
Expertise, Extension, Evolution

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Abstract

Session: Cultural Evolution (Lewens, Buskell, Clarke) Contemporary accounts of cultural evolution take culture to be a channel of heritable information, complementing analogous channels of genetic and individually-based information (Richerson and Boyd 2005; Mesoudi 2011). What demarcates cultural information is its propagation through mechanisms of social transmission, which can take cultural conspecifics or external artefacts as bearers of useful information. But it is an open question whether or not such a system can propagate the information of extended cognitive systems, where external artefacts form a constituent part of the supervenience base of an ephemeral cognitive system (Clark 1998, 2008, 2010). Sterelny (2010) argues that such temporary systems should, in fact, be seen instead as persisting capacities of an agent to self-assemble systems, particularly systems where the external artefacts are seen as highly trustworthy, entrenched and complementary to a single-user in a specific context. This characterisation of the underlying information of extended systems – fine-grained and unique to individuals – seems to equate extended cognitive systems with artefact employing expertise. Expertise as such is not directly transmittable (Sterelny 2006), but can serve as part of the explanation for propagation in terms of model-based imitation (Richerson and Boyd 2005). Yet characterising extended cognition as expertise seems to leave out some of its more convincing cases. I will argue that when we loosen some of Sterelny's (2010) criteria, we can capture the paradigmatic cases of cognitive extension, and create a more viable picture of the transmission of extended cognitive systems through pedagogical contexts scaffolding individual learning (Clark 1998; Gergely & Csibra 2009).

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