

# Classic Paper

Introduction to *The Extended Mind* by  
Andy Clark and David Chalmers (1998)

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**T**his time around our classic paper is not a classic from the world of Solution Focused (SF) practice. Rather, it is an absolutely copper-bottomed genuine classic from the world of philosophy of mind. As such, this paper may be new to many readers. However, please read on! We are delighted to have secured the rights to reprint Andy Clark and David Chalmers' paper *The Extended Mind* (Clark & Chalmers, 1998).

This paper holds a significant position in the development of philosophy of mind – significant enough to have its own entry in Wikipedia. In recent decades traditional cognitive science has been challenged by a range of new perspectives on cognition, action and what it means to 'think'. Embodied cognition (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991) views the mind as not contained solely within the brain, and states that a person's 'beyond-the-brain body' plays a causal or constitutive role in that person's cognitive processing. The extended mind thesis (presented for the first time by Clark and Chalmers in this paper) took this a radical step further, by seeing the mind as actually spreading beyond the body and into the person's environment. Further angles on this have appeared subsequently, notably the enactive cognition school (see for example McGann, De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2013; Thompson, 2007), which sees the mind as existing dynamically in the relationship between organisms and their surroundings (including other organisms).

What is remarkable to me, looking back, is quite how simple this paper is. Clark and Chalmers invite us into a thought experiment concerning two people, Inga and Otto,

who wish to go to a museum simultaneously. Inga (whose name begins with the same letter as ‘in’ and ‘internal’) has remembered the address of the museum in the conventional way, in her head. Otto (whose name reminds us of ‘outside’) can’t remember things this way as he suffers from Alzheimer’s Disease, so he writes the address of the museum down in his trusty notebook.

While we have no difficulty in regarding Inga’s actions as using her mind, Otto’s case seems on the face of it to be different. However, Clark and Chalmers demonstrate that the differences are much less than the similarities between the cases, and that we should therefore treat Otto’s case in the same way – so that Otto’s notebook is part of his mind, rather than external to it. This is such a simple example, and yet it has proved to be incisive in the ways in which ‘mind’ and ‘thinking’ are conceived – on the philosophical scene and increasingly in the wider world.

What does this have to do with SF practice? That’s a huge question which I can only start to answer here. If we look at how SF practice is carried out, the questions we ask are notable for being about our clients’ experience of, and responses to, their environments – the others around them, their homes and workplaces etc. We ask about ‘first tiny signs that a miracle has happened,’ or ‘how would your boss respond when you did that’. We don’t ask about internal reflections about how these thoughts, feelings and experiences are being generated – ‘how do you feel about that’ being a classic question not heard in serious SF practice.

By engaging with our clients’ way of engaging with the world, we could see ourselves as helping them adjust, refine and rebalance their own interactions and their own lives. By the work of Clark and Chalmers these are not merely the surroundings of our minds, they are part of our minds. Which may be one part of the answer to the question I have been posing in recent months – how does SF practice work? How do these apparently innocuous conversations about better futures and what’s working have an impact on people who may even be seriously ‘mentally ill’? Because, one might

suggest, the mental and the mind extend into and pivot as much around the environment as the individual – which itself means that the ‘person’ may be more than just an individual body.

There is a lot more to be said about this in due course. But what better way to build this path than by reading and enjoying *The Extended Mind*? Then, I suggest you go back and take another look at Guy Shennan’s paper *Extended mind, extended person, extended therapy*? which draws on this tradition and connects it to aspects of SF work.

Bertrand Russell once wrote (in “The Philosophy of Logical Atomism”, 1918), that

*“the point of philosophy is to start with something so simple as not to seem worth stating, and to end with something so paradoxical that no one will believe it.”*

It seems to me that Clark and Chalmers’ paper is a perfect example of this – an utterly simple idea which ends up turning our understanding of the mind inside out.

## References

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