the more enjoyable texts one may come across in its field. It is - on the face of it - an answer to the ‘qualia trap’ that Clark and Chalmers so eagerly aim to avoid, but much more sophisticated than that. Douglas Robinson opens the way for new work in the field of 4E+A by calling a spade a spade, a feeling a feeling.

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