

Supersizing Religious Life

Warren S. Brown and Brad D. Strawn

Philosopher of mind Andy Clark famously wrote, “We make the world smart so we can be dumb in peace.”¹ Clark’s quip plays on the contrast between what we are in our native, isolated selves (not so smart) and what we become when extended into our mind-enhancing environments, full of smart-making artifacts, other people, and immediately accessible accumulated information (much smarter). What Clark is arguing for is the reality of what philosophers of mind refer to as *extended cognition* – the fact that most instances of thinking cannot be said to take place entirely within the brain or even the body, but involve interactive coupling with extra-body elements that are rightfully considered a part of the immediate cognitive processing system.

In our recent book, *Enhancing Christian Life: How Extended Cognition Augments Religious Community*,² we take the arguments for cognitive extension one step further in arguing for the importance of such extension of mind into the realm of religious life, thought, and belief. If extended cognition argues that we are not as smart as we think we are when we are separated from our smart-making environments, we argue that we are not as religious and spiritual as we think we are when separated from our worlds of religious-making scriptures, congregations, worship experiences, rites, and fellow believers. When extended beyond our individual selves, religious life (more specifically Christian Life in our context) is enhanced.

Extended Cognition

There is a parable illustrating extended cognition that is often used by philosophers of mind. It is the story of Otto and his notebook.³ In this illustration, Otto’s memory is failing significantly due to Alzheimer’s disease. So, Otto uses a notebook to write down things he

¹ Andy Clark, *Being There: Putting Brain, Body, and World Together Again* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 180.

² Strawn, B.D. and Brown, W.S. (2020). *Enhancing Christian Life: How Extended Cognition Augments Religious Community*. Intervarsity Press.

³ Originally developed in Andy Clark and David J. Chalmers, “The Extended Mind,” *Analysis* 58:1 (1998): 7-19; reprinted in *Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, ed. David J. Chalmers (New York: Oxford University, 2002).

needs to remember—shopping lists, appointments, jobs around the house, people’s names, etc.—and uses this to enhance his significantly weakened memory. Clark argues that Otto’s notebook works as a part of his cognitive systems in such a way that its contributions to his mental processing cannot be readily distinguished from his brain-based memory. From an information processing network point of view, there is no inherent difference in accessing a notebook or accessing one’s hippocampal memory systems. The notebook, when in use, is an extension of Otto’s memory. What is more, Otto credits items in the notebook as real records of things-remembered in the same way he credits (when he can) things emerging from his brain-based memory systems. Otto’s weak memory has been “supersized” by the extension of his memory system into the world of extra-body artifacts.

Another more commonplace example of extended cognition (one of thousands one might think of) is the process of doing complex arithmetic like multiplying two 3-digit numbers, aided by paper and pencil. Typically this processes cannot be done by the mind/brain alone. However, aided by interactions with paper and pencil, we are able to do this cognitive task. The cognitive process of multiplication is accomplished by an interactive cognitive processing loop between brain, body, *and* external paper and pencil. In this regard, Clark and Chalmers argue, “If, as we confront some task, a part of the world functions as a process, which *were it done in the head*, we would 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. Cognitive processes ain’t (all) in the head!”⁴

As an example from another domain, consider a problem-solving interaction between two persons. The two persons become enmeshed in an ongoing reciprocal interaction such that, as solutions emerge, there is no clear demarcation between the cognitive processes of the two persons that would allow allocation of the solution to one brain/mind. The mind at work is an assembly made possible by each participant’s cognitive extension into the interactive space. By virtue of the reciprocal cognitive extensions, a more powerful and imaginative processing system emerged that had greater capacity to solve the problem at hand than either isolated mind.

⁴ Clark and Chalmers, “Extended Mind,” 222.

Not all aspects of the current environment are objects of extended mental processes at any particular moment. Rather, depending on the current mental problem to be solved, different aspects of the environment may become enmeshed in an ongoing feedback loop with the brain and body such as to constitute an extended cognitive processing system relevant to the task at hand. In this way, activity that we would label “intelligent” does not occur exclusively in the brain/body, but includes the currently incorporated aspects of the external world. Within such a temporarily assembled system, the mind at work is not solely in the brain and body, but rather encompasses the external artifacts or situations in use at the moment.

Extended Religious Life

In the two books we have written,⁵ we have been rethinking the nature of religious life from the point of view of current theories in philosophy of mind which have their roots in modern neuroscience. Generally, the viewpoint we have adopted views mind as embodied, embedded, enacted, and extended. Our overarching questions has been something like, “If we reconsider human nature from this point of view, what implications does this have for our understanding of religiousness?”⁶

Our first book, *The Physical Nature of Christian Life*, focused on the embodied, embedded, and enacted aspects of human nature, arguing against the idea that spirituality is best understood as constituted by the cultivation and enrichment of an inner non-material part of the person (the soul). We attempted to move religiousness from an internal and private matter outward towards an embodied, situationally embedded, and enacted aspect of persons.

Taking this book as our starting point, we have argued in *Enhancing Christian Life* for a view of religious life as inherently extended, involving ongoing experiences of soft-coupling with sources outside of the self that constitute and enhance religiousness. Here we are particularly informed by Andy Clark’s book, *Supersizing the Mind*.⁷ Our premise is that extension of

⁵ Brown, W.S. and Strawn, B.D. *The Physical Nature of Christian Life: Neuroscience, Psychology and the Church*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012; and Strawn and Brown, *Enhancing Christian Life*, 2019.

⁶ To be explicit about where we are coming from, and to anchor our arguments in a specific tradition, we have stayed within Christian faith and life, but we feel our arguments have implications in other faith traditions as well.

⁷ Andy Clark’s book *Supersizing the Mind: Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011.

ourselves into scripture, worship, religious rites, and relationships with other Christians “supersizes” Christian life. Whatever religiousness we may manifest cannot be credited to our individual selves, but is something that is most accurately attributable to the networks of artifacts, traditions, and fellow believers into which we extend ourselves and experience our religious lives.⁸

Recently it has become popular to say, “I am spiritual but not religious.” People who say this typically mean that they perceive themselves to have a form of inner, private spirituality, but that they do not engage in the life of traditionally organized religious groups and practices. However, we argue that private religious practices are never exactly private – we are never alone in some private, inner, individual religious world. The reason for this is that individual practices and experiences are derivative of corporate practices learned from our religious tradition. Therefore, to pray, read, sing, chant, or meditate on our own is to simulate what we have done and experienced within the broader religious community. *The mental processes that constitute our private religious practices are simulations involving prior cognitive extensions into what has been experienced in corporate religious life.*

Thus, we argue that, if solo spirituality even exists, such individual and privatized spirituality is dwarfed and puny compared to what might be the case when spiritual life is enhanced by incorporation into some form of corporate religious practices and congregational worship. Spirituality reaches beyond what exists within an individual person, existing in extension of the person into interactions occurring, for example, in worship. In this way, the understanding of religiousness moves from self-focused, internal, private spirituality outward to embodied, embedded, enacted, and extended life.

Solo religious life is, at best, dwarfed and puny. Extended religiousness is more robust -- supersized.

⁸ We recognize that some of the attitudinal individualism which is the target of our argument may be less true of other faith traditions. However, we believe it to be largely true of Western Christianity.