

Thomas Fuchs, *Ecology of the Brain: The Phenomenology and Biology of the Embodied Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Overcoming the brain centrism of current neuroscience, “Ecology of the Brain” develops an ecological and embodied concept of the brain as a mediating or resonance organ. Accordingly, the mind is not a product of the brain: it is an activity of the living being as a whole, which integrates the brain in its superordinate life functions. Similarly, consciousness is not an inner domain located somewhere within the organism, but a continuous process of engaging with the world, which extends to all objects that we are in contact with. The traditional mind–brain problem is thus reformulated as a dual aspect of the living being, conceived both as a lived or subjective body and as a living or objective body. Processes of life and of experiencing life are inseparably linked. Hence, it is not the brain, but the living human person as a whole who feels, thinks, and acts.

This concept is elaborated on a broad philosophical, neurobiological, and developmental, and psychopathological basis. Based on a phenomenology of the lived body and an enactive concept of the living organism as an autopoietic system, the brain is conceived in this book as a resonance organ, mediating the circular interactions within the body as well as the interactions between the body and the environment. Above all, a person’s relations to others continuously restructure the human brain which thus becomes an organ shaped by social interaction, biography, and culture. This concept is also crucial for a non-reductionist theory of mental disorders, psychiatry, and psychotherapy, which is developed in a special chapter.

A highlight of the book is that it does not shy away from asking the big questions of human neuroscience that have also puzzled philosophers through the ages: how is free will possible? What is the relationship between the conscious mind and unconscious matter? In addressing these questions in an interdependent manner, Fuchs develops a daring proposal that breaks with a number of ingrained beliefs about consciousness and nature. Effectively, he argues that our experience is opaquer and more constrained by its embodiment than typically assumed, and our body derives much of its spontaneous order from its animacy. Thus, by assigning priority to the person as a whole, with its dual aspects of lived and living body, the gap between subjectivity and nature becomes less prominent.

The upshot of Fuchs’ theory of dual aspectivity is that the dominant strategy of theoretically collapsing Cartesian mind-body dualism into its material aspect, and then empirically locating the mind inside the brain, is misguided and bound to fail. He proposes two complementary methodological remedies: on the side of subjectivity, we must consider not just higher-level mental processes, but the person’s whole being-in-the-world, and on the side of nature, we must consider not just the brain, but the person’s whole organismic embodiment in interaction with the ecological and social world. In this way, Fuchs decisively converts enactivism’s original neuroscientific research

program, neurophenomenology (Varela, 1996), into a long overdue neuro-physio-socio-phenomenology.