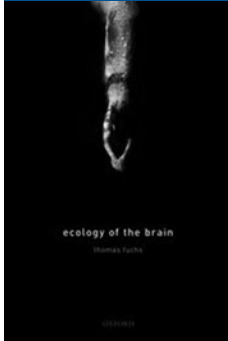


## Book reviews

Edited by Allan Beveridge and Femi Oyeboade



### Ecology of the Brain

By Thomas Fuchs.  
Oxford University Press, 2018.  
\$46.95 (pb). 336 pp.  
ISBN 9780199646883


Philosophy of mind has been one of the most interesting disciplines within philosophy. There have been many debates over the nature of the mind, and we can confidently say that the discipline has come a long way from the times of Cartesian dualism. In recent decades, as the philosophy of psychiatry has established itself as a legitimate subject within both psychiatry and philosophy, it has thoughtfully depended on philosophy of mind. It would seem obvious that, when speaking of disorders of the mind, we need to have an idea what the mind is. Unfortunately, this is the area about which, in my opinion, we need to have more discussions. I have seen different models of mind, from Cartesian dualism to physicalism, applied in different occasions. How we answer the question of the nature of the mind has further reach than just defining disorder. If, for instance, we submit to a materialistic view of mind, how can we reconcile it with the concept of free will? In recent decades, there has been an increase in the dominance of a materialistic/reductionist model of the mind. Our brains and our emotions, our will and reasoning are all seen as a product of the interactions of neurons and neurotransmitters. Subjective experience, which is hard to measure, is becoming less important and is seen to be subsumed under the rubric of neuroscience. In response, some lament that ‘we are not our brains!’. To which the materialist/reductionist proponents reply, then what are we? What are we indeed? I think it is at this point that this book can make a significant contribution. Thomas Fuchs has previously written about phenomenology, intersubjectivity and embodiment. Here, he provides an account of an embodied brain in the world.

He starts with the criticism of a brain-centred model that aims to reduce human experience to neurobiology, which includes assertions such as ‘we are our brains’. The downside of this approach in psychiatry is that mental illness is seen as a neurobiological process, something at the neuronal/neurotransmitter level, at the expense of relationships with the physical/sociocultural environment, affecting our agency, will and decision-making. This reductionism separates humans from the world they inhabit, and this is what Fuchs opposes.

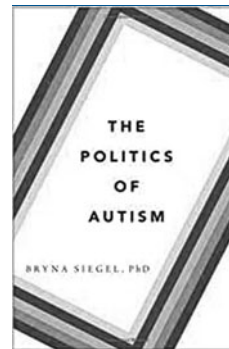
In place of reductionism, Fuchs gives an account of the brain as the mediating organism. He replaces the mind–body dichotomy with existing as an embodied being. I particularly liked his thesis that all higher brain functions presuppose the human being’s enactment in life in a shared social world. This reminded me of the evolution of the human brain, whereby the brain became more complex as the environment, including the sociocultural one, became more complex. We evolved in the world and cannot be cut off from it. Fuchs applies these ideas to the field of psychiatry, which makes it clinically relevant too.

The book is an interesting read, although some background knowledge in philosophy and phenomenology is recommended. However, the reader does not need to be an expert in phenomenology to understand the main thrust of the book.

Fuchs is not dismissive of neurobiology, and books such as *Ecology of the Brain* can be a valuable resource in showing that there is more to psychiatry than neuroscience, as important as it is, and how much philosophy can contribute to the practice of a truly holistic psychiatry.

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### The Politics of Autism

By Bryna Siegel  
Oxford University Press, 2018.  
£19.99 (hb) 352 pp.  
ISBN 9780199360994

Siegel has written widely on the education of children with autism and has studied and worked with leading autism theorists in the USA, such as Eric Schopler and Ivar Lovaas. Her aim was to write a book on the politics of autism because discourse on autism is ‘vulnerable’ to ‘scam artists’, bad educators and clinicians who do not fully understand the condition. The main argument of the book is that the politics of autism in the USA has ‘left behind the real needs of most individuals and families living with autism’.

The first two chapters cover the increase in the diagnosis of autism. Siegel argues that this increase was largely a result of expanding diagnostic criteria and changing diagnostic practices. The third chapter considers ‘the psychiatric diagnosis industry’ and psychiatric validity. She suggests that all childhood neurodevelopmental disorders should be classed as ESSENCE (early symptomatic syndromes eliciting neurodevelopmental clinical examination), building on the work of Christopher Gillberg. In her analysis, Siegel fuses a radical social constructivist position with a clinical pragmatic approach; an interesting stance that she does not interrogate fully. Her work is useful in that she advocates new clinical approaches in response to historical and social analysis. This is innovative and interesting, although it would have been significantly improved through an engagement with wider historical and sociological work by Gil Eyal, Chloe Silverman, Madjia Holmer Nadesan, Ian Hacking and others.

In chapter 4, she argues that inclusive education has become a ‘civil rights issue’ rather than one that considers the child’s best interests. She suggests that changes in the 1970s that ensured education for all pupils led to major improvements in educational techniques aimed at children with autism among others, although she laments that many children never get to benefit from them because of the growing trend to educate children with autism in mainstream classes. She also makes some very candid statements such as ‘much of the money spent on implementing educational plans (IEPs) for mildly, moderately and severely intellectually disabled pupils with autism is a waste of money’. Subsequent chapters

cover health economics, alternative medicines, the ‘vaccine wars’ and genetic research, pointing out that parents need more help in navigating claims about intervention and treatment efficacy from unreliable sources. She is widely critical of false claims on the internet.

The book includes fascinating examples from Siegel’s professional life, concerning both policy changes that she has overseen and individuals with whom she has worked. Although Siegel’s clinical expertise leads to interesting insight and discussion, the lack of engagement with the wider sociological and historical literature does mean that there are some factual errors, such as ‘the concept of “autism” did not exist before 1943’. Nevertheless, the book

makes interesting observations. Siegel’s work highlights the fact that there is much more that such historical, social and political analysis can offer to help current policy makers, psychiatric practitioners and others to think concretely about how to make effective changes to support individuals with autism. It suggests that now there is a greater need than ever for these disciplines to work together.

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