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*edited by*

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Until now interdisciplinary research concerning philosophy and literature has focused mainly on aesthetics, philosophy of language and literary studies. The point is that these different research areas have rarely met, preferring to work separately the ones from the others on the same subject. The aim of this special issue is to bring finally together top researchers in all these fields trying to confront their results and their methods and, as far as philosophy is concerned, to take into consideration both the analytic and the continental tradition.

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Elvira Di Bona, Stefano Ercolino  
MUSIL IN A LOOP: THE OTHER CONDITION AND THE  
EXTENDED MIND\*

*Abstract*

In this paper, we propose a reading of Robert Musil's controversial notion of the "other condition" in light of the basic features of the philosophical doctrine of externalism, as formulated in the classical account of the extended mind proposed by Andy Clark and David Chalmers (1998). Our reading is not meant to exhaust the complexity and polysemy of the idea of the other condition, but merely aims to open up a possible perspective on the interpretation of a concept that is as elusive as it is central in Musil's thinking.

The expression "extended mind" refers to a specific relation between the mind and the world. The idea is that given the "presence of continuous mutually modulatory influences linking brain, body and world"<sup>1</sup>, there is no real distinction between the mind and the world, as if the mind extended into the world and the world constituted the mind. The extended mind thesis is at the core of the account of externalism formulated by Clark and Chalmers<sup>2</sup>, namely, the philosophical view that attributes an active role to the environment in order to determine the contents of our beliefs. This form of externalism is usually distinguished from the standard version of externalism supported by Putnam<sup>3</sup>

\* This paper was jointly designed and discussed. Elvira Di Bona wrote the introduction, the section *The Extended Mind*, the first two paragraphs of the section *Reframing the Other Condition*, and the *References* (A-L) and Stefano Ercolino the section *The Other Condition*, the last two paragraphs of the section *Reframing the Other Condition*, and the *References* (M-W).

<sup>1</sup> Clark 1997: 63.

<sup>2</sup> Clark and Chalmers 1998: 8-9.

<sup>3</sup> Putnam 1975.

and Burge<sup>4</sup>, according to which features of the external world do not impact directly on the organism and its activity. The two views also differ because whereas the first form of externalism claims that the mental can be realized not only in the brain but also in other physical extracorporeal supports (the so-called “externalism of the vehicle”), the second form maintains that a process or cognitive activity is mental only if it is realized in the brain (the so-called “externalism of the content”).

We find that Clark and Chalmers’ notion of the extended mind broadly conceived might be useful in order to rethink the character of the other condition as defined by Musil. Our intention is to highlight some analogies between the other condition and the extended mind, without reducing, however, the Musilian other condition to the extended mind – which would be inappropriate, to say the least, not only because it would inevitably flatten the metaphorical dimension of Musil’s idea, but also because the conceptual superimposition between the other condition and the extended mind is not perfect. We will not evaluate the validity of the extended mind thesis<sup>5</sup> since our essay aims to put forward only an interpretive hypothesis of the other condition, set out at the crossroads of literature and philosophy.

Our reading of the Musilian other condition seeks to point up the originality of Musil’s thinking in light of analytic philosophy. Of course, for his refractoriness to both systematicity of thought and logically stated arguments<sup>6</sup>, Musil could be hardly regarded as an analytic philosopher; and yet, he envisioned, albeit mostly in a metaphorical and often obscure way, a view of the mind that is currently at the center of the contemporary debate in the philosophy of mind and artificial intelligence.

This paper is articulated in three sections. In the first, we will outline the different available interpretations of the other condition, focusing particularly on the philosophical aspects of the concept. In the second section, we will introduce the main claims at the basis of the classical account of the extended mind provided by Clark and Chalmers. In the third section, we will look at some of the core features of the other condition in light of the claims made in the second section, and show that there are substantial elements in common between the other condition and the extended mind theory so as to envision a new possible line of investigation in the field of Musil studies.

<sup>4</sup> Burge 1979; 1986.

<sup>5</sup> Clark and Chalmers 1998; Wilson 2004; Menary 2007; Clark 2008.

<sup>6</sup> In *The Man without Qualities*, Musil writes: «Philosophers are despots who have no armies to command, so they subject the world to their tyranny by locking it up in a system of thought» (Musil 2011 [1930–1942]: I, 272; *MoE*: I, 253). See Ercolino 2014: 82-86.

## *The Other Condition*

The “other condition” [*der andere Zustand*] is one of the thorniest issues in Musil’s thinking. Musil incessantly defined and redefined it in both his narrative and essayistic production, outlining a shifty concept which lends itself to numerous interpretations. The other condition is what, in *The Man without Qualities*<sup>7</sup>, Ulrich and Agathe relentlessly strive to reach through a perfect loving union. It is the illumination that lifts the veil of phenomenal appearances, the golden suspension of mysticism; it is the ineffable sublime of the chapter «Breaths of a Summer Day» of *The Man without Qualities*. However, the other condition is also, as literary critic Mark Freed argues in *Musil and the Nonmodern*, an alternative way of understanding and experiencing which conceptually opposes and criticizes the Cartesian metaphysical and epistemological frame of modernity<sup>8</sup>. The other condition – or “essayism [*Essayismus*]”<sup>9</sup>, following the conceptual couplings, shifts, and restatements which are typical of Musil’s thought – dereifies the ontological and epistemological architecture of a modern world designed by the “distinctions-oriented rationality” [*am Unterscheiden orientierten Rationalität*]<sup>10</sup> of René Descartes’ *Discourse on Method*<sup>11</sup>. It is a “nonmodern [*nonmoderne*]” category of thinking<sup>12</sup>, which cracks the binary distinctions upon which modernity grounded itself, such as those between subject and object, reason and unreason, science and art.

Despite the rich polysemy of the concept, in the present study we will put aside historical and cultural considerations<sup>13</sup> in order to examine the other condition from a purely speculative point of view. The other condition is neither an objective nor a subjective state; rather, it is an indistinct state in which the object and the subject are undivided. In two fragments of the unfinished 1923 essay *The German as Symptom*, Musil gives one of his most comprehensive definitions of the other condition:

Nonetheless, the true opposition to the factual attitude is not far from this last determination. There is a human state that is fundamentally opposed to rationalizing, calculating, goal-oriented activity, estimating, pressure, craving, and base anxiety.

It is difficult to describe.

<sup>7</sup> Musil 2011 [1930-1942].

<sup>8</sup> Freed 2011: 7.

<sup>9</sup> Musil 2011 [1930-1942]: I, 273; *MoE*: I, 253.

<sup>10</sup> Luhmann 1998 [1992]: 23; *BM*: 53.

<sup>11</sup> Descartes 2003 [1637].

<sup>12</sup> Latour 1997 [1991]: 46-48; *NAJEM*: 69.

<sup>13</sup> Ercolino 2014; 2015.

One aspect of the truth resides in all the characterizations (as love, goodness, irrationality, religiosity) that have been disputed here, and for the complete truth we have today no thought at our command.

I would like to call it simply the “other condition”.

In contrast to it, all thinking and desire appear as one.

If we try to characterize this contrast soberly and thoughtfully, we could describe the ordinary condition as narrowly focused and goal-oriented: a strut, a thin line connects the individual with his object and attaches itself to both the object and the person at only a single point, while all the rest of the person’s being remains untouched. This is true of knowledge as well as desire, and in fact both are often condemned together as two aspects of the same evil<sup>14</sup>.

*Hereinafter we read:*

If we attempt to summarize, we may already say:

That the [other] condition is characterized as active as well as passive; but never indifferent. (Contemplative-Dionysian).

That it shows heightening of subjectivity as well as diminution; in both cases, however, no objectivity. Double subjectivity. From the perspective of the external world, then, a broad contact that oscillates back and forth, in which the outer world dominates or retreats; but never indifference. The opposite of objectivity is excess of self or, excess of object, but not subjectivity. It is a matter of dividing things differently: the division between subject and object is a result of the rational attitude (obviously a matter of the emotional-rational [distinction]).

We may say that it is just as much a dereification of the self as of the world [*eine Entdinglichung des Ich wie der Welt*].

It is a matter of evaluating differently. The opposition egoism-altruism loses its meaning; likewise, the opposition good-evil. In its place we can put the pair: enhancement-diminution.

Also, in place of what is useful we can put: what enhances.

Part of this too is a falling away of everything petty.

In the contemplative branch, a frequent feeling of sinking or being engulfed, of perishing, of being born up [*ein Gefühl des Versinkens, Eingehens, Getragen-werdens*]<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> Musil 1990 [1923]: 185; GW: VIII, 1392.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*: 187; 1394. For another definition of the other condition, see the 1925 essay *Toward a New Aesthetic*, in which Musil writes: “In contrast to this spiritual condition stands another, [...] the condition of love, of goodness, of renunciation of the world, of contemplation, of vision of approach to God, of entrancement, of will-lessness, of meditation, and many other aspects of a fundamental experience that recurs in the religion, mysticism, and ethics of all historical people as universally as it has, remarkably, remained undeveloped. [...] Today, if one does not have one’s own thorough research as a base, one must renounce the temptation to try to say



A keyword seems to emerge out of the argumentative shapelessness of Musil's rhapsodic essayism: *dereification*. And it is precisely to such "dereification of the self as of the world" that we will try to give a particular meaning in light of the extended mind theory.

### *The Extended Mind*

Starting from Clark and Chalmers' article *The Extended Mind* published in *Analysis* in 1998, a heated debate arose, both in the philosophy of mind and cognitive science, around a crucial question: "Where does the mind stop and the rest of the world begin?"<sup>16</sup>.

The extended mind theory has three fundamental features. First, the theory is grounded on the notion of "coupled system", which is a cognitive process generated by the mutual interaction between mind and world and in which the environment plays an *active* role. Broadly speaking, the external world shapes the mind by virtue of establishing an active "relationship" with it. Which is why Clark and Chalmers labeled their position "active externalism". The active role of the environment can be understood in two ways<sup>17</sup>: as simply 1) the influence that the environment exerts upon cognitive processing in the brain, or as the possibility that 2) some features of the environment *constitute* cognitive processes (the so-called "constitutive thesis"). The second reading is based on the idea that the environmental features do literally constitute the cognitive processing, instead of simply having a causal effect on it.

Clark and Chalmers argue in favor of the second reading by virtue of the "causal coupling" thesis, according to which the coupled system mind-world constitutes a cognitive system: "[...] the human organism is linked with an external entity in a two-way interaction, creating a *coupled system* that can be seen as a cognitive system in its own right"<sup>18</sup>. Clark and Chalmers suggest what

more about the nature and the meaning of this other condition [...]. But if one simply extracts a few main, common characteristics from the purely descriptive accounts of a literature that is thousands years old, one finds again and again the presence of another world, like a solid ocean bottom from which the restless waves of the ordinary world have drawn back; and in the image of this world there is neither measure nor precision, neither purpose nor cause [*weder Maß noch Genauigkeit, weder Zweck noch Ursache*]: good and evil simply fall away, without any pretense of superiority, and in place of all these relations enters a secret rising and ebbing of our being with that of things and other people [*ein geheimnisvoll schwellendes und ebbendes Zusammenfließen unseres Wesens mit dem der Dinge und anderen Menschen*]. It is in this condition that the image of each object becomes not a practical goal, but a wordless experience [...]" (Musil 1990 [1925]: 199; GW: VIII, 1144).

<sup>16</sup> Clark and Chalmers 1998: 7.

<sup>17</sup> Menary 2010: 1-2.

<sup>18</sup> Clark and Chalmers 1998: 8.

parameters have to be met in order to be sure that the causal coupling satisfies the constitutive thesis:

All the components in the system play an active causal role, and they jointly govern behavior in the same sort of way that cognition usually does. If we remove the external component the system's behavioral competence will drop, just as it would if we removed part of its brain. Our thesis is that this sort of coupled process counts equally well as a cognitive process, whether or not it is wholly in the head<sup>19</sup>.

We can extrapolate three observations from this quotation: the first is that the coupled system is constituted by the mutual behavior of both internal (the mind) and external components (the environment); the second is that, if we keep unchanged the mind but modify the environment, our behaviour might drastically change too; the third is that, if the coupled system is constituted by the mutual interaction between the mind and the world, then the coupled system itself counts as a cognitive process.

The second fundamental feature of the extended mind, instead, is that, according to the extended mind theory, the borders between mind and world are *blurred*. It is as if, by virtue of the coupled system mind-world, the mind and the world merged and beliefs were no longer confined in the inner space but extended in the outer world: "[...] 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"<sup>20</sup>. Clark and Chalmers draw this conclusion from the famous example of Otto and Inga. Inga would like to go to the New York Museum of Modern Art to see an exhibition. She goes to the museum after remembering that it is on the 53<sup>rd</sup> Street. Otto, on the contrary, suffers from Alzheimer's disease and is obliged to rely on information written on a notebook in order to remember where the Museum of Modern Art is. Otto walks to the 53<sup>rd</sup> street after consulting his notebook, as well as Inga walks to the 53<sup>rd</sup> street after consulting her memory. According to Clark and Chalmers account of the extended mind, the two cases are similar in their most significant features: "The information in the notebook functions just like the information constituting an ordinary non-occurrent belief; it just happens that this information lies beyond the skin"<sup>21</sup>.

The mind's extension into the world brings us directly to the third core feature of the extended mind, that is, the notion of the "parity principle", which is expressed by Clark and Chalmers as follows: "If, as we confront some task, a part of the world functions as a process which *were it done in the head*, we would

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*: 8-9.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*: 33.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*: 13.

have no hesitation in recognizing it as part of the cognitive process, then that part of the world *is* (so we claim) part of the cognitive process”<sup>22</sup>. The parity principle seems to approach the extended mind thesis to functionalism, namely, the idea for which what makes a process a cognitive process is its function and not its location. According to such principle, the internal process needs not to be externalized as if it were located outside of the mind. In order to ascertain whether a process is cognitive, it is crucial to look at its function rather than at where it is located.

### *Reframing the Other Condition*

The first and the second feature of the extended mind theory, according to which the environment would play an active role in driving cognitive processes and the borders between the mind and the world would merge, respectively, find a counterpart in the dereifying dimension of the other condition as described by Musil in *The German as Symptom*. Musil argues that the division between mind and world, subject and object, is a result of the “rational attitude”<sup>23</sup>, or “ordinary condition”, in which a “strut, a thin line connects the individual with his object and attaches itself to both the object and the person at only a single point, while all the rest of the person’s being remains untouched”<sup>24</sup>. What the other condition criticizes is precisely the Cartesian design of the ordinary condition. For Musil, the other condition is, indeed, about “dividing things differently”<sup>25</sup>, going beyond the Cartesian dichotomy of mind and world, even beyond mind and world themselves. In the other condition, both a “heightening” and a “diminution” of subjectivity occur<sup>26</sup>; the world both “dominates” and “retreats”<sup>27</sup>. A coupled mind-world system takes shape, in which mind and world interpenetrate and cause each other, as happens in the causal coupling process of the extended mind. In Musil’s words: “It is just as much a dereification of the self as of the world”<sup>28</sup>. In the other condition, the boundaries between mind and world blur, the subject and the object fade into each other. The other condition is the indistinctness of mind and world, which turns out to be indissolubly tied-up in a cognitive loop. In short, the other condition represents

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*: 8.

<sup>23</sup> Musil 1990 [1923]: 187; *GW*: VIII, 1394.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*: 185; 1392.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*: 187; 1394.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*.

the form of *externalism* in which features of the environment (the world) are interactively linked to the mind so that the interactive link itself *constitutes* a “dereification of the self as of the world”.

The other condition, however, is not only about dividing things differently; it is also about “evaluating differently”<sup>29</sup>. In the other condition, the “opposition egoism/altruism loses its meaning; likewise, the opposition good/evil”<sup>30</sup>. In Musil’s intentions, the other condition should have opened, indeed, new ethical horizons, in the attempt of translating Friedrich Nietzsche’s project of the transvaluation of values into practice – an obsession that reverberates throughout Musil’s thinking. The other condition is a synthetic cognitive (and ethical) state; a state in which all contradictions recompose and in which “there is neither measure nor precision, neither purpose nor cause: good and evil simply fall away, without any pretense of superiority, and in place of all these relations enters a secret rising and ebbing of our being with that of things and other people”<sup>31</sup>. The anticartesian strain of Musil’s understanding of the other condition is clear, with its criticism of the distinctions-oriented model of rationality drawn upon the four “rules” outlined by Descartes in his *Discourse on Method*<sup>32</sup>, and it would not be too daring, perhaps, to attribute such an anticartesian strain also to the extended mind thesis.

Finally, with regard to the third feature of the extended mind theory, namely, the parity principle which leads to Clark and Chalmers’ functionalist perspective on the extended mind, one might refer to an interpretative line of Musil’s work which developed at least since the 1970s and focused on Musil’s assimilation of *Gestalt* psychology and the functionalist philosophy of Ernst Mach<sup>33</sup>. Mach’s *The Analysis of Sensations*<sup>34</sup> influenced the early Musil with its questioning of the ideas of a fixed time-space continuum and direct causality. Although Musil

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>31</sup> Musil 1990 [1925]: 199; *GW*: VIII, 1144.

<sup>32</sup> Descartes, from the *Discourse on Method*: “The first [rule] was never to accept anything as true if I did not know clearly [*évidemment*] that it was so; that is carefully to avoid prejudice and jumping to conclusions, and to include nothing in my judgment apart from whatever appeared so clearly and distinctly [*si clairement et si distinctement*] to my mind that I had no opportunity to cast doubt on it. The second was to subdivide [*diviser*] each of the problems that I was about to examine into as many parts [*parcelles*] as would be possible and necessary to resolve them better. The third was to guide my thoughts in an orderly way [*par ordre*] by beginning with the objects that are the simplest and easiest to know and to rise gradually [*par degrez*], as if by steps, to knowledge of the most complex, and even by assuming an order among objects in cases where there is no natural order among them. And the final rule was: in all cases, to make such comprehensive enumerations [*denombremens*] and such general reviews [*revues*] that I was certain not to omit anything” (Descartes 2003 [1637]: 16; *ŒD*: VI, 18–19).

<sup>33</sup> Arvon 1970; Monti 1979; Hoffmann 1997; Smith 2000; Pieper 2002.

<sup>34</sup> Mach 1914 [1906].

criticizes Mach's epistemology in his doctoral dissertation, *On Mach's Theories*<sup>35</sup>, a trace of Mach's functionalist outlook can be clearly detected throughout his thinking: suffice it to recall the widely debated concept of "Eigenschaftslosigkeit"<sup>36</sup>. The impact Mach's functionalism had on Musil's work brought Musil to attempt to discard dualistic conceptions of reality, which he regarded as the product of multiple tensions: the tension between mind and world, the tension between mind and body, and the tension between nature and culture. Therefore, Musil opted for synthetic metaphysical and epistemological positions according to which mind and world are described and linked in procedural terms as the interplay of formal and functional units<sup>37</sup>. In this sense, the cognitive openness of the other condition seems to fit particularly well the functionalist overtones of Musil's thinking.

To conclude, in this paper we tried to show that the core characteristics of the other condition find an unexpected counterpart in the three basic features of the extended mind theory. Our aim was not to exhaust all the possible meanings of the other condition but to merely look at one of the central concepts in Musil's thinking from an alternative perspective and suggest a possible line of inquiry in the field of Musil studies. By comparing the other condition to the extended mind, we neither advocated for a reduction of the polysemy of the idea of the other condition, nor intended to investigate how thinking of the other condition in terms of the extended mind theory might affect our understanding of Musil's work. What we wanted to do was just to set a starting point. It is our conviction, indeed, that in the case under analysis, the dialogue between literature and philosophy could offer new ground for the literary and philosophical debate on the works and thought of one of the most fascinating intellectual figures of the twentieth century.

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<sup>35</sup> Musil 1982 [1908].

<sup>36</sup> Reinhardt 1969; Kümmel 2001.

<sup>37</sup> Mehigan 2003: 16.

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