

Affordances are Signs

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Sections of the talk

1. Mental life is in the body
2. Nature is continuous
3. Experience is continuous
4. Why Affordances are Signs and why it matters

1.

Mental life is in the body

In a postmodern shift, Psychology is abandoning mechanism.

What is leading when we approach consciousness by means of the non-linear dynamics of interconnectivity and strange attractors?

Has the dynamic, open flow of consciousness been explained in quantitative, physical terms?

Or has there perhaps been an intriguing sea-change in much of contemporary science, such that, after several hundred years of specific concentration on the linear and the inanimate, we are now beginning to seek out those physical properties of nature that actually mirror the form of our own existence?

H. Hunt

The life of consciousness – cognitive life, the life of desire or perceptual life – is subtended by an “intentional arc” which projects around us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation.

Phenomenology of Perception, page 136.



Maurice Merleau-Ponty. 1908 - 1961

Psychologists are beginning to recognise that mental life is:

Embodied

Enacted

Situated

and that

feeling is more fundamental than thinking.

These changes move towards the philosophy of A.N. Whitehead



A.N. Whitehead
1861 – 1947

The ultimate constituents of nature are occasions of experience

Nature is in a continual creative advance

2.

Nature is continuous

We are in the world and the world is in us.

*We should conceive of mental operations as among the factors
that make up the constitution of Nature*

*... there are no clear divisions anywhere ... when you push your observations beyond the
presuppositions on which they rest ... Any division, including some activities and excluding
others, also severs the patterns of process which extend beyond all boundaries. ...
connectedness is the essence of all things of all types.*

Whitehead

Like Whitehead, Peirce saw continuity as mental as well as physical:

Thought is not necessarily connected with a brain.

*It appears in the work of bees, of crystals, and
throughout the purely physical world ...*

Not only is thought in the organic world, but it develops there.

Peirce

Peirce explained continuity semiotically.

Firstness – bare existence
Secondness – causal relations
Thirdness – mental relations

Thirdness is signification

3.

Experience is continuous.

For Peirce, continuity is semiotic:

To say, therefore, that thought cannot happen in an instant, but requires time, is but another way of saying that every thought must be interpreted in another, or that all thought is in signs.

For Whitehead, continuity is experiential:

Each occasion presupposes the antecedent world as active in its own nature. ... qualitative energies of the past are combined into a pattern of qualitative energies in each present occasion

Objects are predictable, subjects are not.

This is what drives the creative advance.

4.

Why Affordances are Signs and why it matters.

There is information in the light to specify affordances this radical hypothesis implies that the value and meaning of things can be directly perceived.

The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal either for good or ill.

By affordance I mean something that implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment.

The notion that invariants are related at one extreme to the motives and needs of an observer and at the other extreme to the substances and surfaces of a world provides a new approach to psychology.

Gibson

Affordances are behavioural meanings.

Affordances connect the needs of organisms to opportunities for action.

Animals perceive the world 'As Is'

Humans perceive the world 'As If'

This makes mimesis possible

Why it matters:

It explains Evolution as a striving for semiotic freedom .

It clarifies the continuity of biology and culture.

Conclusions

Whitehead and Peirce share the aim of overcoming dualism

Both propose that intentionality is universal

Bohm: *Meaning points both ways*

Consciousness is not produced by brains; it is transduced

Peirce suggests how action proceeds

Whitehead suggests why there is action at all

Whitehead takes action to be progressive, creative

Does Peirce do the same?

Is Biosemiotics a Science?

Who cares?

It's a way of seeing. Heremeneutics is a resource.

We have more import problems to address and it might help.

Thanks for your attention!