Reimaging the Addiction trajectory

Much recent philosophy has emphasized the role of ‘scaffolding”: the many social, material and technological factors that are necessary for human development. We should also insist on the role of “plumbing”. Inside all of us there is a complicated system of biological structures that process information with a view to keeping the body’s internal milieu in a stable configuration. Psychiatric conditions involve feedback between neurocomputational disturbances and the social, cultural and material scaffolding in which human lives unfold. The result is that patients are no longer at home in a social world they can trust, in part because they are altering the world around them through changes to their own interactions with it.

In applying this basic idea to addiction we find a trajectory in which social and environmental factors gradually assume more explanatory importance as disordered decision making at the psychological level gives way to the construction of a distinctive niche that sustains a set of related neurocomputational endowments. The addict is at home in this nice while remaining intractable to the wider community. I trace this development in outline and sketch ideas for redirecting the trajectory by rebuilding the addict’s niche in constructive ways.