Minds, Things, and Materiality

Michael Wheeler

Taking material culture seriously

In a rich and thought-provoking paper, Lambros Malafouris argues that taking material culture seriously means to be “systematically concerned with figuring out the causal efficacy of materiality in the enactment and constitution of a cognitive system or operation” (Malafouris, 2004, p. 55). As I understand this view, there are really two intertwined claims to be established. The first is that the things beyond the skin that make up material culture (in other words, the physical objects and artifacts in which cultural networks and systems of human social relations are realized) may be essential to the enactment of, and be partly constitutive of, certain cognitive systems or operations. The consequence of establishing this claim is supposed to be that we have a mandate to recast the boundaries of the mind so as to include, as proper parts of the mind, things located beyond the skin. Thus, in talking about the contribution of the world to cognition, Malafouris (2004, p. 58) concludes that “what we have traditionally construed as an active or passive but always clearly separated external stimulus for setting a cognitive mechanism into motion, may be after all a continuous part of the machinery itself; at least ex hypothesi.” This is the position that, in philosophical circles, is known increasingly as the extended mind hypothesis (Clark and Chalmers, 1998; Menary, forthcoming). Henceforth I shall refer to this hypothesis as EM. Further explication of EM will come later, but a stock example, due originally to Rumelhart et al. (1986), will help bring the idea into preliminary view. Most of us solve difficult multiplication problems by using “pen and paper” as an environmental prop enables us to transform a difficult cognitive problem into a set of simpler ones,
and to temporarily store the results of intermediate calculations. For the fan of EM, the coupled combination of pen-and-paper resource, appropriate bodily manipulations, and in-the-head processing constitutes a cognitive system in its own right.

The second claim that Malafouris needs to establish is that, when things-beyond-the-skin achieve the status of being essential to the enactment of, and partly constitutive of, certain cognitive systems or operations, they often do so in virtue of a kind of causal contribution that is, in some way to be determined, a product of those things' essential materiality, rather than in virtue of some other kind of causal contribution. (I shall later identify the former kind of causal contribution as one that involves *vital materiality* and the latter as one that involves only *implementational materiality*.) One implication of this second claim is that, for EM to be characterized correctly, it needs to pay more than lip service to what we might call the very materiality of material culture.

It is worth noting that, in the context of Malafouris’s interests, the payoff from adopting EM is plausibly nothing less than a reconfiguration of the intellectual landscape inhabited by the discipline known as *cognitive archaeology*. Consider the question “What does a Palaeolithic stone tool do for the mind?” Conventional cognitive archaeology is committed to an “in-the-head” ontology of mind. This condemns material culture to a life outside of cognition proper, and so the things studied by cognitive archaeology are (roughly) things that minds have made and/or used. The cognitive states and processes concerned are not themselves on show in those things, although certain inferences about the nature of those states and processes, inferences of an unavoidably hazardous nature, might be ventured. However, if past ways of thought were not just *expressed in* material culture but were often partly *constituted by* material culture, as EM implies, then cognitive archaeology gets to study past minds in a rather more direct fashion. In fact, the things studied by cognitive archaeology are literally parts of (no longer functioning) minds. If this is right, then the interdisciplinary collective that is cognitive science is poised to welcome a new member of the team.

So where are we going in this paper? In what follows I shall spell out what I take to be the only plausible reading of what is the canonical statement of EM, and argue that, on this reading, the distinctive EM conclusion is purchased using a currency of what I shall call “implementational materiality.” I shall also submit evidence that Malafouris would judge such implementational materiality to be an inadequate