

The Extended Mind and Religious Thought

with Leslie Marsh, "Mindscales and Landscapes: Exploring the Extended Mind"; Mark Rowlands, "The Extended Mind"; Lynne Rudder Baker, "Persons and the Extended-Mind Thesis"; Teed Rockwell, "Minds, Intrinsic Properties, and Madhyamaka Buddhism"; Joel W. Krueger, "Empathy and the Extended Mind"; Leonard Angel, "Quintuple Extension: Mind, Body, Humanism, Religion, Secularism"; and Matthew Day, "Constructing Religion without The Social: Durkheim, Latour, and Extended Cognition"

MINDSCAPES AND LANDSCAPES: EXPLORING THE EXTENDED MIND

by *Leslie Marsh*

Abstract. This brief article introduces a symposium discussing the extended mind thesis and its suggestive relation to religious thought. Essays by Mark Rowlands, Lynne Rudder Baker, Teed Rockwell, Joel Krueger, Leonard Angel, and Matthew Day present a variety of perspectives.

Keywords: David Chalmers; Andy Clark; extended mind

It has been ten years since a snappy and provocative paper by Andy Clark and David Chalmers (1998) audaciously burst upon the philosophical scene. Given that the paper had been rejected three years earlier by three major journals (Chalmers 2008, 42), it must have come as an enormous surprise to the authors that a veritable Extended Mind (EM) cottage industry has since been generated by their paper. Whether or not one subscribes to the Clark-Chalmers argument or variations thereof, what cannot be denied is the palpable excitement and overall quality of the EM literature. Philosophy of mind has been greatly enriched by this topic. EM forces one to take seriously the idea that cognition has an embodied, social, and artifactual dimension; indeed, mind exists at the intersection of this trinity.

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The EM literature is as controversial as it is suggestive.¹ It should be no surprise then that EM has taken wing in a context that its progenitors in all probability did not anticipate.

All of the contributors here—Mark Rowlands, Lynne Rudder Baker, Teed Rockwell, Joel Krueger, Leonard Angel, and Matthew Day—have an established interest in matters of cognition and religion, although not necessarily the same motivations. Of the group, Rowlands and I are best considered as skeptics.² This stance does not present discontinuity or dissonance; a highly attractive feature of *Zygon* is that the editorial policy is incredibly ecumenical, with writers of all persuasions engaging one another across disciplines and across belief systems. Just about a decade ago, Jensine Andresen and Robert Forman called upon “religious studies to explore how consciousness functions and how it may play a role in the constitution of reality, in spiritual experience, in the generation of doctrine, and in ritual and meditative life” (2000, 7–8). This is precisely the conversational character that *Zygon* has been promoting for many years. Beyond the table-thumping tone characteristic of recent bestsellers (see Marsh 2006) there is a great deal of sober discussion of religious experience from a naturalistic perspective, a notable example being Loyal Rue (Marsh 2007). So much for the disclaimer.

Rowlands’s brief is to survey the EM literature. Few are better placed to do so, because Rowlands himself is a major player in the EM world. At first blush, the Clark-Chalmers argument presents a challenge to traditional notions of personal identity. Baker, a preeminent metaphysician with an established interest in religion, is well placed to examine these issues. Rockwell, through his intimate knowledge of Buddhism together with the non-Cartesian sensibility that drives his philosophy of mind, negotiates EM border skirmishes. Krueger incorporates the current hot topic in philosophy of mind—simulation theory—with discussion of empathy filtered through EM and Zen Buddhism. Angel presses the notion of EM into the service of formulating a new understanding of the concept of humanism. Day rounds off this collection by examining the sociological implications of EM for the study of religion.

It is probably a good idea that one read the Clark and Chalmers paper as soon as possible. It is brief, accessible, and easily available. If after reading it and the essays constituting this symposium one is inclined to negotiate a burgeoning literature, I would recommend tackling the somewhat sparse critical literature to help crystallize the issues. By far, the best critiques are by Frederick Adams and Kenneth Aizawa (2008) and Robert Rupert (2004; in press). Clark’s latest (2008) offers a spirited defense of EM, having had the benefit of assimilating these sustained critiques. There are other influential EM theorists worth checking out, notably Alva Noë, Susan Hurley, Edwin Hutchins, Evan Thompson, and Robert Wilson, referenced in one

or more of the essays here. The exceptional vibrancy of the EM literature is well worth engaging with.

NOTES

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1. The term *extended mind* has also been associated with biologist Rupert Sheldrake. The notion of EM as used in this symposium bears no resemblance at all to Sheldrake's telepathic Theory of Morphic Fields, which posits the idea that mind extends beyond the brain like a magnetic field with the ability to reach, touch, and influence things.

2. Some may have come across Rowlands's writing as an ardent secularist thinker at <http://secularphilosophy.com/>. My brand of skepticism is articulated in Marsh 2006; 2007; 2009.

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