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Cognitive Systems and the Extended Mind surveys philosophical issues raised by the situated movement in cognitive science, that is, the treatment of cognitive phenomena as the joint products of brain, body, and environment. The book focuses primarily on the hypothesis of extended cognition, which asserts that human cognitive processes literally comprise elements beyond the boundary of the human organism. Rupert argues that the only plausible way in which to demarcate cognitions is systems-based: cognitive states or processes are the states of the integrated set of mechanisms and capacities that contribute causally and distinctively to the production of cognitive phenomena—for example, language-use, memory, decision-making, theory construction, and, more importantly, the associated forms of behavior. Rupert argues that this integrated system is most likely to appear within the boundaries of the human organism. He argues that the systems-based view explains the existing successes of cognitive psychology and cognate fields in a way that extended conceptions of cognition do not, and that once the systems-based view has been adopted, it is especially clear how extant arguments in support of the extended view go wrong.

Cognitive Systems and the Extended Mind also examines further aspects of the situated program in cognitive science, including the embedded and embodied approaches to cognition. Rupert asks to what extent the plausible incarnations of these situated views depart from orthodox, computational cognitive science. Here, Rupert focuses on the notions of representation and computation, arguing that the embedded and embodied views do not constitute the radical shifts in perspective they are often claimed to be. Rupert also argues that, properly understood, the embodied view does not offer a new role for the body, different in principle from the one presupposed by orthodox cognitive science.