



Evan Thompson (2007)
**Mind in Life. Phenomenology,
 and the Sciences of Mind**
 Harvard University Press: Cambridge
 ISBN: 978-0-674-02511-0
 543 pages

Disclosing Autopoietic Subjectivity: Tracing a Path from Life to Consciousness

Kevin McGee ◇ National University of Singapore <mckevin@nus.edu.sg>

Twenty years ago, philosopher Evan Thompson and biologist Francisco Varela began a project to explore the possibility of a circulation between the sciences of mind (cognitive science) and ways of studying, understanding, and transforming human lived experience. This resulted in *The Embodied Mind* (1991), a book they wrote with cognitive scientist Eleanor Rosch, that:

- examined and critiqued three broad strands of work in cognitive science (cognitivist, emergence, and enactive);
- provided a brief introduction to Buddhist approaches to mind (as a case-study of one tradition that has developed methods and insights into lived, first-person experience); and
- sketched some initial ideas about how each could inform the other.

Thompson's latest book, *Mind in Life*, continues and expands upon *The Embodied Mind*. As with the earlier book, Thompson's aim is to "bring the experimental sciences of life and mind into a closer and more harmonious relationship with phenomenological investigations of experience and subjectivity." He wants to "make headway on one of the outstanding philosophical and scientific problems of our time – the so-called explanatory gap between consciousness and nature. Exactly how are consciousness and subjective experience related to the brain and body?" But he is also careful to calibrate reader expectations. His goal, he writes, is not so much to *close* the explanatory gap as to "enlarge and enrich the philosophical and scientific resources we have for addressing the gap." (all quotes from the Preface).

As such, the book is in many ways a more detailed and current version of the same "enriching" perspective that was proposed in *The Embodied Mind*. Thompson provides more detailed treatment of relevant insights

from phenomenology, theoretical biology (autopoiesis), and the "embodied dynamist" approach to psychology and neuroscience. He also updates the earlier book in many ways, providing detailed information about the current status of many methods and strands of research that were touched upon in the earlier book.

There are also some obvious differences between *The Embodied Mind* and *Mind in Life*. For example, rather than continuing the exploration of Buddhism as a method for studying first-person experience, Thompson argues for the importance and relevance of Husserlian phenomenology; indeed, compared with the interpretation of Husserl expressed in *The Embodied Mind* this constitutes a major re-appraisal. (Thompson now believes that their earlier interpretation of Husserl was mistaken.)

Another difference is that there is a detailed treatment of autopoiesis (curiously, *The Embodied Mind* contained virtually nothing on this topic). Indeed, Thompson extends autopoiesis – which argues for the equivalence of "life" and "cognition" – to propose a model of "sensorimotor subjectivity." This, he argues, is a fruitful way to reconceptualize and overcome some of the difficulties posed by the classic Cartesian mind-body dichotomy to the study and understanding of first-person experience. This proposal may be the book's major contribution.

In conclusion, this is a rich, complex, and valuable book in the constructivist tradition of philosophy and science – and a book deserving of extended review and discussion. Nonetheless, at the end of reading it, one does feel as if "something is missing." Perhaps it has to do with a somewhat ineffable difference between *The Embodied Mind* and *Mind in Life*, a difference that seems somehow related to the fact that Thompson is the sole

author of *Mind in Life*. The book originated as a collaboration with Varela that was cut short by Varela's untimely death; as a result, although Thompson acknowledges the strong influence of Varela, ultimately the book is more (solely) his own. This may not make a difference to readers unfamiliar with their earlier work together, but for many it may be difficult to read the book and not wonder "what could have been." Taking a less historical perspective, "what is missing" is perhaps the degree to which the book is

explanatory. Thompson himself sets the challenge when he writes, "It is one thing to be able to establish correlations between consciousness and brain activity; it is another thing to have an account that *explains* exactly how certain biological processes generate and realize consciousness and subjectivity" (emphasis added). Thompson notes that we are currently struggling to conceive even of the form that such explanations could take, and he might well agree that his own book only makes moderate progress towards

that goal. However, the good news is that there are people like Thompson who continue to engage in the effort – and to produce books such as *Mind in Life*.

Reference

Varela, F. J., Thompson, E. & Rosch, E. (1991) *The embodied mind: Cognitive science and human experience*. MIT Press: Cambridge, MA.