Project 6:

Although emotions are typically conceived of as responses to changes in the environment, there is no consensus on which role the environment has with regard to our affective life (causal vs. constitutive role). This is what robust notions of embeddedness and extendedness should establish, respectively. The task here is to find affective analogues of the familiar notion of “scaffolding” in situated cognition, which refers to the active structuring of an environment with the goal of reducing cognitive load (e.g. when setting up an automatic reminder system for important deadlines). Examples where we actively structure the environment as an “affective scaffold” in order to influence our emotional well-being are not hard to find: We furnish our apartment in a way that feels comfortable, we remove everything that reminds us of our ex-partner to alleviate the pain of separation, we deliberately undergo psychotherapy in order to get over our anxieties etc. The idea of active structuring is crucial for strategies of emotion regulation, e.g. in situation selection, situation modification and attentional deployment (Gross 2002, Stephan 2012). Interesting as the idea of embedded emotions may be, it does not address the question of whether some emotions are extended in the sense that they literally cross an individual’s boundary (Colombetti and Roberts 2015). For, even if the environment is a (potentially indispensable) scaffold for an individual’s affective life, scaffolded emotions as such do not extend beyond the organism’s body (Stephan et al. 2014). The dissertation should provide a measure for well-grounded evaluations of whether or not dispositional and occurrent affective states and processes deserve to be called “embedded” or “extended”. This project results in a case study for the general postdoc project on causation and constitution.