

The Empty and Extended Self

According to Buddhism's four noble truths, we find our lives filled with anguished suffering because we habitually crave for life to be other than it is; and this habit of craving will cease only if we cultivate in our lives the Buddha's path of mental discipline, wisdom, and moral conduct. The goal of Buddhism is to cure craving. One aspect of the cure is the realization that the self is empty, that one has no core self with an intrinsic nature as a permanent changeless identity. One result of the cure is that one develops compassion for others who are stuck in the cycle of craving and anguish.

There is a model of the self that can be derived from the recent work of some philosophers in the field of cognitive science. In particular, I am thinking of Andy Clark and Daniel Dennett. Their writings suggest a model of the self that I would describe as spread out in space and time, or to use Clark's term, extended. On this view of the extended self, there is no core self, no central controller, chooser, meaner, or thinker.

This essay is the first step in a larger project of mine to show how to use a contemporary model of the extended self to reinterpret the Buddhist model of the empty self, and to do so in a way that embraces and illuminates the aims of Buddhism: to stop the craving that causes suffering and to act with socially engaged compassion. The idea is to contribute to a twenty-first century Buddhism.

In this essay I will argue that the Buddhist claim that the self is empty is akin to Andy Clark's claim that the mind is extended. How and why the self is

empty in the Buddhist sense can be usefully explained and elaborated if we assume that the mind is extended in Clark's sense. I will be appealing primarily to two texts: Clark's *Supersizing the Mind: Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension* (2008) and Guy Newland's *Introduction to Emptiness: As Taught in Tsong-kha-pa's Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path* (2008).

1. A Brief Primer on the Empty Self

The founder of the Ge-luk sect of Tibetan Buddhism is Tsong-kha-pa, who in 1402 presented a synthesizing vision of Buddhism in his *Great Treatise*. Tsong-kha-pa is of the Madhyamaka tradition of Buddhist philosophy and relies heavily on the writings of Nagarjuna. Newland is an editor of the three-volume English translation of the *Great Treatise* (Snow Lion Publications, 2000-2004). Newland's *Introduction to Emptiness* is a distillation, summary, and restatement of Tsong-kha-pa's key ideas, aimed at a contemporary but educated audience.

Let me introduce a few key points using Newland's exposition. According to Buddhist philosophy,

we superimpose upon ourselves—and on things around us—a false existence, a self-existence of essential reality that actually does not exist at all. . . . [T]he ultimate truth is the sheer absence, the lack, of any such essence. This is emptiness. . . . The spiritual path to buddhahood involves balanced development of two factors: wisdom—which knows the emptiness of all that exists—and compassionate action for the welfare of other living beings. Wisdom destroys all reifications and penetrates ultimate truth, while leaving intact the conventional truths that allow us to exist, to make ethical distinctions, and to help those who suffer. (Newland 14 and 16)

The Buddhist tradition offers plenty of arguments intended to show that all things are empty. Reflecting and meditating on these arguments in order to really let them sink in is an essential part of the path. These arguments are often reductio in form, refuting each of the logically limiting alternatives implied by the claim that intrinsic natures exist. (For example, Tsong-kha-pa argues that an essential self cannot exist because it is neither identical with nor different from the aggregates of mind and body [Newland 91-94].) A very important point, however, is that although such arguments are supposed to establish the *ultimate* truth that things, including chariots and trees and persons, are empty, it is still correct to say that such things exist *conventionally*. This distinction between ultimate and conventional truth is crucial in Buddhist accounts of emptiness: persons who make decisions and act in the world do exist (conventionally), but ultimately there is no core self. I believe a similar distinction applies to the extended self: extended cognitive agents exist, but there is no central thinker and controller. More on this later.

What does it mean when Buddhists say that a conventionally existing thing is empty? They certainly mean that it has no permanent changeless identity, no substantial core that persists through changes. But, according to Newland, the heart of Tsong-kha-pa's view, supported by text from Nagarjuna, is that emptiness is the same thing as *dependent arising* (see Newland 37-38). A central tenet of Buddhism is that things come into being in dependence on causes and conditions. To be empty is to be a function of various causes and conditions; things do not exist (ultimately) in and of themselves, but they do exist (conventionally) inasmuch as

they arise dependently. Soon I will suggest that the model of the extended self may offer a contemporary illumination of the empty, dependently arising self.

2. A Brief Primer on the Extended Self

Andy Clark thinks that we sometimes think *on* paper. When you use pen and paper to solve a complex equation,

[t]he loop through pen and paper is part of the physical machinery responsible for the shape of the flow of [your] thoughts and ideas. . . . [T]he outward loop [is] a functional part of an extended cognitive machine . . . [built] of extended cognitive circuits that are themselves the minimal material bases for important aspects of thought and reason. (Clark 2008, xxvii)

So your mind is supersized, spread out into the world. According to this view, the mind is not brainbound; human cognition does not depend directly on neural activity alone.

[T]hinking and cognizing may (at times) depend directly and noninstrumentally upon the ongoing work of the body and/or the extraorganismic environment. . . . [T]he actual local operations that realize certain forms of human cognizing include inextricable tangles of feedback, feed-forward, and feed-around loops: loops that promiscuously criss-cross the boundaries of brain, body, and world. (Clark 2008, xxviii)

Although the above summary is based on Clark's 2008 book *Supersizing the Mind*, he hatched the idea in a 1998 paper in *Analysis* co-authored by David Chalmers and entitled "The Extended Mind" (reprinted as an appendix in Clark 2008). In that paper he advocates an active externalism for mind, arguing that if some part of the world functions in a process that would count as a cognitive process were it done in the head, then that part of the world is part of the cognitive process.

In such cases, the human organism and an external entity form a coupled system that is itself a cognitive process. Otto's notebook is the famous (in some circles) example elaborated in Clark and Chalmer's essay. Otto, who has Alzheimer's, always carries a notebook to write down new information, and then consults the notebook as needed to retrieve information, like: MOMA is on 53rd Street. The notebook is Otto's memory and its information functions like the information in an ordinary non-occurrent belief. Thus, Clark concludes, "beliefs can be constituted partly by features of the environment, when those features play the right sort of role in driving cognitive processes. If so, the mind extends into the world" (Clark 2008, 226).

In *Supersizing the Mind*, Clark elaborates and defends the extended mind thesis, offering a variety of examples of extended processes. Examples build from extended sensorimotor processes (like a player running to catch a fly ball or a dog snagging a frisbee) to extended bodily agency processes (like fluently using a stick to hit a ball or dig for termites) to extended cognitive processes (like language use, second-order reflection, and of course Otto and his notebook). I am going to mention a few examples *without* explaining the detailed experiments and reasoning that justify the conclusions.

Suppose you are given a pile of colored blocks. Your task is to look at a model pattern of colored blocks on the left and reconstruct the pattern on the right using your blocks. Research shows that your strategy would not be to look at the model, then decide on the color and position of the next block to be added, and then move

that block into position. What you use instead are repeated rapid eye movements (saccades) just before *and* after picking up the next block; glancing at the model stores only one piece of information at a time, either the color or the position, and just in time for immediate split-second motor control. Catching a fly ball or a frisbee works the same way. Sensory inputs are not transduced into a persisting inner model that you (or your mind or your reasoning system) consult in order to calculate the appropriate motor outputs. Rather, information from the environment is gathered by sensors on an as-needed basis for micro motor control. In extended sensorimotor processes, the agent and the environment are tightly coupled in a task-specific agent-world circuit.¹

Agent-world circuits and combinations of them can explain why some agents are capable of becoming one with their tools, as “plastic neural resources become recalibrated . . . so as to automatically take account of new bodily and sensory opportunities” (Clark 2008, 39). Thus whole new agent-world circuits are created; “the new agent-tool interface itself fades from view, and the proper picture is one of

¹ See Clark 2008, sections 1.3-1.5, and this pair of passages from pages 15-16:

Sensing here acts as a constantly available channel that productively couples agent and environment rather than as a kind of “veil of transduction” whereby world-originating signals must be converted into a persisting inner model of the external scene. . . . Instead of using sensing to get enough information inside, past the visual bottleneck, so as to allow the reasoning system to “throw away the world” and solve the problem wholly internally, [extended sensorimotor strategies] use the sensor as *an open conduit allowing environmental magnitudes to exert a constant influence on behavior*. Sensing is here depicted as the opening of a channel, with successful whole-system behavior emerging when activity in this channel is kept within a certain range. What is created is thus a kind of new, task-specific agent-world circuit.

an extended or enhanced agent confronting the (wider) world” (Clark 2008, 31).² Examples of such extended agents include all kinds of fluent tool use, as well as more surprising cases, like “a brain-machine interface . . . that allows a macaque monkey to use thought control to move a robot arm” (33) and Tactile-Visual Substitution Systems that allow blind people to recognize faces and to bat rolling balls (35). Of key importance for Clark, language too is a tool incorporated with extended agents like us.

Words on the page and speech sounds in the air are “material symbols” with which we form agent-world circuits. Language is “a form of mind-transforming cognitive scaffolding” enabling the discovery of abstract patterns (via labeling), the development of certain kinds of expertise (via verbal rehearsal), and the exercise of our capacities to reflect on our own thoughts and character and to guide our own thinking (via second order cognitive dynamics). The latter capacities are crucial for making us the kind of minds and selves that we are. “As soon as we formulate a thought in words or on paper, it becomes an object for both ourselves and for others. As an object, it is the kind of thing we can have thoughts about” (Clark 2008, 58). Thus the linguistic forms and structures in our environment are part and parcel of some of our most important extended cognitive processes, forming “a potent overlay

² Clark explores the agent-tool extension in detail in chapter 2, and this is also the launching point for his 2003 book, *Natural-Born Cyborgs*.

that . . . reconfigures the [extended] space [of agent-world circuitry] for biological reason and self-control” (Clark 2008, 59).³

Animals sometimes construct their own niches—spider webs, beaver dams. Cognitive niche construction is the process by which animals build physical structures that transform problem-solving spaces to aid thinking and reasoning. For animals like us, language is a self-engineered cognitive superniche, a cognitive niche that allows us to construct open-ended sequences of new cognitive niches. By reducing the descriptive complexity of the environment and engendering new feedback cycles, language use makes possible a process of increasingly complex cognitive self-stimulation that loops out into the environment creating agent-world circuits that incorporate external props and structures into extended cognitive processes. Clark’s examples range from a bartender’s designating different kinds of glasses for serving different drinks, to solving complex accounting problems, to playing the video game Tetris, to driving a car or playing the piano, and even to interpreting others as intentional agents (see 59-75).

Thus, according to Clark, “we are not just bodily and sensorily but also *cognitively* permeable agents” (2008, 40). We can change the world in ways that enable feedback loops, and hence agent-world circuits that extend our cognitive

³ Clark is here rejecting accounts of language like Fodor’s language of thought model. According to Clark’s model,

language works its magic not (or not solely) by means of translation into appropriate expressions of neuralese or the language of thought but also by something more like coordination dynamics. Encounters with words and structured linguistic encodings act to anchor and discipline intrinsically fluid and context-sensitive modes of thought and reason. This notion of anchoring is best appreciated in the light of connectionist or artificially neural network models of memory, storage, and processing. (Clark 2008, 53)

processes out into the world. Otto did this with his notebook. You do it when you reorder Scrabble pieces to prompt better recall (65). We all do it when we establish agent-world circuitry with the material symbols of language.

Finally, although Clark's focus is on the cognitive processes of what he calls the extended mind, he is aware that his account of extended mind implies an extended self. His account builds from extended sensorimotor loops, to extended embodied agents, to extended cognitive processes. "Otto *himself*," says Clark, "is best regarded as an extended system, a coupling of biological organism and external resources. . . . [We should, he says,] see agents themselves as spread into the world" (Clark 2008, 232). Thus, his is a case not just for an extended mind, but for an extended being that thinks and acts in the world, an extended self.

In each of the next three sections I will explain how the extended self is akin to the Buddhist empty self, and then how the model of the extended self offers contemporary insight for interpreting why and how the self is empty.

3. Empty and Extended: a system of dependent arisings

The empty self and the extended self are both systems of functionally designated parts. The empty self is a system of dependent arisings. The extended self is a mesh of agent-world circuitry. According to Buddhism, things are empty because they are dependent arisings, they are a function of various causes and conditions; "things exist *only* insofar as they are related to other things. . . .

Everything emerges from the surging and relentless complexity of innumerable interdependent conditions” (Newland 95). The extended model may help to enumerate at least some of the conditions that give rise to the empty self.

But from which set of interdependent conditions does the empty self arise? Tsong-kha-pa and Clark face a similar problem. If all things arise dependently, then how do you draw a line between empty persons and other empty things? If extended minds emerge from agent-world interactions, then how do you draw a line between interactions that constitute cognitive extensions and those that do not? I believe that answering the latter question can help answer the former.

For Buddhists, and Tsong-kha-pa in particular, picking out a person is a matter of convention. “Cars, chariots, and persons exist, but this existence is established by ordinary conventional consciousnesses that give us practical and accurate information about the world around us” (Newland 44). This appeal to ordinary conventional consciousness is not an invitation merely to accept things as they appear, rather it is an appeal to ordinary, and even scientifically sophisticated, empirical investigation and its results (see Newland 48-50). The kind of empirical investigations canvassed by Clark should have a *practical* authority for Buddhists to establish the conventional existence of ordinary objects, including persons.⁴

Clark’s investigations indicate that extended mind is a system of functionally poised resources for cognition. The rhythm of rain on his window might enhance

⁴ According to Newland, “Tsong-kha-pa argues that we know ordinary objects exist because they are perceived by unimpaired sense consciousnesses, minds which are in a very practical way authoritative sources of information” (37 and 51).

Clark's flow of thought, but it not thereby a part of an extended cognitive process. This is "because the rain is not part of . . . any system selected or maintained for the support of better cognizing" (Clark 2008, 130). To become part of such a system requires "functional poise," a point that Clark returns to frequently (especially in chapter 5). A functionally poised resource, like Otto's notebook, must be reliably available and easily available as and when required (79). What matters is the way that information is poised to guide reasoning and behavior via the resource (96). Agent-world coupling "ensure[s] that a part is poised to play the kind of role that *itself* ensures its status as part of the *agent's* cognitive routines. . . . It is not the mere presence of coupling that matters but the effect of the coupling—the way it poises (or fails to poise) information for a certain kind of use within a specific kind of problem-solving routine" (87).

Agent-world couplings are dependent arisings. Some part of the world is a cognitive resource because of its functionally poised relation to the agent, and the agent is the extended mind that it is because of its tight link to the resource. A person, thinking and acting in the world, is a system of functionally designated parts, an empty self that dependently arises and an extended self whose circuitry is spread out into the world.

4. Empty and Extended: there is no core self

But surely, for a thinking acting agent, there must be some inner central locus of final choice and control. No. Empty persons do make choices and act in the

world, but, says Buddhism, there is no core self, no core chooser or controller—for the self is empty. Similarly, although Clark characterizes the extended self as an agent who chooses and acts, he suggests that we “reject outright the idea of an inner executive” (Clark 2008, 131). Clark’s reasons for rejecting a central executive can help explain why the Buddhist self is empty of a core chooser or controller.

Clark’s picture, borrowed in part from Daniel Dennett, is that just as outer cognitive resources coupled to an extended agent can do their work without parading information in front of an inner overseer, so it is with inner cognitive resources—neural subsystems can be systematically linked to circulate information and affect behavior without the help of an inner homunculus to centrally organize and control.⁵ “In the absence of any such privileged inner component, the outer and the inner operations are free to emerge as well-tuned coactive participants in the construction of thought and reason” (Clark 2008, 137). On this view, the extended mind is built on a set of teams of tightly circuited internal and external supporting structure; “it is (as it were) supporting structure [and circuitry] ‘all the way down,’

⁵ Clark develops this line of thought in sections 6.10-6.12. He is borrowing from Dennett 1991 and Dennett 1998. Here is Clark’s gloss on Dennett:

In place of such an all-knowing inner executive, we should consider the possibility of a vast parallel coalition of more or less influential forces, whose largely self-organizing unfolding makes each of us the thinking beings we are. Thus Dennett (1991a, 1998) depicts the human mind in terms that more closely resemble a semianarchic parallel organization of competing elements, whose average level of intelligence remains well below that traditionally ascribed to the so-called central executive (a horde of competing miniexecutives or, better, maxiassistants with nobody to assist). Within this flatter competing-cooperating nexus, different elements gain control at different times. But crucially, no element in the dodging and bumping horde is the privileged source of thinking such that the job of the rest is just to articulate or store its fully formed (though perhaps as yet verbally unarticulated) thoughts. Within such an economy, our ongoing cycles of gestural and linguistic self-stimulation are neither simply the products of, nor the servants of, a single stable independent central reasoning element. (131-132)

with mind and reason the emergent products of a well-functioning swirl of (mostly) self-organizing complexity” (136).

Thus, if the Clark-Dennett picture is correct, we may say that there is no core self because there is no inner central executive. It is dependently arising loops and circuits all the way down. The empty extended self arises dependently from the circuited swirl of various systems and subsystems both internal and external.

But if the self is an extended mesh of circuitry empty of any core executive decider, then in what sense may we say that empty extended persons make choices and act in the world, as both Tsong-kha-pa and Clark want to do?

5. Empty and Extended: persons-as-agents exist conventionally

For Tsong-kha-pa, persons exist as agents in the quite ordinary sense that cars and chariots may be said to exist. Persons-as-agents appear to ordinary conventional consciousness that provides practical information about the world around us. In fact, to understand that persons are empty, that they lack intrinsic nature and hence *ultimately* do not exist, one must understand that it is only *as* empty and hence dependently arising that a person can exist *conventionally as* an agent. Newland writes,

Truly understanding the illusoriness of the person requires both a complete and accurate refutation of the person’s intrinsic nature and an understanding that it is precisely these persons without intrinsic nature who engage in action and experience their effects. In other words, the empty and illusory person *exists* and makes choices, acting effectively to help or to harm. (96)

Thus, to see the person as empty is to see the person as an agent. Here are the steps that establish this link. Emptiness and dependent arising, Nagarjuna argued and Tsong-kha-pa confirmed, are two ways of saying the same thing. So to be empty is to dependently arise. Further, as discussed previously, ordinary consciousness confirms that persons do exist conventionally. So, from the Buddhist perspective, to understand that an empty person conventionally exists is to understand both that a person is an agent (whose existence is established by ordinary, practically and empirically grounded, conventional consciousness) and that the person-as-agent emerges from (dependently arises from) various causes and conditions.

Turn now to the extended self. We have seen that the extended self requires no central executive, and yet extended cognitive agents do exist. There is a parallel here with the Buddhist claim that the empty self has no core intrinsic nature, and yet the person-as-agent exists conventionally. Here is a passage from Clark expressing the view that we identify, in an ordinary practical way, existing agents as perceivers and actors motivated by beliefs and desires.

[W]e don't find or individuate human agents by first finding their cognitive mechanisms! Instead, we find an agent by identifying (roughly speaking) a reliable, easily identifiable physical nexus of perception and action, apparently driven by a persisting and modestly integrated body of goals and knowledge. Then and only then do we ask, of some particular problem-solving performance displayed by *that very agent*, what and where are the underlying mechanisms that make possible that performance. It is at this point that we may sometimes be surprised to find that the target performance depends on a far wider variety of factors and forces than we initially imagined. In so doing, we retain a perfectly good grip on the cognitive agents that are our primary objects of study. (Clark 2008, 118)

Notice how this passage distinguishes the ordinary practical, conventional matter of identifying existing agents from the more technical matter of identifying the mechanisms that can explain how and why agency is possible. Thus both Tsong-kha-pa and Clark agree that persons-as-agents exist conventionally; in our ordinary awareness of the world around us, we recognize others as goal-driven perceivers and actors. As a further technical matter, if the extended model is correct, then the mechanisms that make agency possible extend inside of and outside of the bodily agent and its brain, and they require no central executive to produce cognitive performances.

The conclusion, then, is that both the empty self model and the extended self model hold that agents (persons) conventionally exist—that is, that they are identified as agents in an ordinary practical conventional way—and that they are systems of dependent arisings with no core self. Neither model is hung up about losing a sense of ourselves as agents, as persons who act and think in the world. Such things exist and emerge from various causes and conditions, factors and forces. What the extended model offers to the empty model is an empirically sophisticated account of the mechanisms involved. This is valuable because one of the strategies Buddhists use to arrest the cravings that bring on suffering is to investigate and develop a deeper understanding of the causes and conditions of things. In fact, they come back to this again and again; it is a basic aspect of wisdom. By understanding the causes and conditions of dependent arisings one can shake the craving for permanence that leads to suffering. The extended model of

the self can contribute significantly to this investigation of causes and conditions and deepen one's appreciation that one's self really is empty. Understanding that and how one's self is extended as well as how one's agent-world circuits develop and work may also help one to develop strategies to short circuit cycles of craving.⁶

[The following final section is likely to be cut when presenting at conference.]

6. Toward a Twenty-First Century Buddhism

Just as Clark distinguishes between the ordinary way we pick out an agent who acts in the world from the technically sophisticated investigation of the causes and conditions that make possible its performance, so does Tsong-kha-pa distinguish between mundane and technically sophisticated forms of conventional consciousness.

Tsong-kha-pa tells us that, in a sense, all conventional consciousnesses operate in a noninquisitive manner; to some degree they function within the context of how something appears to them, without asking, "Is this how the object *really* exists, or does it just appear this way to the mind?" At the same time, and vitally, he points out that conventional consciousnesses need not be *utterly* noninquisitive. They operate within the context of how things appear, but *within that context they can do analysis*. (Newland 49)⁷

⁶ I discuss this point about craving in more detail in my unpublished essay "Curing Cyborg Craving: Buddhism and Cognitive Technologies." I get the idea that we are cyborgs from Clark 2003. Clark maintains that we are cyborgs "not in the merely superficial sense of combining flesh and wires but in the more profound sense of being human-technology symbionts: thinking and reasoning systems whose minds and selves are spread across biological and nonbiological circuitry" (Clark 2003, 3). In the essay I argue that if we are cyborgs as Clark suggests, then realizing this might help us to make more sense of what craving is and how to cure it.

⁷ This passage continues:

Tsong-kha-pa reminds us that conventional knowledge is not only what is accepted by the nonphilosophical village elders, etc. Conventional knowledge is something that advanced practitioners and sophisticated philosophers also must have and must rely upon. . . . [C]areful analysis and accurate perception even at the conventional level can show that what

What appears to noninquisitive conventional consciousness can be mistaken and should be corrected by the careful empirically grounded analysis of more inquisitive experts. The earth might appear flat, but expert conventional knowledge has shown that this is not so. Likewise, I would argue, contemporary science should trump the empirical speculations of Buddhist writings from previous centuries.⁸

For example, although Tsong-kha-pa might explain my performance as an agent (in part) by appeal to karmic causes and conditions set into motion by actions in a previous life, twenty-first century Buddhists who realize that there is no room for a doctrine of rebirth in contemporary science, need not buy this explanation. According to Tsong-kha-pa, “the person lacks even a particle of intrinsic nature, but is the accumulator of karma and the experiencer of effects, and is produced in dependence upon earlier karma and afflictions” (quoted in Newland 97-98). I am not here trying to explain karma, or the person as “an accumulator of karma.” But if a contemporary interpretation of karma is the less-metaphysically ambitious claim that past actions condition your future, then I think that the extended self model can add some interesting and useful insights about why this is so. As agent-world circuits are established, the extended person itself is changed, and the new

some persons or consciousnesses take for fact is actually completely wrong. For example, an ordinary conventional consciousness might mistake a rope for a snake or a mirage for water. One does not have to analyze emptiness in order to refute these mistaken conceptions and perceptions. Belief in a flat earth, and other hypotheses refuted by science, all fall into this same category. (Newland 49-50)

⁸ Here I am following the lead of Stephen Batchelor and his pragmatist approach to Buddhism. See for example Batchelor 1997 and Batchelor 2010.

couplings will guide future reasoning and behavior. Lesson for a twenty-first century Buddhist: Be mindful of that with which you couple.

XXXX XXXX
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[FINAL NOTE: The essay might be just a bit too long for 20-25 minute presentation. If the paper is accepted for the conference, my plan for presenting the paper is to cut section 6 and to present an abridged version of section 2. I might also skip some of the longer quotes.]

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