

The Space of Possible Minds

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In recent decades, the mind – both human and otherwise – has been explored by scientists in fields ranging from zoology to astrobiology, computer science to neuroscience. Taking a uniquely broad view of minds and where they might be found – including in plants, bacteria and machines – I suggest a unified way of thinking about what minds are and what they can do. I argue that in order to understand our own minds and imagine those of others, we need to move on from considering the human mind as a standard against which all others should be measured. One of the potential benefits of current developments in AI is that they force us to take a wider view of kinds of minds. Indeed, to fail to do so raises the risks of both anthropomorphizing AI and of devaluing human cognition as a machine-like, algorithmic process.

By mapping out properties of mind without prioritizing the human, new light might be shed on a host of long-standing and urgent questions. What moral rights should we afford animals, and can we understand their thoughts? How worried should we be about sentient AI? If there are intelligent aliens out there, how could we communicate with them? Should we? Understanding the space of possible minds also reveals ways of making advances in understanding some of the most challenging questions in contemporary science: What is thought? What is agency? What is consciousness? And what (if anything) is free will?