



BOOK REVIEW

Chris Abel, *The Extended Self: Architecture, Memes, and Minds*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2015. Pp. 357 + xx. ISBN 978-0-7190-9612-9. £25.

This ambitious book explores a number of distinct but related dimensions of human experience, including the nature of the self, the evolutionary history of the species, the correspondence between embodiment, cognition and articulation, the role of technology and built environments in the development of identity, the unfolding global ecological crisis, and the interdependencies between these various fields. Abel's goal is to demonstrate the extent to which our understanding of these issues will mutually inform one another and to do so in a way that avoids both the "deterministic thinking" of modernism as well as the "nihilistic aspects of [some forms of] postmodernism" (xv; note that a concise overview of many of the arguments Abel develops in this book is available in "Technically Embodied Selves," an essay included in the recently released third edition of his *Architecture and Identity* [New York: Routledge, 2017]).

Drawing on the work of Eva Jablonka and Marion Lamb, Abel at one point in the *Extended Self* highlights the

"interaction" between four different forms or "levels" of human evolutionary history, including the "genetic," the "epigenetic," the "behavioral," and the "symbolic" (76). It is perhaps more than anything this interaction Abel emphasizes throughout the book, for it is this interaction he believes best accounts for the development of all forms or levels of emergence and development. This dynamism is articulated not only in terms of interaction but also in terms of "combinativity" and "process" (cf. 3, 120-122). Persons, language, meaning, artifacts, customs, and built environments "all emerge out of an indivisible reality" (38), and each in turn affect the nature and shape of that reality.

The organizing theme of the book is that of the "extended self," which Abel defines as a reality that "reaches outward to embrace a complex world of many different kinds of experiences involving both interpersonal and cultural transfusions" (3). The nature of the self and its existence is one of the recurring questions Abel explores. Echoing the proposals made by Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch in their book *The Embodied Mind*, Abel suggests the self is a "fundamentally fragmented, divided and non-unified" reality (49), so much so that "there is no self beyond the aggregates

of experience” (50). Abel’s account of the extended self is one that not only allows for but insists on a “merging of personal and group identities” along with a merging of human and non-human fields or entities (7).

Close to the heart of Abel’s account of the self lies his exposition of embodiment. The body is the “nucleus or fulcrum of human experience” (26), what Husserl described as the “persisting point” of all human experience (31). Abel sees the body itself as a dynamic field that can be said to include our interaction with the artifacts, technologies, and artificial environments (including cybernetic ones; see 236-258) we encounter in the world... or, perhaps better, *as* the world (32). Abel draws on both Merleau-Ponty and Polanyi, and appreciates that the latter more so than the former recognized the continuity between formal and informal experiences (36).

Artifacts, tools, and built environments are thus all essential aspects of Abel’s analysis of the extended self. Taking his cue from Bernard Stiegler’s reading of Heidegger, Abel suggests this dimension of human experience should not be understood in exclusively instrumental terms but should be recognized as “*a way of revealing*” (62), one that clarifies the essence of human nature. The technical is thus a mediating field between the organic and the inorganic, one populated by “organized beings” with an evolutionary history governed by “both material and non-material dynamics” (64). The development of the human mind and that

of human technology are so intertwined that their interaction “properly constitutes” time (65).

Not surprisingly, evolutionary models are an important part of Abel’s project. He appreciates Darwin’s genius, but also recognizes the inability of natural selection to account for all the varieties of evolution Abel considers (75-86). He looks instead to the descriptions of autopoietic systems provided by Polanyi, Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturana, and John Minger (86-92). It is within the context of his analysis of autopoiesis that he naturally takes up a consideration of memetics (93-112), and indicates his efforts are aimed in part at helping provide the “more rigorous foundation” memetics “badly needs” (109).

Throughout the book, Abel refers to architectural examples of the ideas he presents (see, e.g., 26-30, 124-142, 149-154, 174-187, etc.). These examples, however, are not mere illustrations or analogies but rather serve as specific instances wherein the interaction and interdependence of the self, mind, embodiment, and the environment are manifest. One of the most intriguing architectural concepts he uses is that of Mitsuo Inoue’s description of the differences between (on the one hand) Western and Chinese architecture and (on the other) Japanese architecture: whereas the former tend towards “geometrical” forms of order, the latter are “movement-oriented” and reveal their order only as one passes through them (239-245). This notion of “movement-oriented” order is

very much of a piece with Abel's larger project.

One of the less pronounced but nonetheless pervasive themes of the book has to do with current environmental and ecological concerns. Abel argues late modern Western lifestyles are unsustainable (225-227) and offers a few suggestions for overcoming our "addiction" to automobiles (231-233) and restructuring urban environments (233-235). His proposals are more programmatic than practical, but he acknowledges as much: his concern is to provide an alternative account of the self that will help us apprehend the nature of real freedom and thereby give us a better "understanding of our place in the world, and of the more complex realities that go with it" (224-225). Ultimately, though, he seems rather pessimistic about our chances: we are, he suggests, likely "not up to the task" of making significant changes in our lifestyle, there is a "well organized and funded campaign" dedicated to minimizing our awareness of the problem, and history is replete with examples of failed or collapsed civilizations that failed to "properly manage their environmental resources" (227-228).

Throughout *Extended Self*, Abel does a masterful job coordinating a considerable range of concepts and resources in an organized and compelling manner. It does seem, however, there are two questions to which he might have devoted more attention, especially given the importance both questions have for his project. The first question has to do with the distinction

between the *reality* of the self and the *apprehension* of the self, or what we might call (on the one hand) the *objective* or *ontological* mode of the self and (on the other) its *subjective* or *phenomenological* mode. At times it seems Abel recognizes a distinction between them, but at other times it seems he risks conflating them in confusing or problematic ways.

The second question has to do with the reality of the self: it is not at all clear the account Abel provides of the emergence and development of the self (or its embedded or "extended" nature) requires one to conclude "*there is no self beyond the aggregates of experience*" (50). One could, it seems, draw the opposite conclusion just as readily from the argument Abel provides. A more systematic analysis of the nature of emergence and the relationship between lower-level and higher-level entities within complex, dynamic ecologies is needed; Polanyi's account of dual control would be helpful here. Hopefully Abel will have an opportunity to address these questions in his forthcoming *The Self-Field: Mind, Body, and Environment*.

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