



REJOINDER

## Back to the future with the theory of affordances

Tim INGOLD, *University of Aberdeen*

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Rejoinder to Keane, Webb. 2018. “Perspectives on affordances, or the anthropologically real.” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 8 (1/2): 27–38

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The concept of affordance was introduced by the psychologist James Gibson, as the centerpiece of his distinctively ecological approach to perception. Starkly opposed to the cognitivism of mainstream psychology, Gibson’s approach was founded on the premise that perception is the work not of a mind encased in a body but of a whole living organism, indissolubly mind and body, actively engaged in its surroundings.<sup>1</sup> The organism was generally assumed to be an animal of some kind, but whether that animal was human or nonhuman was not, for Gibson, a matter of particular import. What did matter was that perception, for humans and nonhumans alike, is about being alive to the world, about moving around in it, attending to it, and discovering, along the way, what it has to offer, whether for good or for ill. These offerings are what Gibson meant by the affordances of the environment.

Affordances are ways to carry on your life, or alternatively, what get in the way: opportunities and hindrances. They are not exactly products of perception since, for Gibson, “to perceive” is an intransitive verb—it yields to no finalities. Like life, perception *carries on*: what it produces are not percepts but perceivers in person. It tunes their attention. Affordances are the ways in

which things come into the immediate presence of perceivers, not as objects-in-themselves, closed in and contained, but in their potential for the continuation of a form of life. Thus perceiving an affordance, and acting in its realization, are not distinct and sequential but one and the same: to act *is* to attend. In the perception of affordances, according to Gibson, life enters into a direct and unmediated relation with the world, even as the world opens up to its living inhabitants. It is in that very opening up that the world becomes an environment.

What, then, can the theory of affordances offer to anthropology? I was introduced to ecological psychology in the early 1980s by one of Gibson’s most brilliant but tragically short-lived followers, Ed Reed.<sup>2</sup> Intrigued, I delved into its literature and began attending the international conferences on “event perception and action” which brought its practitioners together in often fractious argument. While united in their opposition to cognitivism, in all its forms, I found them fiercely divided among themselves. The seeds of discord had already been sown in Gibson’s seminal text (Gibson 1979), in which he had simultaneously put forward two, apparently irreconcilable positions. One, which we could call “realist,” is that objects in the environment afford

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1. Gibson’s ideas are presented in two major works, *The senses considered as perceptual systems* (1966) and *The ecological approach to visual perception* (1979).

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2. Reed’s definitive study, *James J. Gibson and the psychology of perception*, was published in 1988 (Reed 1988).



what they do because of what they are. Affordances, that is, are intrinsic properties of objects in themselves, regardless of whether any living being is there to realize them. They define a niche in the environment for a creature to fill; remove the creature, and the niche is still there. The other position, which we could call “relational,” is that affordances exist only insofar as they are realized in the activity of a creature for which, or for whom, they are of consequence. No creature; no affordance. Wanting it both ways, Gibson insisted that affordances are real, objective, and physical, even as they are properties of an environment that—in explicit *contrast* to the physical world—is constituted only in relation to the being whose environment it is.

For me, coming from a background in ecological anthropology, this discord rang a bell. For in my own field, too, I had encountered an impasse. It concerned the role of culture in human adaptation to the environment. Is the environment a natural given: a set of objective conditions to which its human inhabitants, by way of culture, devise adaptive solutions? Or does the world become an environment for humans only insofar as it is drawn into the ambit of culturally conditioned practice? On which side are the terms of adaptation set: nature or culture? This, of course, was an old argument, pitting physical realism against cultural constructionism.<sup>3</sup> But as I listened to the debates of the ecological psychologists, I wondered whether the idea of affordances, divested of the more hard-edged tenets of realism, could offer a way forward.

My first attempt to think this through was published in 1992, in a paper entitled “Culture and the perception of the environment” (Ingold 1992). The argument, in a nutshell, was that a relational approach to affordances might give us a language in which to express how people continually bring forth environments, and environments people, that could escape the endlessly self-replicating dualism between a universally given world of nature and the diversely constructed worlds of culture. In the language of affordances, people would be differentiated not in their acquisition of diverse conceptual schemata for organizing the disorderly raw material of bodily sensation into meaningful representations, but by their variable attunement, through practiced skills of perception and action, to the features of a world

3. Perhaps the most famous articulation of the anthropological debate was by Marshall Sahlins, in his *Culture and practical reason* (Sahlins 1976). Sahlins took the side of culture.

that is ever brought forth into presence by way of their own activity.

Just like nonhuman beings, I argued, humans can enter into meaningful relations with the world without these relations having to be mediated by the concepts and categories of a cultural tradition. Culture, in short, doesn’t get in between people and their environments. Nothing is between. Somewhat overstating the case in my enthusiasm, I argued that the best way to deal with the problem of what to do with culture is simply to eliminate it from the ecological equation, or to accord it at best a secondary role as a medium not of perception but of interpretation. We perceive as we go along; we interpret when, reflexively, we look back on what we and others have done. It is perhaps in their interpretative prowess—facilitated by language and culture—that human beings come into their own. In hindsight I would put it differently. Perhaps, instead of eliminating culture from perception, we should cease thinking of culture solely in terms of systems of representation, or of schemata for constructing them. What we have been accustomed to calling culture might be better seen to consist and persist in variable skills of perception and action.<sup>4</sup>

A year later (Ingold 1993) I found myself returning to the same theme, this time in the course of addressing another longstanding conundrum of anthropology: How, through our fieldwork and practices of participant observation, can we possibly come into a shared perception of the world with people whose experiences of life have heretofore been very different from ours? Classically, understanding the people of another culture was regarded as a task of translation: an attempt to establish a crossover between distinct conceptual worlds. To see things as other people do meant keying into their concepts. Yet how can you do this when, without having already understood the concepts, it is impossible to obtain the key? You would be ever caught in a vicious circle. If perception, however, is not about how people organize sensory data in terms of acquired concepts, but rather about how they attend to the world itself in the practical conduct of life, then a possible solution is at hand. For it implies that to perceive the world as others do, we no longer have to get inside their heads. It is enough to join with them, in their activities in the world.

For what Gibson’s theory tells us is that perception is carried on in public, rather than in the privacy of iso-

4. This argument is developed at length in several of the constituent essays of my book *The perception of the environment* (Ingold 2000).



lated minds. It requires us to participate with others, to attune our movements with theirs, to pay attention, and to care. By doing so we bring forth a world of affordances in common. This commonality lies, if you will, on the hither side of concepts: it precedes and facilitates, rather than depends upon, representation and interpretation. It is, of course, what makes fieldwork possible. And most importantly, it is *a coming together in difference*. It produces a certain sense of who “we” are, as people bound in the conduct of common tasks, yet not bounded by any categorical division between “us” and “them.” Instead of the multiple and diverse worlds of “other cultures,” each internally homogeneous yet divided one against the other along the boundary lines of ethnic identification, the theory of affordances allows us to imagine but one world, of nevertheless unlimited and ever-emergent differentiation (Ingold, in press).

Now, after a lapse of twenty-five years, we find Webb Keane returning to the same problems: first, of how to resolve the dichotomy between physical realism and cultural constructionism; and second, of how to define who “we” are, without having to oppose ourselves categorically to a “they.” I can only welcome the fact that he finds a possible solution to both problems in the perspective of affordances. Nor is it any surprise that he is apparently unaware of my earlier efforts, along much the same lines, to introduce affordance-thinking into anthropology.<sup>5</sup> For the truth is that these efforts had fallen on deaf ears. No-one had picked them up. The idea of direct perception—that living beings can find meaning in an environment unmediated by signs—was apparently too much for anthropologists who had always insisted, almost as an article of faith, that there can be no meaning without semiosis. Anthropology always wants to hide presence behind its signs, perception behind interpreta-

tion. The perspective of affordances puts this into reverse. It asserts that we perceive things directly, as they come forward into presence and impinge on our activity, not indirectly through the signs they leave in their wake. Interpretation comes later.

This, ultimately, is what sets Gibson’s ecological approach to perception apart from an alternative that has gained much greater traction in recent anthropology. The source of this latter approach lies in the biosemiotics of Jakob von Uexküll. Writing in the 1920s and 1930s, von Uexküll had coined the term *Umwelt* to describe the perceived environment of a living organism. In the animal’s *Umwelt*, things take on certain perceptual qualities (or “tones”) thanks to the way they are drawn into its characteristic pattern of activity or form of life (von Uexküll [1934] 2010). These tones sound very much like affordances. But there’s a difference. For if Gibson always wanted, in the last resort, to anchor affordances to the physical properties of the environment, von Uexküll went to the opposite extreme, arguing that tones are in no sense intrinsic to things in themselves but entirely bestowed upon them by the animal in whose *Umwelt* they are rendered manifest. Without naming names, Gibson was clearly aware of the difference and keen to highlight it, insisting that the niche comprised by the sum of environmental affordances for an animal should on no account be confused with “what some animal psychologists have called the *phenomenal environment*,” or the “subjective world” of the species in question (1979, 129, original emphases).<sup>6</sup>

Once again, the matter of affordances came down to the public nature of perception. The animal in its *Umwelt*, interpreting the world through its signs, inhabits its own species-specific bubble of reality, inaccessible to other kinds. So, too, humans are said to inhabit their own cultural worlds. Affordances, however, are ways along which the world comes into presence, not the residual traces or indications of a world that has already vanished into absence, or is hidden from plain sight. Affordances are perceived, not interpreted or represented. But anthropologists, convinced that meaning requires signs, have been more concerned to extend sign processes to non-human worlds than to consider the possibility that the direct perception of affordances, common to nonhuman animals, might work just as well for humans. In one of

5. The blanket reference to my work on environmental perception, in Keane’s footnote 5 (31), seems to have been added as an afterthought. He also refers to writings by the archaeologist Carl Knappett, and the design theorist Donald Norman. He does not have the space, he says, to discuss the similarities and differences among our uses of the concept of affordance (this, in an article ostensibly devoted to the topic), but avers that these approaches “seem to be closely related in their fundamentals.” It is not clear what these fundamentals are. It is true that Knappett and I agree on many things (see, in particular, Knappett 2005), but anyone remotely familiar with the works of Norman and myself will know that we disagree on practically everything.

6. See my essay “Point, Line, Counterpoint: From Environment to Fluid Space,” for more extended discussion of the differences between Gibson and von Uexküll on this point (Ingold 2011, 76–88).



the most recent examples of the genre, a study carried out among Runa people of Ecuador, Eduardo Kohn (2013) elaborates a complex semiotic theory of environmental perception without once mentioning the idea of affordances or making any reference to the ecological approach.<sup>7</sup> He appears to know nothing of it.

It is high time to turn this around, and to forge a vocabulary that will allow the world to be restored to presence. Can Keane succeed where I failed? I wish him luck. But he will need to do his homework. For a scholar who prides himself on the manifold borders that his disciplinary passport has allowed him to cross (27), I am astonished that he should present his intervention as a new departure. Not only does he appear largely ignorant of the field of ecological psychology, from which the concept of affordance comes and in which it has been debated at such length; he also seems unaware of just how prominently the concept has figured in other disciplines, including some he mentions, such as human geography and archaeology, and others he does not, such as architecture and education. How can it be, for example, that Gibson's entire oeuvre is represented by just one summary article of fifteen pages, that no other work in ecological psychology is cited at all, and that reference to the work of others "in and around anthropology" is relegated to a footnote?

At issue is not intellectual priority or the acknowledgment of sources. No-one wants a boring literature review, least of all in a public lecture. It is not about whom you cite but the precision and integrity of scholarship. There is much to be said for picking up ideas and concepts from other disciplines, or from other scholars, and seeing how far you can run with them. And there is nothing wrong with bringing them to bear in areas of inquiry very far from those for which they were originally purposed. But this needs to be done with care and respect for the depth, complexity, and subtleties of previous usage. It cannot simply be ignored. Keane's claim in the aforementioned footnote is that he is extending the range of the affordance concept "beyond perceptions of the material environment." I am unclear what the "immaterial environment" might be. If experience

7. Kohn even goes so far as to make semiosis the defining feature of animate life (2013: 9). To live, apparently, is ever to represent things in their absence (23–24). Try it yourself! Try breathing the signs of absent air, and eating the signs of absent food. I'll wager that you will not last long.

lies in the perception of affordances, what can Keane possibly mean by "the affordances of subjective experience" (36)? In any case, much of Keane's argument persuades me that just as an affordance perspective can take us beyond the dichotomy between physical reality and its cultural construction, so it also transcends that between the material and the immaterial. Let's see, however, how he manages to deal with the issue.

Basically, he does it by trying to have it both ways, exactly as Gibson did. Quite correctly, and in the spirit of Gibson, he observes that perceiving and responding to affordances does not depend upon mental representation. But he also insists, again with Gibson, that while affordances are "*objective features*," they exist only "relative to the properties of *some other* perceiving entity and *relative to that entity's activity*" (31, original emphases). So they are physically real and contingently relational at the same time. We are, in a sense, back where we started, with an unsatisfactory compromise between a realist and a relational ontology. The affordance perspective, in Keane's approach, merely works as sticking plaster to cover it up. Indeed the problem is irresolvable, and it points to a deep-seated asymmetry in Gibson's original approach to perception. For while, on the one hand, he brings the perceiver back to life, as a being who is continually moving around, actively attending to things, exploring their inexhaustible potentials and becoming more and more skilled in the process, on the other hand the environment is effectively solidified: it is portrayed as an environment of *objects*, every one of which is fixed in a rigid and invariant form, rendered inert, ready and waiting for the perceiver to come on the scene and to suss out its affordances (Ingold 2011: 12).

That's why, after my prolonged dalliance with Gibson's ideas, and my advocacy of the perspective of affordances, I have myself latterly become a critic. Ironically, at the moment that Keane is catching up with affordances, I find that I am leaving them behind. For perception, as I would now understand it, is not just a matter of exploring a world of objects that are already there, or that have already—so to speak—"precipitated out" from the formative processes that have given rise to them; it must also be about being present and aware in the very moment of formation itself. This is to join with a "world without objects," on the wave-crest of its incipience (Ingold 2015: 13–17). Consider the fluxes of the world—the wind and weather, the ever-changing skies, the turn of the tides, the run of the river, the movements of animals, and the growth of plants. To hunt and



fish, to farm, to set sail, indeed to carry out almost any kind of livelihood on land or at sea, it is necessary to attune your movements, and the timing of your activities, so as to catch the moment when the forces that conspire to the success of your enterprise are in favorable alignment. The world is not always ready and waiting; you have also to be ready and waiting for the world. The symmetry must be reestablished, and this can be done only by reinserting both environment and perceiver in the current of real time. The ancient Greeks had a better sense of this in their idea of *kairos*, denoting not just the moment that must be seized but the attention and responsiveness necessary to do so.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps this comes close to what Keane means when he says that affordances pertain not to objects or people but to entire situations (32).

For me, this touches on the central question of the relation between perception and imagination. For cognitivists, of course, there is little to distinguish between them: the percept is an image, and as a representation, it is on the other side of the fence from the reality it purports to represent. Gibson went to the other extreme, insisting that perception opens directly to the real world, only to leave imagination high and dry on the other side: the imaginary, he insisted, is just another word for the unreal. Is that, perchance, what Keane means by a perception that goes beyond that of the material environment? Gibson would assert, to the contrary, that imagination is a form of awareness that, in his words, is “not strictly perceptual” (1979: 256). There’s a very simple test, he argued, for telling the perceptual and the non-perceptual apart. For reality is inexhaustible; the more you subject it to scrutiny, the more finely tuned your attention, the more you will discover. Not so, however, with the image. For try as you might, you will never find in it more than the mind has already put there. All you can do is add to it, by way of interpretation. Perceiving is to imagining, then, as discovery to interpretation (Ingold 2012: 3).

But do the real and the imaginary have to be thus split apart? Could we not find a way to bring them together, in a single creative movement? To do so we will have to think differently of the imagination: not as a capacity to construct images, or as a power of mental representation, but more fundamentally as a way of living creatively in a world that is not already created, already

formed, but one that is itself crescent, always in formation. Such is a world without objects. Do we not, in walking, continually place ourselves at risk by falling forward, tumbling ahead of ourselves into the void, only to regain our footing in a skilled adjustment of body posture to the irregularities of the ground? Imagination sets us loose to fall; perception restores our grip so we can keep on going. One is aspirational, the other prehensile. It is in their alternation that all life is lived.<sup>9</sup> Just as in the example of walking, to inhabit a world without objects, in perception and imagination, is to participate from within in the process of the world’s self-making, of its autopoiesis. Is that not also the calling of anthropology?

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8. For a fuller discussion of *kairos*, see Hawhee (2004: 65–76).

9. I have set out this argument at greater length elsewhere (Ingold 2015: 138–41).





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Tim INGOLD is Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Aberdeen, and a Fellow of the British Academy and the Royal Society of Edinburgh. He has carried out fieldwork among Saami and Finnish people in Lapland, and has written on environment, technology, and social organization in the circumpolar North, the role of animals in human society, issues in human ecology, and evolutionary theory in anthropology, biology, and history. In more recent work, he has explored the links between environmental perception and skilled practice, and the interface between anthropology, art and architecture, and design. He is the author (for Routledge) of *The perception of the environment* (2000), *Lines* (2007), *Being alive* (2011), *Making* (2013), *The life of lines* (2015), *Anthropology and/as education* (2017), and (for Polity) *Anthropology: Why it matters* (2018).

*Tim Ingold*  
Department of Anthropology, School of Social Science, University of Aberdeen  
Aberdeen AB24 3QY, UK  
[tim.ingold@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:tim.ingold@abdn.ac.uk)

