

Book Review

Being Alive – Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description

Tim Ingold (Routledge: Abingdon, UK) 2011, pbk, 270 pages

Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description is a book by Professor Tim Ingold, an anthropologist based at the University of Aberdeen. Prior to the publication of this book, Ingold previously published a collection of essays titled *The Perception of the Environment* (2001 (2011 reissue)). The core message in that was how “we understand everything relationally as a movement along a way of life” (Ingold 2011, p. xv). The essays in *Being Alive* continue and develop that message.

Being Alive consists of nineteen chapters; each covers a different subject and can be read as a standalone essay. However, the first fourteen chapters build on each other and can also be read in a linear flow. It is only once the reader reaches chapter fifteen that this flow is broken. Chapters fifteen through nineteen explore a range of topics which appear unrelated to the previous chapters or each other. Given this, this review will focus on drawing out some of the key messages from the first fourteen chapters. Particularly as the messages from chapters fifteen through nineteen are, to this reviewer, unclear.

The overarching message of *Being Alive* is how to be alive is not to be sprinkled with agency, but rather to be alive is to be in life. Thus life is not a sprinkling of magic dust onto inanimate material and life is not in things, rather things are in life (Ingold, 2011). This notion of ‘being in life’ and the understanding that is brought forward by that phraseology is that dichotomous understandings that split the world into separate categories (mind/matter; humans/nature) are disintegrated. Ingold (2011) explores the disintegration of a split by asking questions such as “if a thing must already exist in the imagination before the work of production can even begin, where does the initial image come from?” (p.5). A question he then answers by arguing that “where producing things gives us objects to consume, consuming things gives us ideas of what to produce” (ibid; p.5). By extension he argues that producers do not transform the world “as play their part in the world’s transformation of itself” (ibid; p.6). As such “human beings produce themselves and one another by establishing through their actions, the conditions for their ongoing growth and development” (ibid, p.8). Thus Ingold (2011) brings forward an understanding where humans are connected and not separable from all that surrounds them. However to avoid taking a human centric perspective he asks us to consider a farmer’s work in establishing conditions for crops. Ingold (2011) provokes us

to consider that from the crop's perspective a farmer is an environment being manipulated to enable the crop's propagation. Thus Ingold argues that "living beings of all kinds...constitute each other's conditions of existence, both for their own and for subsequent generations" (Ingold, 2011; p.8). Leaning on the work of Oyama (1985), Ingold (2011) drives home his point regarding the ontological and epistemological inaccuracy of assuming separation, as opposed to a relational view; by arguing that Darwinian evolutionary theory is disabled by a fallacy that supposes "organic form pre-exists the processes that have given rise to it" (ibid, p.8). This relational view is augmented in subsequent chapters when Ingold (2011) discusses how the "wind is its blowing" (ibid, p.17), the stream is the running water, we hear in sound and we see in light.

Ingold (2011) argues that the relational view is difficult to grasp, partly because of the subject-verb structure of the English language. Whereby individuals say "the wind blows" (ibid, p.17) and thus the structure of the language is such that it inserts a fissure between the wind and blowing - a fissure that helps to perpetuate notions of separation. In another chapter, Ingold (2011) explores how visual communication by way of diagrams can also insert a fissure. For example he argues that when using a circle to depict an organism an inversion is created whereby the depiction is that the organism is closed in on itself and has a perimeter boundary and wall where "the organism is in here and the environment is out there" (ibid, p.69). Similarly another chapter explores how a plank is sawn into two, in which it is highlighted that a saw can only be a tool when it is placed "in relation to other things within a field of activity in which it can exert a certain effect" (ibid, p.56). Thus a saw (or anything) has no intrinsic attributes but rather only has attributes of any kind when in a particular context (a relational field).

Ingold (2011) through the chapters builds towards an argument that "things are alive...because the substances of which they are comprised continue to be swept up in circulations of the surrounding media that alternatively portend their dissolution or - characteristically with animate beings - ensure their regeneration (ibid; p.29). Thus he argues being alive is to be a hive of activity pulsing with flows of materials (Ingold, 2011). As such "the environment does not exist in and of itself, it exists only in relation to the being whose environment it is" (Ingold, 2011; p.77). Further the environment might be more appropriately "envisaged as a domain of entanglement" (ibid; p.71); as there is no environment without an organism and vice versa.

Implications of this relational understanding proposed by Ingold (2011) are clanging truths such as; "participation is not opposed to observation but it is a condition for it" (ibid, p.129) and how it is storytelling not the power of classification that is key to

human knowledge. Further he argues how “we have to recognise that our humanity is neither something that comes the territory, with our species-specific nature, nor an imagined condition that places the territory outside ourselves, but rather the ongoing historical process of our mutual and collective self-creation” (ibid, p.114). Thus humans and what it means to be a human is a negotiated relationship between our genes, culture and our environment. An implication not discussed by Ingold (2011) is that his views imply that life is not a special category. Rather life and non life are relational effects whose categorisation purely rests on the temporality of the observer. Thus everything is alive and or nothing is alive.

Turning to business studies, two key implications of Ingold’s (2011) arguments are one, organisations are negotiated concerns between the people that constitute them and the environments they find themselves in. Thus the environment is not acted on, it is acted in. Second, a visual depiction of an organisation using a circle closes the organisation in on itself and inappropriately creates a notion of a false separation between an organisation and its environment. Further if Ingold’s (2011) construct is accepted and to be human is to be a negotiation between genes and environment. Then organisations, perhaps more than we realised, are impacting our humanity. Thus perhaps far more than was considered, organisations are not only shaping the environment, their acts shape us as individuals - as our humanity is not a static repository of attributes, rather it is a negotiation within a context, a context that is changing.

In sum, similar to Ingold’s prior publication *The Perception of the Environment* (2001 (2011 reissue)); *Being Alive* is an excellent read and well worth the cover price. The relational view it proposes can also be summed up via a quote from Hans Jonas whereby “the effects keep adding themselves to one another, with the result that the situation for later subjects and their choices of action will be progressively different from that of the initial agent and ever more the fated product of what was done before” (Jonas 1984, p.7)

References

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