



Book review: Chris Abel's *The Extended Self: Architecture, Memes and Minds*

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Journal of Evolution and Technology - Vol. 25 Issue 1 – June 2015 - pgs 53-55

Chris Abel is an architectural theorist and critic with extensive knowledge of evolutionary theory, cultural history, and the philosophy of technology. His new book, *The Extended Self*, is a scholarly study of technology's evolution and transmission. It addresses how we incorporate technology into our everyday experience and even our conceptions of ourselves. Abel is especially interested in patterns of urban life in the USA and Australia, two countries that favor large, detached houses, feature urban sprawls that seem to go on forever, and show a heavy dependence on motor vehicles for personal transport. As he points out, many of us – many American and Australian suburbanites – are obsessed with our cars, experiencing them almost as extensions of our bodies.

Abel leads us to reflect on our species' love affair with technology. His insights may help us create cityscapes, self-conceptions, and patterns of living that are less ecologically destructive. Perhaps we can better understand just why we so often choose homes that are distant from services and workplaces, necessitating the use of privately owned motor cars. Why, in short, do we adore McMansions and gas-guzzling SUVs? Why do we live – again, so many of us – in ways that contribute to global warming and environmental deterioration?

Unfortunately, *The Extended Self* delivers less of this understanding than it seems to promise. Abel suggests that the practical solutions are well known, but he never explains succinctly what they are. More importantly, given his apparent objectives, he provides no explicit account of why the (well-known?) solutions are resisted or how the resistance could be overcome through better policy or improved public understanding. In these respects, his book is disappointing.

Its strength lies in its thoroughgoing investigation of larger issues. This includes a wide-ranging, and intellectually deep, exploration of ideas relating to memetics and the transmission of culture.

That, in turn, provokes comparisons between the mechanisms of biological evolution and those of cultural change and influence. Abel handles all this with relish. It's a confident scholarly performance.

In the process, he includes some fascinating analyses of specific issues. For example, he sets the record straight on the exigencies of constructing square chambers roofed by domes. In a well-known paper by Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin, "The Spandrels of San Marco and the Panglossian Paradigm" (1979), the authors discuss spandrels as a metaphor for phenotypical characteristics of a species that are byproducts of other features, rather than directly adaptive. As Abel points out, however, this won't do. In the absence of strong, lightweight building materials that became available only recently, spandrels, or something very like them, have an important architectural function. They are needed to spread a dome's load of weight. With masonry techniques from pre-modern eras, it was not possible to erect a stable dome that touches walls or arches at only four relatively narrow points (pp. 80-81). Abel's response to Gould and Lewontin does not, of course, prove that there are no characteristics in nature that are mere byproducts. It does, however, weaken the power of the famous Gould-Lewontin metaphor.

Unfortunately, there also some errors and oddities in *The Extended Self*, such as a reference to Gould as "Jay Gould" in one place (p. 78) and as "Stephen Gould" in another (p. 188) – with separate index terms for each. As another example, one long endnote refers to the Conservative Party's election to power in Australia in 2013 (p. 317). For better or worse, however, no such thing happened: no political party with that name, or anything similar, has been registered by the Australian Electoral Commission for many years, let alone held a parliamentary majority at either federal or state level. Abel is thinking of Australia's governing coalition of the Liberal Party and National Party. This does, indeed, constitute a conservative bloc, and it was restored to federal power in 2013. The intent of the passage is reasonably clear to anyone who is familiar with Australian politics; nonetheless, the inaccuracy is rather startling.

To be fair, any complex non-fiction book will contain errors. Though some stood out for me, *The Extended Self* may include no more than most. A larger barrier to its success is its hyperacademic prose style. The sentences are monotonously long, and their central points are multiply hedged and qualified. There's a conspicuous refusal to employ the simple word "I" – combined with far too much resort to the passive voice. (Avoiding the passive voice should not become a fetish, since there are many occasions when it's demanded. Its continual use can, nonetheless, suck the vitality out of English prose.) The overall effect is to produce an authorial voice that sounds detached, impersonal, and unfocused.

Too typically, Abel's sentences read like this:

Arguing that extreme theories of fragmented or non-existent selves ignore the psychological and social value of having a continuous focal point for the self of some kind, however fragile its foundations might be, Andy Clark and David Chalmers offer an alternative theory of extended minds which retains the integrity of individual human agents while also embracing the extension of personal powers by external devices – that is, external to the human body. (p. 56)

If that sentence doesn't faze you at all, then congratulations! In fairness, I am sure that it can be followed with a bit of concentration. Nonetheless, its central claim is so bogged down in situating and qualifying material that a reader can become lost in just this one sentence. Stated more plainly, the central claim is this: *Andy Clark and David Chalmers offer a theory of extended minds that includes a role for individual human agents, while acknowledging the extension of our*

powers by devices external to our bodies. That is a sufficiently difficult, challenging, nuanced thought for just one sentence.

It would not matter so much if sentences such as the one I've quoted were exceptions, but they are not. Unfortunately, Abel piles up sentence after consecutive sentence that tests a reader's patience. I'm not blaming him in particular. Academic publishers – and, indeed, the general milieu of academe – often encourage this kind of writing. It's a cause for regret, since it cuts off communication with many readers who might otherwise benefit from exposure to academic ideas.

As a bottom line: *The Extended Self's* subject matter is interesting and timely, and Abel's coverage has much to recommend it. His book is worth consulting and coming back to, perhaps repeatedly: it's an undeniably useful resource that consolidates much information and captures much effort. Its style, however, creates a barrier to accessibility. That's a pity, but the problem goes beyond this book.

Note

All page references are to Chris Abel, *The Extended Self: Architecture, Memes and Minds*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015.