



Comment on “Affordances in *“Dennett’s From Bacteria to Bach and Back”*”

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I am grateful to Zuzanna Rucińska for her wide-ranging discussion of different definitions and understandings of affordances, but I am not persuaded by her that the difficulties she exposes are not “just philosophers’” difficulties. By this I mean that philosophers can tie themselves in knots over whether colors are “external” properties or “internal” or “mental” properties or whether colors even exist, but the science of color and its related and constituent phenomena is hardly touched by these engaging puzzles. Color is actually one of the few phenomena of the manifest image that does occasionally mislead scientists into avoidable *culs-de-sac*, encouraging them to take the Hard Problem seriously, for instance, but in general, our understanding of what color is and isn’t is steadily improving thanks to scientists leaving these ontological problems to the philosophers, who are welcome to them. (For the record, I declared colors to be real “lovely” properties in *Consciousness Explained* (pp. 379–80), a distinction picked up usefully by my student Tony Chemero. They are not definable—more precisely they *would not* be defined—without reference to a class of “observers.”) Affordances are, like colors, lovely properties.

Rucińska says:

As I point out in other work, “the only consensus with respect to affordances is that they are possibilities for action. What they are (properties or relations), where they are located (in the environment or cutting across the environment-animal dichotomy), and how they work (whether they invite actions or not) is a matter of great debate” (Rucińska, 2017, p. 259).

And where are possibilities for action? Where are your euros or dollars? I am not convinced that these are questions that should detain us for long, though a “great debate” might be an enlightening exercise in discovering the limits of useful ontology-mongering. I have tried to articulate my own position on whether these are serious metaphysical issues or just puzzles in Dennett (2013). Some affordances, like coins and dollar bills, have convenient concrete “external” locations and material constitutions; some affordances, like bank balances, credit limits and driver’s licenses have material avatars of sorts but are otherwise quite arbitrarily located. Where is Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, and what is it made of? Rucińska says:

In *From Bacteria to Bach and Back* (2017) we see references to almost all of the variations of affordances mentioned above. Perhaps that is because all of these varieties ‘sound good’ in some sense, and may have a distinct place in the evolutionary story. However, referring to all of them is problematic, as these conceptions are contradictory, so in principle, they should not all have a place in one conceptual story.

Yes, they do “sound good” in some sense, and since the concept is the brainchild of an individual, J.J. Gibson, we might pay some deference to his own attempts to define it—which seem to be similarly variegated—or we might decide that *whatever* Gibson meant, this is what *we* will mean by the term. Its rise in popularity in a variety of scientific contexts, well-noted by Rucińska, is rather like the rise—to fixation, one might say—of “the” concept of a *gene*, or a *species*, both of which have multiple more or less special-purpose, and not clearly mutually consistent definitions. Some of her questions have relatively easy answers, in my opinion. Are affordances “‘picked up’ like information?” Those that are genetically inherited, like color, are not. Those that are socially or culturally inherited are. Still others are created by individual affordance-users, like the sound of my daughter’s voice, which I (or rather my brain) has created and adjusted over the decades. Speaking of voices, in my first book, *Content and Consciousness* (1969), I did just that, so this is not a new bit of evasion from me:

The word “voice” as it is discovered in its own peculiar environment of contexts, does not fit neatly the physical, non-physical dichotomy that so upsets the identity theorist, but it is not for that reason a vague or ambiguous or otherwise unsatisfactory word. This state of affairs should not lead anyone to become a Cartesian dualist with respect to voices; let us try not to invent a voice-throat problem to go along with the mind-body problem. (p. 9)

I may be wrong about affordances. It may be that a more incisive and metaphysically rigorous treatment of the concept will yield a harvest of insights, and if anyone can show that this is true, Rucińska can.

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