



# Political philosophy of mind: inverting the concepts, expanding the niche

Sofia Tzima<sup>1</sup> · Jan Slaby<sup>2</sup>

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## Abstract

This text maps out a territory for political philosophy of mind, with emphasis on habit, affect and an expanded notion of the social niche. We first survey the historical development of classic philosophy of mind towards the articulation of political philosophy of mind and discuss further influences for the field. We then outline commitments to relationality, dynamism, and emergence, to adopt a post-cognitivist view of cognition as embodied and situated, as ongoing dynamic interaction with the environment. We propose to move beyond the user/resource framework dominant in extended mind approaches and to surpass what Jesper Aagaard calls the “dogma of harmony” prevalent in 4E approaches. Moving beyond the individual subject, towards situated agents shaped by institutional procedures, social domains and subjectification practices, we highlight the role of affect and habit in processes of societal mind-shaping. We propose a critical methodology: inverting key concepts from philosophy of mind to bring out their ambivalent standing amidst oppressive and exploitative social structures, thereby expanding the purview of the socio-material niches in which cognitive and affective capacities are developed and expressed. We discuss work on habit in the enactivist and pragmatist traditions to put our method of concept inversion and niche expansion to work. The article is meant to be an introduction and invitation to join an emerging scholarly effort at the intersection of philosophy of mind, 4E cognitive science and social as well as political philosophy.

**Keywords** Affect · Habit · Mind-shaping · (Social) niche · Philosophy of mind · Scaffolding

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✉ Jan Slaby  
jan.slaby@fu-berlin.de  
Sofia Tzima  
stzima3@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup> Berlin School of Mind and Brain, Humboldt University Berlin, Berlin, Germany

<sup>2</sup> Institute of Philosophy, Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany

## 1 Introduction: Political philosophy of mind

Political philosophy of mind is the study of the formative interaction between social and political processes and the mental capacities of human individuals and collectives. It combines philosophical analyses of the mind with inquiries into the social conditions and dynamics that impact the constitution, development and expression of mental capacities. This guiding assumption of a constitutive correspondence between socio-cultural environments and mental capacities informs a critical perspective: Which mind-shaping environmental structures have detrimental effects on the well-being, autonomy and self-realization of the actors under its influence? How might man-made environmental conditions, social arrangements, technologies and media aid and abet political agendas by shaping attitudes, mental capacities and habits of political constituencies, for instance alienation, ignorance, apathy, aversion or hatred? Political philosophy of mind combines a perspective on the relational constitution of mental capacities with a critical outlook on contemporary “pathologies of the mind”, while orienting inquiry towards enabling and liberating social arrangements.

In order to tackle this theme with sufficient depth, political philosophy of mind requires an interdisciplinary orientation. Within philosophy, it combines ‘classical’ philosophy of mind and philosophy of cognitive science with aspects of social and political philosophy; it borrows from analytical, phenomenological, poststructuralist and critical theory perspectives. Beyond philosophy, it interacts with several fields in and around the cognitive sciences, especially approaches to distributed cognition, work in cognitive and evolutionary anthropology, developmental, social and personality psychology. Further afield, it looks to sociology, cultural anthropology and media theory as well as science and technology studies and related areas. With this orientation, political philosophy of mind builds upon other interdisciplinary developments in the mind sciences, such as cognitive sociology (DiMaggio, 1997; Zerubavel, 1999), cognitive archaeology (Donald, 1991; Malafouris, 2013), cognitive-science-adjacent memory studies (Sutton, 2010; Michaelian & Sutton, 2013; Heersmink, 2018; Heersmink & Carter, 2020); phenomenological psychiatry (Stanghellini et al. 2018; Fuchs, 2017; Ratcliffe, 2017), and critical neuroscience (Choudhury & Slaby, 2012; Slaby & Gallagher, 2014). A central source of inspiration is work in the 4E tradition of philosophy of mind and cognitive science: the four E’s standing for embodied, embedded, enactive and extended approaches to the mind; in effect, a combination, not without internal tensions, of extended mind theory (Clark, 1996; Clark & Chalmers, 1998), enactivism (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007; Noë, 2004, 2009; Thompson, 2007) and phenomenologically informed cognitive science (Gallagher, 2020; Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008).

In this introductory article, we combine a historical and systematic overview with a more specific study of affect, habit and mind-shaping social arrangements. The background for this is a critique of problematic assumptions informing much contemporary work in philosophy of mind. The text is structured as follows: The initial section on the theoretical influences and main intellectual developments (2) is followed by a section on core assumptions and concepts (3), and a stepwise discussion of several background assumptions and “dogmas” of prevalent approaches in 4E-oriented philosophy of mind (4). As an example of political philosophy of mind at

work, we probe into enactivist accounts of habit and confront them with studies of the habits of “whiteness as property” (Harris, 1993; Guenther, 2019) (5). We conclude with a brief outlook (6).

## 2 Background and theoretical development

During the 20th century, philosophy of mind became one of the most productive subfields of anglophone philosophy. Adjacent to the cognitive revolution in psychology and the rise of cybernetics and computation from the 1950s onward, philosophy of mind took up the Cartesian challenge with renewed vigor and new means: How is mind possible in a physical world? As the title of a forerunner book from the 1920s indicated, the orientation initially was metaphysical: *Mind and its Place in Nature* (Broad, 1925). With the appeal of physicalism and the trend towards a science-oriented naturalistic philosophy, mental phenomena were considered to be metaphysical outliers in need of accommodation to the prevailing ontological framework. This explains the early appeal of mind/brain identity theory (Place, 1956; Smart, 1959).

Mostly in keeping with the physicalistic spirit of the times, a younger generation of philosophers turned to cognitive science for inspiration. The rise of the computer propelled a reductionist program, spearheaded by functionalism (Putnam, 1960) and the computational theory of mind (Fodor, 1975; Fodor & Pylyshyn, 1988). Early successes of the brain sciences provided the impetus for an eliminativist program that aimed to replace (instead of reduce) the mental by suggesting that better neurophysiological descriptions of brain states might take the place of imprecise mind talk (Churchland, 1981, 1986). Others, such as Dennett (1981), opted for a more subtle partial revision of common assumptions about the mental: Dennett’s “intentional stance” agreed with the eliminativists’ in denying the existence of mental states as concrete realities in the individual’s mind/brain, but considered the intentional ascriptions of folk psychology as indispensable. Mental states, on this view, are useful fictions we ascribe to one another as part of a shared practice of mutual understanding (“folk psychology”); and the patterns in behavior and environmental responses that these ascriptions track are real (Dennett, 1991; see also Haugeland, 1998).

While all these approaches shared a broadly materialistic, anti-dualistic orientation, that wasn’t the only game in town: so-called “qualia freaks” insist on the reality and irreducibility of phenomenally conscious experiences, which led to a rehabilitation of the first-person-perspective and drew some philosophers of mind back to dualistic positions (Chalmers, 1996; Kripke, 1980; Nagel, 1974). Conspicuously absent from all these options and quarrels was any explicit concern with social and political matters; in fact, outside of Dennett’s social ascriptionism, most of these views were thoroughly individualistic, giving almost no weight to the embeddedness of minded agents in social environments. In retrospect, it can seem puzzling how little attention philosophers of mind devoted to alternative approaches in the mind sciences which gave a much more central role to sociality and culture, such as the work of Donald (1991), Deacon (1997) or Hutchins (1995).

In the increasingly segregated landscape of philosophy in the second half of the 20th century, analytical philosophers of mind worked mostly in isolation from con-

tinental thought, be it the phenomenological tradition or the various shades of what came to be known as poststructuralism. That may in part account for the a-political outlook of the field and its debates. However, in the few instances where conciliatory scholars attempted to bridge the analytic-continental divide in matters of the mind, the political stakes of philosophical thought on mind and cognition emerged readily: In his essay “The Intentionality Allstars” (1990), John Haugeland hinted at the political conservatism of important strands of mainstream philosophy of mind by contrasting the individualism of right-wing neo-Cartesians (Fodor, with Searle out in right field) with the theoretical socialism of left-wing neo-Hegelians (Sellars, Brandom with Richard Rorty and Derrida out in left field). In his attempt to push the credibility of these latter positions, which back then represented a minoritarian segment of views on the mind, Haugeland took recourse to irony and a goofy baseball analogy, as apparently the mere thematization of political orientations was not viable in a respectable publication of these times.<sup>1</sup>

A decade or two earlier, politically engaged contrarians in cognitive science had proposed approaches to the mind that pushed the field well beyond the canonical debates: Gregory Bateson’s (1904–1980) cybernetics-inspired ecology of the mind theorized the nested interdependency of individuals, social systems and ecosystems, which included a close alignment of the principles governing individual mentality with the homeostatic patterns of larger systemic wholes (Bateson, 1972). J.J. Gibson’s (1904–1979) ecological psychology, offered a view of visual perception as direct, as opposed to the cognitivist understanding of perception as inferential and the environment as otherwise inaccessible. He further proposed the idea of active perception and the complementary notion of affordances, as perceived opportunities of environmental engagement that are tied to organismic needs, in this way, illuminating the importance of the organism-environment system as a unit of analysis (Gibson, 1979; see also Rietveld & Kiverstein, 2014). Similarly impactful in the long run was the work of the Chilean biologist and philosopher Francisco Varela (1946–2001). Like Bateson, Varela derived some of his main ideas from evolutionary biology; his cooperation with biologist Humberto Maturana led him to propose the concept of autopoiesis, the self-organizing and self-producing capacities of organisms. Varela’s work became increasingly more popular during the 1990s and led to the establishment of the philosophical and scientific school of enactivism (De Jaeger & Di Paolo, 2007; Thompson, 2007; Varela et al., 1991; Varela, 1999).

Yet, when it comes to the main discourses and developments in the philosophy of mind, voices such as Varela’s, Gibson’s or Bateson’s for a long time remained marginal and had little agenda-shaping power. Outrightly ignored, as in many other areas of philosophy, was the work of decolonial, poststructuralist and feminist scholars, despite their obvious pertinence for matters of mind.<sup>2</sup> The development that would

<sup>1</sup> Much more can be said, obviously, on the political trends and cultural currents informing the heyday of anglophone philosophy of mind. For poignant and well-informed historical perspectives, see Cohen-Cole (2013), who charts a notable liberal current behind Cold War cognitive science, and Stadler (2014).

<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, one might tell a substantive parallel history of approaches to the mind, to situated mental capacities and socio-political shaping of attitudes and orientations – a history that would feature names such as DuBois, Fanon, Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze & Guattari, Foucault, Haraway, Young, Butler, and more recently Ahmed and Wynter (to drop just some of the better-known names).

eventually ignite a more emphatic turn to matters political on part of some philosophers of mind came from within the cognitive-science-friendly wing of ‘classical’ analytical philosophy of mind. With the programmatic question “Where does the mind stop and the rest of the world begin?” Andy Clark and David Chalmers forcefully shifted the agenda of the philosophy of mind towards an orientation that gave much more weight to the socio-technical environments in which cognitive agents were situated. While still at base metaphysical, their seminal essay “The Extended Mind” (1998) proposed to expand the realization base for mental processes to encompass not only the individual brain but also various cognition-enabling structures, tools and technologies in the environment of cognitive agents. What the authors called “active externalism” is the view that cognitive processes (not only the content of cognition as earlier semantic externalist views suggested) could involve aspects of a cognizer’s environment. Andy Clark in particular would come to tirelessly develop, formulate and promote this perspective (Clark, 1997, 2001, 2008, 2010).

In the wake of the high visibility of these writings and the intensive debates on the pros and cons of extended mind (EM) theory, earlier approaches to distributed cognition (Hutchins, 1995, 2000) and culturally enabled cognition (Donald, 1991) received more attention and were more readily incorporated into scholarship on the mind. This project was especially taken up by proponents of the 4E approach to cognition, which also gained more traction as relevant to the debate on the environmental role in cognition. It aimed to incorporate and systematize perspectives on cognition, such as Hutchins’ and Donald’s, that went against the internalist, brain-centered standard (see Oxford Handbook of 4E, 2018). While EM theory itself diversified productively and inspired several research programs (see, e.g., the texts in Menary, 2010; Sutton, 2010; Wheeler, 2010), it faced strong criticism from internalists, leading to some theorists arguing that only an enactive, embodied – as opposed to functionalist – approach can safeguard the concept of extended mind. Hence, Clark’s EM was also transformed into the extended aspect of the 4Es.

Extending EM theory towards an enactive direction, Gallagher’s concept of the Socially Extended Mind proposed that cognition is not only extended through our tools and technologies, but also by our coupling with other minds or institutions, such as a legal or educational system (Gallagher, 2013). ‘Mental’ or ‘cognitive institutions’ both facilitate certain cognitive tasks, such as coming to a conclusion on a judicial matter and enable certain cognitive abilities that would not exist in the absence of those institutions, such as the ability for legal argumentation (Gallagher, 2013; Slaby & Gallagher, 2014). With this proposal, Gallagher, deviating from the apolitical mind-philosophical standard presented above, explicitly motivated a critical perspective, offering, on the one hand, the concept of socially extended mind as a tool for critical theory and urging a social critical twist within the cognitive sciences, on the other. In his monograph *Action and Interaction* (2020), Gallagher has integrated his earlier work on social cognition, intersubjectivity and the embodied self with the approach to (mental) institutions, while aligning this work closely with a Frankfurt School critical theory perspective (represented, inter alia, by Axel Honneth’s work on recognition and “pathologies of reason”; see Honneth, 2023).

In parallel to the EM debates, which viewed cognition as an essentially high-level problem-solving activity, attention has been drawn to the inseparability of cogni-

tion and emotion, on the experimental as well as on the theoretical front. Backed by neuroscientific evidence on appraisal and dynamics of brain organization (e.g., Freeman, 2000; Lewis, 2005; Pessoa, 2008), and based on the sense-making tenet of enactivism, theorists, for instance Thompson and Colombetti, promoted the idea of the inherently affective character of cognition (Colombetti, 2005, 2013; Thompson, 2007; Thompson & Stapleton, 2009); not only marking a fundamental difference between EM and enactivism, but more importantly giving affective phenomena a more concrete explanatory role for cognition. Further developments in the philosophy of emotion came to view affects and emotions not as individual organism's processes, but rather as supported or co-constituted by the emoting subject's environment. A variety of approaches under the umbrella term "situated affectivity" emerged ranging from more neutral commitments to such ideas as a constructivist "affective scaffolding" (Colombetti & Krueger, 2015; Griffiths & Scarantino, 2005; Coninx & Stephan, 2021) to extended (Slaby, 2014; Carter et al., 2016), collective emotions (Krueger, 2015; von Scheve & Salmela, 2014) and distributed affectivity theses (Slaby, 2016; Stephan et al., 2014), whereby individual affective states are shaped and modulated by a group's overall affective dynamics.

More recently, especially work on (affective) scaffolding has given rise to a number of publications on detrimental, manipulative or oppressive forms of scaffolding (Liao & Huebner 2020; Spurrett 2024; Timms & Spurrett, 2023). This emerging work reflects a broader trend of scholars cautioning against overly optimistic, harmonious descriptions of mind-enabling or -enhancing environmental structures and technologies (Aagaard, 2021; Protevi, 2013; Slaby, 2016). We consider these works to be quite close in theory and in spirit to what we call 'political philosophy of mind'. Yet, the full potential of a focus on affect, affective arrangements and affective technologies has not been developed in this literature as it focuses more on specific instances of detrimental scaffolding and less on the broader conceptual and critical framework that could help systematize these critiques. Here lies the more specific contribution of the present text.

The opening up of emotion and affect to processual and relational thinking made the social and by extension normative dimensions of affective phenomena explicit. It also brought the philosophical discussion around them in contact with the field of critical and cultural affect studies, which more directly dealt with these dimensions. The new "turn to affect" (Clough & Halley, 2007) in critical theory was marked by two seminal texts: Sedgwick and Frank's "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold" (1995) and Brian Massumi's "The Autonomy of Affect" (1995), reinstating the possibly missed impact of their predecessors, Silvan Tomkins's psychobiology of differential affects (1962) and Gilles Deleuze's interpretation of Spinoza's theory of affects (1988). While space does not permit for an adequate summary of the development of affect studies from the mid-1990s onwards, what is here highlighted is (1) the post-cognitive conceptualization of affect as the "in-between", the transindividual dynamics of often pre-reflexive, non-categorical interactions of human and non-human bodies (see, e.g., Ahmed, 2004; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Mühlhoff, 2018; Seyfert, 2012; Slaby & von Scheve, 2019) and (2) the political relevance of affect, its role as a basis for social research and critique (Wetherell, 2012).

Taking up affect's political relevance and continuing an attempt to bridge the continental/analytic divide in philosophy, Protevi (2009) working within a Deleuzian framework, brings together many of the aforementioned orientations to examine "politically shaped and triggered affective cognition", laying out the groundwork for the current project, with his formulation of the linked concepts of "bodies politic", "political affect" and "political cognition". In combining Deleuze's threefold ontology and 4E cognition, Protevi examined the emergent and produced subjectivity within the interaction of somatic and social systems, through the role of affective cognition. On these grounds, Protevi argues that affect is inherently political, as bodies are part of ecosocial matrices wherein they affect and are affected by each other. He develops a dynamic and relational understanding of affect, taking it as a key organizing element in his analysis of political cognition. Looking to articulate processes via which the subject emerges, while suggesting that a successful political philosophy of mind should avoid both reductive individualism and strict structuralism (Protevi, 2022), he points to the link of the subpersonal, the personal and the supra-personal (social), highlighting them as politically-relevant levels of analysis. Equally important as these theoretical articulations are Protevi's case studies pinpointing instances of political affect and political cognition, such as his geosocial history and political analysis of the Hurricane Katrina catastrophe in New Orleans in 2005 (Protevi, 2009, ch. 7) or his recent indictment of institutional pathologies afflicting precariously situated essential workers in the U.S. South during the Covid-19 pandemic (Protevi, 2022). In a related vein, Jan Slaby coined the term "political philosophy of mind" and suggested the term "mind invasion" (rather than "mind extension") in order to highlight the political nature and implications of situated affectivity and cognition, rendering the question of the formation of individuals' mental capacities and affective patterns inseparable from the critical consideration of sociopolitical organization of reality (Slaby, 2016).

In *The Mind-Body Politic*, Maiese and Hanna (2019) continue the path opened by Protevi towards a political philosophy of mind, focusing on a notion of mind-shaping. The authors claim that "mind-shaping institutions" are purposefully designed to and play a fundamental shaping role on the mental capacities of the individuals falling under their jurisdiction. Critical of overly cognitivist approaches, Maiese and Hanna outline an enactivist account of institutional mind-shaping based on notions of participatory sense-making, bodily habits and affective framing. Thereby, the authors reveal the "affective core" of the mind-shaping thesis. Individual affective frames and bodily comportments become visible as the prime target areas onto which social and institutional arrangements exert their formative and modulating powers. Maiese and Hanna's work has been acknowledged for establishing a more coherent path for others to follow in the new field of political philosophy of mind, as it firmly redirects philosophy of mind's gaze towards the sociopolitical nexus.<sup>3</sup>

With this survey of the main intellectual developments from the late 20th century to the present, characterized by a series of turns, to the environment, to the body and

<sup>3</sup> A productive critical discussion of Maiese's and Hanna's book has been conducted on the Syndicate Network Website (see <https://syndicate.network/symposia/philosophy/the-mind-body-politic/> - last accessed on November 25, 2024).

to affect, and to the social and institutional, we have thus arrived at a new, somewhat belated, turn to the political.

### 3 Core assumptions

In contrast to the canonical approaches in the philosophy of mind, the starting point of the current work is not the individual cognizing subject – or, in some cases, just the brain –, but rather a distributed complex and dynamic social system. The outside-in model we favor starts from organized social domains and moves inward towards distributed, situated affectivity, corresponding affective frames and thereby towards embodied minds. This explanatory orientation is based on commitments to processual over static ways of thinking, to being as becoming, to dynamism and emergence. Acknowledging the limitations of reductionism, and taking up pragmatic reasons, i.e., testing how adopting such a stance allows us to advance certain concepts, we adopt a framework that favors process philosophical thinking stemming from such figures as Whitehead, Bergson, Deleuze and Guattari, also drawing on Fanon and Wynter.

We thus begin with the assumption that the world consists of physical, organic, cognitive, and social processes that dynamically interact at various levels of organization. Out of these interactions, relative order in a chaotic world arises, points of stability and predictability emerge, which allow for a more systematic study of these organizational levels. Dynamical systems theory is a transdisciplinary study of the behavior of complex dynamic systems over time, which uses mathematical formulations to model the dynamics of abstract theoretical, living, material, sociotechnical, cybernetic, and other types of systems. In this framework, emergence is a feature of complex dynamic systems, whereby the interaction and self-organization of the components of a system give rise to new patterns of behavior. Crucially, this pattern cannot be produced by an individual component of the system but can only emerge on the collective level. For a system to be capable of self-organization, circular causality must be present (Bateson & Donaldson, 1991; Protevi, 2009). This implies that the interaction of the components give rise to the pattern of behavior at the system scale, restricting the behavior of the component parts so that they enable the system scale behavior. Accordingly, to make sense of how a system and its components behave, we must look to how they relate to each other in terms of mutually restricting and enabling their operations. Dynamical systems thinking thus combines a processual perspective (becoming over being) with a commitment to relationality (relations as prior to *relata*).

Applying the concept of emergence to the level of the social we take the supra-individual level of organization – the level of institutions, infrastructures and social practices – as one in which phenomena emerge from the ongoing interactions of individual subjects, but which cannot be reduced to the individual level. Likewise, in order to describe the behavioral (in dynamic system terms) patterns of the individual subject, we ought to understand the way in which those patterns are constituted by the restricting or shaping influence of the whole system to which the individual belongs. Zooming in, we also take the individual subject not just as a member of a social



whole, but also as part of an environmental whole and as herself a whole with individual parts. Here again, the same principles determine co-constitutive relationships whose political dimensions are to be discerned and investigated.

Protevi proposes a threefold investigation “above, below and alongside the subject”, or otherwise, the “social”, the “somatic” and the “assemblage” (Protevi, 2009, p.4). The “somatic” encompasses all the physiological and psychological processes of the body and their ongoing dynamic interactions, the “social” refers to the structures, activity, and characteristics of the social field, of groups and institutions. The “assemblage”<sup>4</sup> comprises the horizontal dimension, the coupled system of brain-body-environment, and its complex interaction with the immediate techno/social/cultural milieu. We might also think of these levels as the bodily, the environmental and the sociocultural dimensions, and in turn link them to the aforementioned turns in philosophy of mind, towards the body, towards the environment and towards affect. These categories are interrelated in a way that one is almost always implicated within the other and yet, there exist separate tools to talk about them distinctly. Thus, we attempt to draw from and compose a variety of conceptual resources that correspond to the different aspects of political life; moving between research from biology and ecology, research on embodiment, theory of social reproduction, to the study of subjectification practices, decolonial and critical race theory.

Commitment to relationality comes in many flavors. In thinking about interdependence, wholes and parts, different types of useful relations have been articulated. For example, while Varela-inspired enactivism defines an interactive structural coupling between the body as autonomous adaptive system and its environment (Di Paolo & De Jaegher, 2017), Gibson-inspired ecological psychology defines a perceiving/acting organism-environment mutuality, pointing “at the ontological level [to the] codependence, coregulation, codetermination, and coevolution of the organism-environment system” (Read & Szokolszky, 2020). While we will not attempt here a conceptual clarification of the differences between the two approaches, we take them as potential starting points from which to think about the operational boundaries and location of the so-called subject in non-individualistic terms. We find underlying in both frameworks a welcome opposition to reduction and a relational definition of cognition as a dynamic interactive phenomenon that has at its focus organismic activity and its location at the boundary of agent and environment.<sup>5</sup> We adopt such a post-cognitivist approach, rejecting the assumption that cognition is at its core information-processing.

Cognition, here, involves an organism’s reciprocal interaction with a rich, complex environment on both the synchronic and diachronic levels; it involves a set of skills and capacities for adaptive behavior that the organism learns and develops through constant interaction with the environment. In this dynamic interaction, both

<sup>4</sup> Consistent with Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of agencement (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), but expressed in dynamical system terms, “assemblage” refers to [an] “emergent functional structure ... [a] dispersed system that enables focused behavior at the system level as it constrains component action” (Protevi, 2009, p.49). For an affect theoretic appropriation of assemblage thinking, see Slaby et al. (2019) on the notion of “affective arrangements”.

<sup>5</sup> More could be said about the relationship between enactivism and ecological psychology, obviously. A helpful exploration of convergences between these areas is McGann et al., 2020.

the body and the environment play constitutive roles, as the former is the physical means through which the organism perceives and acts, while the latter provides the conditions for the organism's action and sense-making. In other words, basic cognition is non-representational, embodied and situated. In light of such an approach, a central question becomes that of relative dominance, as in this dynamic interplay certain environmental structures lead the way, determining a path for the organism to follow. This raises the question to what extent a subject's cognition is still also guided by intrinsic drives or other individual states or dispositions.

## **4 The dogma of the individual, the dogma of harmony and the complacent assumption of just systems**

Raising issues of scope, method and assumptions, the framework-shift we propose is based on three shortcomings of contemporary approaches to philosophy of mind. The first two, namely, the dogma of the individual (also called the user/resource model) and the dogma of harmony, have been raised by Slaby (2016) and Aagaard (2021), and will be further elaborated here. The third, the assumption of just systems, is here underlined as an implicit assumption found in many of the rather apolitical approaches of the field. In good faith, not wanting to paint an entire field as complicit in social structures of domination and exploitation, we rather use the term complacent, to suggest that an unquestioned assumption, that of social systems being by and large just, allows many philosophers of mind to not have to deal with the implications for their theories (and potentially their lives) of admitting otherwise.

### **4.1 The dogma of the individual or the user/resource model**

From the most traditional cognitivist views to 4E and situatedness approaches, there is an overarching tendency to posit some form of individual cognizing subject. Be it merely a brain, a biological individual body, or a situated "user", the fully constituted individual seems to be the starting point for all theories of cognition. One example of the dominance of such approaches is what Slaby calls the user/resource model, a prominent way of framing thought about the human subject within the situatedness discourse. The user/resource model starts with the individual user, assumed to be a conscious cognizer, who, making intentional use of a resource, an environmental structure or tool, pursues a well-defined task. From Clark-inspired individual-technology couplings (Clark, 2002) to environmental (Griffiths & Scarantino, 2005) and affective scaffolds (Colombetti, 2020; Colombetti & Krueger, 2015), works in both situated cognition and situated affectivity seem to favor a view of the subject as fully developed rational consumer: agents that freely and efficiently navigate the world with the help of the scaffolds that are already in place, purposefully arranged.

While there are instances where a subject is indeed a "user", it is a complicated matter to determine whether we deal with an agent capable of autonomous agency. The critique posed here is that instead of taking the presence of a fully formed subject acting in the world (corresponding to something akin to the fully developed adult brain and body) for granted, we should do justice to the fact that agentic capaci-

ties and other key features of subjectivity are continuously produced: shaped and re-shaped in ongoing intra-action with dynamic environments. Subjectivity is a set of capacities of an embodied, situated organism placed under and continuously shaped by subjectification practices, including environmental structures, machinery, technology, norms and institutions of a given affect-intensive social domain (Protevi, 2009, 2013). Accordingly, to the extent an individual achieves the capacity to determine itself to act in such contexts, the autonomy at issue is necessarily relational – enabled and constrained, diachronically as well as synchronically, by environmental structures and developmental resources, including the contributing acts and responses of other individuals in locally orchestrated social interactions (see Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000). The subject, then, cannot be assumed as given from the outset, but has to be explained by reference to its dynamic socio-material contexts.

Two issues are highlighted as problematic: first, positing a fully formed individual subject overlooks the ongoing production, the shaping and reshaping, of subject-constituting capacities, and thus the entire associated set of subjectification practices as an analytic domain. Second, isolating the subject from the social domains she is inextricable from, might lead to over-simplifying the phenomena we set out to investigate, taking collectively shared affective modes, habits, ways of being to be individual ones and thus occluding the full picture of social existence (on this, see von Maur 2021). This simplification is also the point at which it becomes much harder to discern the political significance of our ways of being.

#### 4.2 The dogma of harmony

Raising constructive criticism towards the 4E discourse, Aagaard (2021) argues that 4E scholars have a tendency to present an overly idealized view of human-technology relations, dominated by notions of cooperation and collaboration between all entities. Calling this assumption the dogma of harmony, Aagaard suggests that over-emphasizing agreement and de-emphasizing conflict, disagreement and other non-harmonious states amounts to a category mistake, as it equates all human-technology interactions with positive interactions. He discusses the examples of bad technology-related habits and deskilling via the use of technology, as cases where the assumption of harmony does not apply. Although Aagaard's critique is almost exclusively geared to human-technology interaction, the author mentions a similar critique on the discourse on intersubjectivity. We think that these are two instances of one tendency that runs across the entire field of research in contemporary philosophy of mind.

In fact, the user/resource model can be seen as an extension of the case Aagaard describes, with technology being extended to resources in the broader sense. Thus, we suggest that this way of thinking risks overlooking often-invisible structuring effects of environments that guide and mold cognition, which are not in accordance with individuals' interests, drives and intentions. The user/resource approach also implicitly models cognition according to a reductive homo oeconomicus template, foregrounding cost/benefit considerations on part of narrowly "rational" agents (see Schuetze & von Maur, 2022). The developmental dimension, which concerns the shaping of affective, behavioral and cognitive dispositions over time, is largely disregarded. In order to harness the full potential of the situatedness framework to shed

light onto these political dimensions of cognition, Slaby (2016) proposes to use the notion of “mind invasion”. This concept attempts to capture the ways in which it is often not the individual’s decision to employ a mental tool towards a goal, but rather it is pervasive sociotechnical environments and institutional realities that initiate and guide this process. This shift in framework comes with a shift in the type of questions one ought to ask: instead of “What can the environment do for the individual?” the question becomes “what does the social environment do to subjects?”, where this question is meant both synchronically (currently ongoing mind-shaping influences) and diachronically (developmental mind-shaping over longer time frames aka subjectification). This expanded viewpoint neither precludes the possibility of individual agency (and thus personal responsibility), nor the fact that certain agents might become effective shapers of others’ mental capacities. Our focus is on grasping the extent to which such agency is structurally enabled, endowed and scaffolded by complex and evolving socio-material environments.<sup>6</sup>

### 4.3 The assumption of just systems

What Aargaard discusses as the “dogma of harmony” is indicative of a broader orientation that implicitly guides much work in the philosophy of mind. The assumption seems to be that, by and large, social systems are just and the individuals positioned in them are goal-oriented rational cooperators that harness intelligent and fair institutional and/or technological arrangements in their environments. In view of what we unfortunately have to call “the real world”, this assumption strikes us as highly idealizing, to say the least. It blocks from view widespread power imbalances, rampant inequality – measured not only in material possessions but in terms of unequal access to institutional protection and the rule of law – structural violence and much else that besets actually existing human collectives. We think that philosophy of mind might have arrived at the point at which the practice of idealizations that serve methodological purposes (for example, the maxim to start from simple and well-functioning cases and increase complexity later) collapses into ideology: the supposition that the environments in which humans develop and exist display the same measure of harmony, balance and rational design than our methodological idealizations suggest.

This problematic tendency has two separate aspects. First, regardless of details about situated subjects and socio-political environments, the practice of painting a harmonious picture of equally endowed and enabled cognitive capacities has epistemic, political and ethical ramifications. Research-guiding assumptions can let researchers take actual power imbalances, inequalities, forms of oppression and violence to be either deviations from a harmonious norm-state or else as not relevant enough as developmental factors or conditions of expression for cognitive or affective capacities. If we take into consideration the massive cultural sway of work in

<sup>6</sup> The question of individual responsibility within social formations that exceed the capacities of individual agents to grasp their place and role in the larger fabric has been much illuminated by memory studies’ scholar Michael Rothberg in his account of the “implicated subject” (Rothberg, 2019). Rothberg’s perspective fits our framework well, as it ties responsibility to a conception of participation in (and perpetuation of) large-scale agentive arrangements. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing us for clarification on the questions of autonomy, agency and responsibility.

cognitive science and philosophy of mind – these fields are accepted authorities for stating how the human mind works and thus ultimately about articulating the content of “the human” (Wynter, 2003) – then the omission of injustice, oppression and structural violence becomes a discursive force with reality-shaping power, contributing to political ignorance and ethical disregard.

Second, broader discursive import of the mind sciences crystallizes in a more concrete assumption, namely that of the autonomous individual. When theorists choose not to consider the ways cognitive and affective capacities or action possibilities are conditioned from without in all sorts of unequal, exploitative, oppressive, or violent ways, this amounts to saying that subjects are autonomous, and moreover as existing within a system that allows them to freely navigate the world in pursuit of individual well-being and fulfilment of desires. The existence of the social system is acknowledged, but its influence is taken to be something enabling and broadly desirable. As if individualism and the assumption of sovereign control were not bad enough on their own, they become even more problematic against the background of a highly unequal and unjust social terrain.

We think that these two tendencies form part of an overarching framework that implicitly guides much work in cognitive science and adjacent philosophy of mind. As a counter, in the remainder of this text, we propose an approach which can concretize the task at hand and avoid the pitfalls discussed above. Our aim is to re-introduce phenomena that, though regular occurrences in past as well as present human societies, have been by and large sidelined through the assumptions of ‘harmony’ and ‘just systems’. Crucially, these phenomena are not randomly distributed in the field, but can in many cases be found next to or on the other side of the positive phenomena under study in 4E philosophy of mind. On this basis, a conceptual framework for political philosophy of mind can be developed in accord with the following directives:

Probe the extent to which concepts, theories and formulations in 4E philosophy of mind can be useful in elucidating the political dimensions of cognition and affect broadly construed. Do this on the grounds of a critical analysis of implicit philosophical, political and ethical assumptions these extant concepts carry.

Focus on concepts that have a janus face, that is, bring out the negative that makes visible a potential positive bias in the established uses of the concept in question. Through a procedure of inversion, turn these concepts into critical tools capable of elucidating social injustices and social pathologies. For example, Timms’ and Spurrett’s (2023) notion of “hostile scaffolding” both elucidates the existence of environmental structures which exploit individuals and illuminates the overemphasis on benevolent scaffolding that is the norm in the literature.

Be ready to replace instead of invert concepts or theoretical frameworks when it becomes clear that they occlude rather than help reveal problematic societal dynamics. As a guideline, when developing alternative notions, favor outside-in approaches that emphasize the relationality, sociality, affectivity of nonsovereign subjects, as these hold more of both explanatory and emancipatory power.

All of this will get more concrete in the following when we put our proposal to work in an effort to critically invert concepts such as habit, scaffolding, and social/affective niche.

## 5 Putting the framework to work: habits

Enactivist and pragmatist accounts of habit have in recent years gained traction in philosophy of mind (see, e.g. Candiotta & Dreon, 2021; Fingerhut, 2020; Ramirez-Vizcaya & Froese, 2019; Barandiaran & Di Paolo, 2014). Authors examine habits as interactive processes, as plastic rather than rigid networks, which generate relatively stable forms of life. In order to understand the critical turn we endorse, we shall investigate how, under 4E and pragmatist frameworks, habits and the associated notions of scaffolding and niche construction can be inverted to uncover the negative that has been overlooked.<sup>7</sup>

Habituation in the 4E literature has been expressed as the emergence and stabilization of certain life-forms, through the organism-environment interaction. Habits are seen as “self-sustaining networks of bodily, neural and interactional processes that become a source of normativity for an agent, in such a way that the preservation of her habitual identities guides much of her perceptions, thoughts, and behaviors” (Ramirez-Vizcaya & Froese, 2019, p.7). An agent’s habitual activities are not just meaningful because of their metabolic value, i.e. their contribution to biological survival, but also because they contribute to the stability and coherence of the sensorimotor repertoire of the agent. Based on the adaptivity of the biological body in its environmental niche, habit formation can also be expressed in terms of niche construction. Shaping and manipulating the niche feeds back into transforming one’s way of being in it, and through this looping process stable habitual patterns emerge.

Habits are implicated in agents’ worldmaking, cognitively, affectively and practically, they are said to be, in construction-themed vocabulary, “building blocks of mental life” (Egbert & Barandiaran, 2014) and “scaffolds of affectivity” (Candiotta & Dreon, 2021). In so far as they are seen as processes of enaction, they contribute to “world-changing” and “agent-changing” (DiPaolo et al., 2022, p. 26), traversing the environmental and social domain. As blocks, they are self-sustaining structures or patterns, which emerge from the exploitation of agent-environment regularities and are reinforced through their repetition. This formulation implies that habits are contingent upon the existence of an appropriate environment for their formation and maintenance. They emerge from and are sustained by the behavior they create within the niche. An agent’s habits also come together to form, together with the habits of others, local ecosystems of habits which sustain a form of identity for the agents in question, an ecology of “microidentities” (Varela, 1999).

Habits seen as organism-environment networks (what Deleuze and Guattari call “territories”; see 1987), as opposed to being restricted to individual bodily dispositions, encompass scaffolds found in those environments. Authors within the situatedness discourse highlight different aspects of scaffolding, and often confer the status of the scaffold to different entities. For example, Colombetti and Krueger (2015) describe material resources which individuals habitually employ in order to modulate their affective states, e.g. a musical instrument is seen as a material affective scaffold for mood-regulation for a professional musician. Candiotta and Dreon (2021)

<sup>7</sup> See Bennett (2023) for a discussion of the political relevance of habit, from James and Dewey to Bourdieu, Foucault, Deleuze, to Malabou, Sullivan and Latour.

suggest that habits are themselves scaffolds of affectivity and thus would describe the habitual act of playing the instrument as the affective scaffold. The important point for our purpose is that in the same way that cognition and affectivity are scaffolded (Sterelny, 2010; Colombetti & Krueger, 2015), so are habits, insofar as they always involve bodily, affective, cognitive and environmental aspects. We hold the position that habits described at the level of the agent-environment nexus involve an assemblage of environmental, material, and interpersonal resources. Environmental resources or scaffolds belong to habits, in the sense that they are essential parts of their emergence and maintenance.

We argue that enactivist habit theorizing has the power to provide useful tools for critical perspectives. However, in order to do so, we need to expose and get rid of the problematic tendencies we have outlined in Sect. 4. The dogmas of harmony and of the individual appear again as underlying assumptions in the enactivist accounts of habit and the related notions of scaffolding and niche construction. Firstly, the presupposition is that the individual's forms of sense-making, which are a key part of habit formation, maintenance or revision, are adaptive, trustworthy and conducive to the stability or coherence of the individual's identity. Behind the tendency in the recent literature to adopt predominantly positive views on habit, we detect a certain idealized view of adaptivity, which routinely overlooks maladaptivity, and consequent maladaptive forms of value-making. Secondly, because of the insistence on the individual as the starting point of theories, and despite there being a welcome acknowledgment of the social dimension of habit formation, when habits' function and diagnosis is laid out in self-referential terms, detrimental, destructive, or otherwise problematic habits beyond the individual are often out of sight. A brief survey of the literature on habits makes this disproportionate focus very clear, with addiction being the paradigmatic example of bad habits (see, e.g. Miller et al., 2020; Ramirez-Vizcaya & Froese, 2019; Proctor, 2016). When destructive habits for the collective come into view, they might appear in the over-simplified form of "good for me/bad for you", self-interested homo-economicus thinking. A more relational approach suggests that the form might be more akin to: "if it seems good for you, but bad for others, perhaps it's also bad for you".<sup>8</sup>

Bad habits either put the agent's metabolic health at risk, like smoking, or put the overall stability of the agent's identity at risk (DiPaolo, 2009; Ramirez-Vizcaya & Froese, 2019). On another view, habits come into crisis when they no longer serve their scaffolding role for the agent in a given context (Dreon & Candiotta, 2021). Whereas such perspectives might accurately describe the problematic nature of individual afflictions, such as addictions, we worry that they fail to consider a range of maladaptive, pathological or otherwise destructive habits that act on the collective level. An overly idealized view of adaptivity, an individualized view of the subject,

<sup>8</sup> Let us be reminded of the decolonial poet Aimé Césaire's words: "[C]olonization, (...), dehumanizes even the most civilized man; that colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based on contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it; that the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform himself into an animal. It is this result, this boomerang effect of colonization that I wanted to point out" (Césaire, 2000).

in combination with a tacit assumption of harmonious resolutions in the case of habit revision, tend to hide from view habits whose proper diagnosis is on the collective level.

Let us look at the example of racist habits. Through the enactivist lens, racist habits do not pose an immediate risk to the metabolic health of an agent. Perhaps the enactivist will say that racist habits may take over the global identity of the individual and impose their own values, trickling down and affecting other habits and regional identities. Yet, if the individual further adapts and creates a new form of coherency, which is the case with individuals that are reliably racist, that simply seems to be the new form of stability for that individual. If that is the case, the account runs the risk of naturalizing such habits, to integrate them into the individual's adaptive activity, and value-making.

When we take the suggestion that habits act as affective scaffolds, we can understand racist habits as serving some form of fear regulating function for the individual. Let us examine how racist habits work on the societal level, through Lisa Guenther's *Seeing Like A Cop* (2019).<sup>9</sup> Guenther proposes a critical phenomenology of whiteness as property (drawing crucially on Harris, 1993) and a collective investment in state violence which protects white property interests. Following Wynter and Fanon, Guenther argues that whiteness is a sociogenic force, a material and historical power, which has over time produced the spatiotemporal order of the 'white world'. This process includes the production of 'white subjects' who "invest" in themselves as property(-owners) and are invested in protecting their property through seeing like and calling the cops. It also includes the production of 'whitespace', understood as a spatial order, as space that is securitized, protected by the police; a space that turns place into real estate, gentrifies neighborhoods, and feels safe only for the propertied white subject. Investment in whiteness as property, and the concomitant need to secure that property, be it one's house or themselves, results in "seeing like a cop": perceptual practices – in other words: habits – of being on the lookout for abnormal activity, deviations in skin tone and accent, searching for people as potential threats. Through a long history of symbolic and discursive means, the law, and institutions, the image of the black man as suspicious or dangerous is generated, the white subject learns to posit non-whiteness as a threat. As Guenther argues, whiteness as property, beyond habits of perception, involves adherence to an aesthetics of stability and self-enclosure, and usually results in calling the cops, which subjects those perceived as abnormal or out of place to various degrees of state violence.<sup>10</sup>

With Guenther's perspective in mind, we would like to critically reformulate racist habits, scaffolding and niche construction. Racist habits in a structurally racist

<sup>9</sup> We focus on Guenther's poignant account as it speaks to our main concerns, but we also want to acknowledge the productive work of other theorists on racializing habits: Ahmed (2007); Al-Saji (2014) Maiese, 2022a, b; Mills, (2007); Ngo (2016); Sullivan (2006), 2014), among several others.

<sup>10</sup> Guenther's work focuses on the US landscape, where calling the cops on non-white subjects is literally a very common occurrence. Elsewhere, and within the EU, which is our place of familiarity, "calling the cops" is replaced by white subjects counting on state institutions to ensure their (and their property's) safety. Such institutional practices withhold entitlement from non-white subjects, restricting their access to safety and protection, often putting their livelihoods in direct danger or exposing them to slower forms of violence.



environment illustrate the janus-faced character of the notion of scaffolding in the 4E literature. If we take the white individual's fear regulation capacities as the scaffolded activity, and the institutions and practices of securitized 'whitespace' as the scaffold, we see how environmental structures that help individuals achieve adaptive stability within a social niche are at the same time oppressive, highly unequal and structurally violent on the societal level. Individuals whose habitual repertoire is scaffolded such as to regulate fear and feel secure in their habitual sphere, at the same time contribute to perpetuating and often exacerbate racist social structures. The individual-centered perspective of the scaffolding discourse brings out how the use of the scaffold allows the subject to reliably interact with an environment that poses certain risks and threats while affording certain safeguards and defense mechanisms. But it leaves out of consideration the flip side of a social structure that surveils, polices, excludes, and puts under repressive scrutiny an entire population of subjects marked as 'dangerous', and moreover doing so along the lines of entrenched stereotypes built on a history of systemic racial oppression (the 'color line').

We follow Timms' and Spurret's hint toward the concept of "oppressive scaffolding" to describe instances of environmental and affective scaffolding where what is being supported or enabled is oppressive relationships between groups. If we now return to the enactivist perspective, we can reformulate racist habits in the following way.

Seeing the Janus face of scaffolding, we might understand racist habits as being supported by oppressive scaffolds. What is being scaffolded here is structural racism in society, through the appropriation of fear regulation on part of privileged individuals. As we learn from Guenther, a white subject seeks to protect her property from threats and has been taught to identify non-white subjects as threats. The fear, albeit being sincerely experienced by the white subject, is a historical artifact of the white world. It emerges out of the intersection of settler colonialism and transatlantic slavery and reflects the dominant interest of the one who is invested in whiteness. When the white subject utilizes the oppressive scaffoldings which are the perceptual practices of seeing like a cop and calling the cops, they contribute to the maintenance, and potential strengthening, of the whitespace and they (re)produce within themselves the identification with white property. These habits contribute to the stable identity of the white subject as propertied personhood, as "self-owning, self-improving, self-investing" (Guenther, 2019, p.201), and as a citizen with rights to be served and protected by the state and the police.

Let us elaborate further on the maintenance of the structure of whitespace. What Guenther calls whitespace and whiteness, in enactivist terms, are the social niche and the habits that create, maintain and strengthen it. In a narrow sense, the utilization of the scaffolding of these racist habits contribute to the construction of the individual's niche. This niche is seen as one's local environment, the proximate and tangible locus of interaction. In this radius, the habits in question contribute to the structuring of neighborhoods filled with "surveillance cameras, alarm systems, fences, gates, swipe cards, and secure parking facilities" (Guenther, 2019, p.193), infused with sentiments of suspicion, exclusion and normalized racial violence. Fear is regulated only by becoming the organizing principle of the social niche. If we further expand our view, we see that the human social niche comprises a multitude of arrangements that span

material, symbolic, infrastructural and institutional dimensions. Expanding the niche is a result of acknowledging the deep interdependencies of our existence, both on the biological-ecological as well as on the human-social scales. Thus, when we suggest that the white subject contributes to the maintenance of whiteness, this is not merely in a narrow sense of her individual local niche, but also in the wider social niche, spanning a broader historical and cultural horizon. Fear as an organizing principle and the concomitant violence it normalizes structure not only the individual's niche, but the broader societal niche, so long as they are not consciously refused and resisted. Similarly to the way individual habits are said to build the ecosystem of habits of the agent, individuals' habits, which are collectively shared, in turn build the ecology of the broader societal niche. Thus, not only can there be oppressive scaffolding, but also harmful niche construction, in the expanded sense of the term 'niche' (see also Coninx, 2023).

One aspect that remains to be examined in light of this discussion is how these negative aspects of scaffolding and niche construction are also bad for those that might initially seem to benefit from them affectively and materially. While our perspective advises caution in over-reliance on biological notions, such as naive modeling of human niche construction on animal life, there are still lessons to be learnt from ecological thinking. In ecosystem ecology, the concept of ecosystem engineering has been developed to describe the way in which, in modifying their own surroundings, organisms change features of the ecosystem they are part of, thereby affecting other organisms (Barker & Odling-Smee, 2014, p.195). If we start from the contention that certain groups of humans have had the most profound destructive effects on the ecosystem, we can perhaps also see how this is not merely a divide between human and non-human, but rather also involves destructive intra-species dynamics that run across human interactions, based on race, class and gender. The fact that the destruction of the planet is bad even for those that do most of the damage hints at the way in which the racist habits of whiteness are also bad for the white subject. As Guenther argues "whiteness is a (very privileged) form of "corporeal malediction" in the sense that it degrades others and diminishes its own social capacity for ethical connection and community" (p. 202). In the case at hand, fear, as the organizing principle of the social niche for white subjects, while being on the surface regulated through a meticulous security apparatus, exclusive social space and internalized policing practices, remains the principle according to which social relations, and by implication also self-relations, are organized. The "privileged" subjects that buy into this structure remain stuck in a (self-)destructive loop - they have opted, in the words of James Baldwin, "for safety instead of life" (Baldwin, 1998, in Guenther, 2019, p. 194).

By bringing out the janus-faced character of perceptual, affective and cognitive habits in their respective niches, which are in turn considered in terms of their broader societal position and their putatively harmful effects on a structural level, political philosophy of mind's method of concept inversion can help theorists add a critical scope to the study of 4E mental capacities.

## 6 Conclusion

What is the upshot of the analysis of habits in the style of political philosophy of mind? We start from innocent, adaptive habits, which help individuals regulate their sensitive nervous systems and end up with those same habits being scaffolds for oppressive systems, which lead to exploitation, species extinction and global warming (see Slaby, 2024). Our proposed method of concept inversion ensures that we are not merely pointing fingers at the individual racist or consumer and their unquestioned habits. Rather, we see in our conceptual shift a broadening of the scope for evaluating ways of being, going beyond individual adaptivity. We study how such modes of being affect the individual subject, how they affect human and non-human others, the environment, and how, in turn, such modified environmental structures continue to shape agents and their capacities. By shifting our perspective towards relationality, the negative, the Janus face of neutral or overly-positive concepts, and by acknowledging the existence of antagonistic relationships, rather than assuming harmonious cooperation and just systems, we can perhaps make our philosophical theories matter more. By outlining how certain biological mechanisms, such as those contributing to habit formation, can be appropriated towards “the vested interests of business-as-usual” (Malm & Hornborg, 2014, p.67), we can begin to think our way out of such structures.

While further conceptual work and strategic positioning is needed to address these issues and consolidate political philosophy of mind as a philosophical subfield, a central role will fall to the probing of specific instances of political affect, environmentally sustained habit and politically consequential cognition (Protevi’s method of case studies; cf. 2009 & 2022). Much of the promise of exploring the intersection of embodied cognitive and affective capacities lies in the opportunity of sustained, multi-disciplinary engagement with historical instances of socio-somatic mind-shaping. A sociological and ethnological sense for the richness and specificity of particular instances of culturally shaped embodied cognition, of bodily-affective styles, orientations and habits will be crucial, and likewise the readiness to, first, expand the critical scope of, and, second, situate the domains, concepts and discourses that one draws on thoroughly in history. This will inevitably increase the complexity of phenomena under study and add variables to one’s theory of situated cognition. Such an expanded agenda might be a tall order for philosophers of mind, but it is a good way forward for a field that has left the armchair and is tired of the ontological and methodological strictures of its earlier installments.

A final note: this perspective might be somewhat of a killjoy, as Ahmed (2017) would call it. It involves refusing to paint a positive picture, where there are issues still at stake, by choosing not to celebrate habits of individuals that do not support forms of collective liberation; by not seeing mere self-regulation, or stable individual identity-formation at the immediate (or distant) expense of others as an adequate form of living, constructing niches and affecting ecosystems. This is not a disavowal of individual affectivity, desires, needs and interests. It is rather a call to rethink those in more relational terms, and do as Fred Moten says: “to recognize that this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly” (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 10). Perhaps

from this point, many (and not just ‘one’) can begin to dismantle the oppressive scaffolds as they climb off them.

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