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# Understanding phenomenological differences in how affordances solicit action. An exploration

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**Abstract** Affordances are possibilities for action offered by the environment. Recent research on affordances holds that there are differences in how people experience such possibilities for action. However, these differences have not been properly investigated. In this paper I start by briefly scrutinizing the existing literature on this issue, and then argue for two claims. First, that whether an affordance solicits action or not depends on its relevance to the agent's concerns. Second, that the *experiential character of how* an affordance solicits action depends on the character of the concern to which it is relevant. Concerns are conceived of as bodily forms of responsiveness, and solicitations are experienced through this responsiveness. The main aim of this paper is to make clear that an understanding of experiential differences in solicitations has to be based on a phenomenological appreciation of how one experiences one's responsiveness to those solicitations. In the remainder of the paper I show how such a phenomenological appreciation reveals several characteristics of our responsiveness and I briefly explore three of them: valence, force and mineness. In the final section I discuss the self-referentiality of affordances in light of the current proposal, and argue that this self-referentiality is broader than is typically acknowledged.

**Keywords** Affordances · Solicitations · Phenomenology · Hermeneutics · Narrative · Concerns · Responsiveness

## 1 Introduction

Affordances are possibilities for action offered by the environment (cf. Gibson 1986). A chair, for example, affords different actions, such as sitting on, grabbing and talking

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about. However, although a glass of water, say, might always afford drinking from, it actually *solicits* us to act only occasionally (e.g. when we are thirsty). Hence, there seem to be differences in how we *experience* affordances.

But can the notion of affordances accommodate these experiential differences? Although some critics worry that it cannot (cf. Ratcliffe 2015) recent research on affordances argues that it *can* accommodate these differences, but concedes that this issue needs further unpacking in future research (cf. Withagen et al. 2012; De Haan et al. 2013; Rietveld and Kiverstein 2014; Bruineberg and Rietveld 2014).

In the current paper I intend to do some of that unpacking. In particular, I address two questions that we can ask regarding the differences in our experience of possibilities for action:

- (1) What determines whether a particular affordance *solicits to act* or not? That is, what determines the difference between a soliciting and a non-soliciting affordance?
- (2) What determines the *experiential* difference in *how* an affordance might solicit action? That is, what determines the *phenomenological character* or ‘feel’ of an affordance? For example, the experience of how a pack of cigarettes solicits action differs for a willing or an unwilling addict.

The paper is structured as follows. I will start, in section 2, by briefly scrutinizing the literature on differences in how affordances solicit action. In section 3 I will address the first of the abovementioned questions. The proposed answer, which is roughly in line with existing research on solicitations, is that whether a particular affordance solicits or not depends on its relevance to our concerns. In section 4 I address the second question. I argue that the phenomenological ‘character’ of an affordance that solicits action depends on the ‘character’ of the relevant concern. Concerns are conceived of as bodily forms of responsiveness, and solicitations are experienced through this responsiveness. The main aim of this paper is to make clear that an understanding of experiential differences in solicitations has to be based on a phenomenological appreciation of how one experiences one’s responsiveness to those solicitations. In the remainder of section 4 I argue that such a phenomenological appreciation reveals several characteristics of our responsiveness and I briefly explore three of them: valence, force and mineness. In section 5 I discuss the self-referentiality of affordances in light of the current proposal, and argue that this self-referentiality is broader than is typically acknowledged.

## 2 Brief survey of research on differences in solicitation

To illustrate the many different ways in which objects may solicit us to act, consider the following situation.

I walk towards the train. After entering, I look for a comfortable seat. I find one and start working on my manuscript. After a while I feel the urge to pee – I thus

pack my things and search for a toilet. When I am done, I suddenly hear what seems like an explosion, and try to get out as quickly as possible.

In this brief situation, at different moments, what draws me to act, what I care about, is finding a comfortable chair, writing my manuscript, locating a toilet, and exiting the train.

Note that when trying to find a comfortable chair, different objects offer possibilities to act, but some of them are more inviting than others. Indeed, because I am looking for a *comfortable* chair, those chairs that have stains on them, or are surrounded by noisy teenagers, are less inviting because they do not afford comfortable sitting – although they still afford sitting on more generally. Different chairs might solicit in a different way. Such differences become even more clear when we look at objects that afford completely different possibilities for action. In the example above, several objects play a role, such as my pen, chairs, toilets, fellow passengers and the doors of the train. Yet when I am searching for a toilet, I could not care less about my pen or the doors of the train - and fellow passengers are only relevant to the extent that they hinder (by occupying the toilet) or help (by pointing to the nearest one) me to find a toilet.

Throughout our lives, we thus experience alternating solicitations. But one might worry that the notion of affordances may not be suitable to accommodate the diversity in the different ways in which we experience soliciting objects. For example, Ratcliffe argues that “Things do not simply ‘afford’ activities; they appear significant to us in all sorts of different ways. It is not helpful to say that a bull affords running away from, while a cream cake affords eating”. He adds that what we need “are distinctions between the many ways in which things appear significant to us” (Ratcliffe 2015, p.61, fn. 24).

To some extent, this critique is warranted. A quick glance at decades of theoretical and empirical research on affordances shows that the emphasis has been on other aspects of affordances, such as its ontological status. Indeed, there has been a tendency to neglect the phenomenology of how we experience affordances, a neglect which can be traced back to the work of Gibson:

The *affordances* of the environment are permanent (...) [whereas] the positive and negative *valences* of things that change when the internal state of the observer changes are temporary. The perception of what something affords should not be confused with the ‘coloring’ of experience by needs and motives. Tastes and preferences fluctuate. Something that looks good today may look bad tomorrow but what it actually *offers* the observer will be the same. (Gibson 1982, p. 410; emphases in original, quoted in Withagen et al. 2012).

This quote indicates that Gibson was not, or not primarily, concerned with the *experience* of affordances.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in his *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, Gibson discusses Gestalt-theorists who stressed the ‘demand character’ that object have (e.g. Lewin 1926; Brown 1929; Koffka 1935), and then continues to argue that “The concept of affordance is derived from these concepts of valence, invitation, and demand but with a crucial difference. The affordance of something does *not change* as the need of the observer changes. The observer may or may not perceive or attend to the affordance, according to his needs, but the affordance, being invariant is always there to be perceived”

<sup>1</sup> See Heft (2001, pp.114–117) for a discussion of Gibson and phenomenology.

(Gibson 1986, pp. 138–139). However, from a phenomenological point of view, there is an important change here. That is, when the needs of an observer change, the affordance *does* change, not in *that* it affords (which is what Gibson stresses) but in *how* it affords something. Or, differently put, how it is *experienced* as affording. Note that this shift to the question of ‘how’ something is afforded has ontological implications: solicitations are subject-dependent, whereas affordances are not. Thus, in the complex ontological debate on affordances, the current paper sides with Withagen et al. (2012, p.256) who note that although “affordances exist independently of an actual observer, (...) for an affordance to invite such an observer is indispensable”.

Recent research on affordances seems to be more sensitive to phenomenological changes in affordances and shows an emerging interest in whether and how affordances are experienced as soliciting (cf. Frijda 1986; Dreyfus and Kelly 2007; Dreyfus 2007; Heft 2010; Rietveld 2012; Withagen et al. 2012; De Haan et al. 2013, 2015; Rietveld and Kiverstein 2014; Siegel 2014; Dotov and Chemero 2014; Romdenh-Romluc 2014; Withagen et al. 2017).<sup>2</sup>

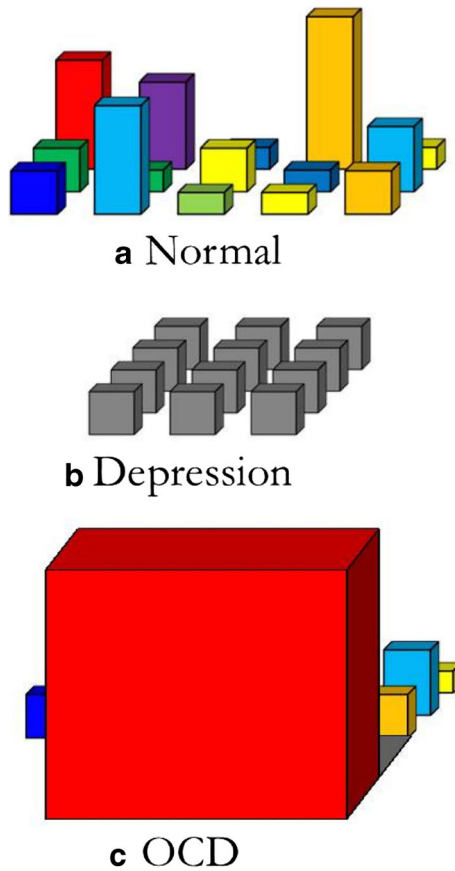
A nice illustration of this can be found in De Haan et al. (2015), who use four dimensions to describe the differences between healthy and pathological ‘fields of relevant affordances’, i.e. the relevant possibilities for action that a particular individual is responsive to in a concrete situation.<sup>3</sup> In the visual depiction of this field in Fig. 1, these four dimensions are represented by the depth, width, height and color of bars, with each bar representing a particular affordance.

Regarding these dimensions, De Haan et al. say that “The ‘width’ refers to the range of affordances or the amount of action options that one perceives. The ‘depth’ of the field refers to the temporal aspect: one not only perceives the affordances that are immediately present here and now, but (...) [one] may already anticipate the affordances on the horizon. Lastly, the ‘height’ of each of the affordances refers to the relevance or salience of this particular option. The different colours refer to variations in affective allure: something may be relevant because it is dangerous, or rather because it is highly attractive” (De Haan et al. 2015).

Although the dimensions of ‘height’ and ‘color’ are an acknowledgement of differences in *whether* and *how* affordances solicit, these differences are not fleshed out. Indeed, De Haan et al. (2013, p.7, fn. 8) say that the “dimension of relevance or salience needs further unpacking. (...) there are many different ways in which the perceived environment can solicit activity. Something can be important because it is dangerous and needs to be avoided, or because it is highly attractive and pulling us in. This means we need to further explore in future work the relation between affective salience of the affordance, and whether something presents itself as an attraction or rather as an ‘avoidance’”.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that although there is overlap with many of these accounts and the one I present here, there are also important differences (thanks for an anonymous reviewer for stressing this point). For instance, and in contrast with some of the mentioned theories, I do not attempt to provide a naturalistic explanation of soliciting affordances. Instead, the aim of this paper is hermeneutic-phenomenological in that it tries to increase our understanding of our experience of various forms of meaningfulness.

<sup>3</sup> Note that although this paper is, in contrast to De Haan et al. (2013, 2015), not primarily concerned with *pathological* cases of how affordances are experienced, I concur that one’s –mental- wellbeing may contribute to alterations in how affordances are experienced.



**Fig. 1** Different fields of relevant affordances, reprinted from De Haan et al. (2015)

In a similar vein, Rietveld & Kiverstein (2014, 340) ask “what makes it the case that a skilled individual is solicited by one affordance rather than another” but concede that this is “an urgent open research question”. They refer to Withagen et al. (2012), who discuss the “nature of the inviting character” of affordances and who similarly conclude that “much work remains to be done” regarding this issue (p.257). Withagen and colleagues do provide a “tentative” list of (organismal) factors that are likely to be involved in determining the invitational character of affordances, but they also emphasize that this list “needs to be complemented, discussed and criticized” (p.256).<sup>4</sup>

In what follows, I address this issue of getting a grip on differences in solicitations. More specifically, I will, in section 3, investigate what determines whether a particular affordance *solicits action* or not? Or, in terms of the framework provided by De Haan et al., what makes the bars go up or down? After that I will, in section 4, investigate the phenomenological differences in *how* any two given affordance may solicit action. Or, again in terms of the framework by De Haan et al., how should we conceive of the differences in color of two bars?

<sup>4</sup> We will further discuss this list in section 3.

### 3 What determines whether an affordance solicits or not?

What we learn from experience is that whether affordances solicit action or not is a thoroughly dynamic process: throughout the day objects become more and less soliciting as we go about. What determines whether an affordance solicits or not? In many cases, this seems to depend on our needs and concerns.

Some everyday examples show why this answer is intuitively appealing: a hammer always affords hammering, but only solicits hammering when I need a hammer-like object, like when I am doing carpentry. Similarly, a sandwich always affords eating but actually draws me to act only when I am hungry (i.e. because there is a bodily need for nutrients).

In addition, this answer is in line with existing research on affordances.<sup>5</sup> For example, Heft (1989, p.16) notes that: “A lighted candle not only affords pain, if you touch its flame, but more positively, it also affords illuminating a dark place as well as heating a liquid such as water. Which of these latter two dispositional qualities is realized *in experience* depends on the individual’s behavioral goals or intentions at a particular time”. Similarly, Rietveld & Kiverstein (2014, p.342) suggest that it is “our current abilities” and “concerns” (which they define in terms of “interests, preferences and needs”) that “make it the case that we are solicited by one affordance rather than another”. And De Haan et al. (2015, p.18) point out that “depending on what is out there and what your needs and concerns are, some (...) affordances will be more inviting to you than others: when you are hungry, the apple will be more salient to you than the keyboard”.<sup>6</sup>

At this point one might worry that the current proposal, on which an affordance becomes soliciting due to relevance to one’s concerns, runs the risk of becoming Cartesian. On such a reading, one would conceive of concerns or needs as private internal states of the agent. And, consequently, when such an agent interacts with the world, it basically “makes a decision and imposes its will on the environment via the mechanical body” (Withagen et al. 2017, p.17).<sup>7</sup>

However, the proposal is *not* Cartesian because when an organism has a particular need or concern, this is typically not a conscious thought, but instead a bodily *responsiveness*. That is, being concerned with X *coincides* with being in a state where one is responsive to X. Being responsive (i.e. being concerned) thus entails that the environment guides me through my actions by soliciting those actions. This stands in contrast to the Cartesian picture where the agent “imposes its will on the environment via the mechanical body”.

Indeed most of our interactions with the world are what one might call ‘concerned’ interactions. For example, when I am doing carpentry, there is no need to evaluate which tool I need: the relevant tool is already experienced as being ready-to-hand

<sup>5</sup> In fact, the connection between needs and solicitations was already made by Gestalt psychologists. Cf. Kurt Lewin’s theory on the reciprocal relation between needs and demand character (Lewin 1926) and those that were inspired by Lewin’s theory (e.g. Brown 1929; Koffka 1935).

<sup>6</sup> Note that one need not be hungry for an apple to be soliciting. Other concerns might play a role as well. For instance, one might be procrastinating and be solicited to eat because by doing so one avoids the task one is dreading. See also footnote 15.

<sup>7</sup> Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this worry.

(Heidegger 1962; Dotov and Chemero 2014). In a concerned interaction, an agent need not reflect on what action to undertake, as the environment already solicits action.<sup>8</sup>

In short, an affordance is a *possibility for action* which *solicits action* (i.e. calls me to act) only when I am *responsive* to act (i.e. concerned). More concretely: an apple affords eating, but only draws me to act when I am hungry. It is important to note that from a phenomenological point of view, the solicitation and responsiveness are intertwined. That is, we do not first experience a solicitation and then the bodily responsiveness. Rather, a solicitation (the ‘call’ to act) is experienced *through* one’s responsiveness. As Bruineberg & Rietveld (2014, p.2) put it, a solicitation is “the (pre-reflective) experiential equivalent of a bodily action-readiness”. (Note that in section 4 I will argue that a solicitation can be more rich and nuanced on account of the various ways in which the bodily responsiveness may be experienced).

Before we continue, there is an important caveat regarding the claim that an affordance is experienced as soliciting when it is relevant to our concerns. Namely, that there may be *additional factors* contributing to the soliciting nature of an affordance, including bodily capacities and skills (Merleau-Ponty 2002; Rietveld 2012), but also socio-cultural factors and the situatedness and history of the agent (Van Dijk and Rietveld 2016). In this respect, consider the ‘tentative list’ of factors, offered by Withagen et al. (2012), that helps to understand why some affordances actually invite us to act whereas others do not. The list includes *four* factors, starting with the action capabilities of the agent: “if the actualization of an affordance requires great effort, it is not likely to invite the agent to act” (2012, 256). This not only seems intuitively plausible but is also corroborated by empirical findings (e.g. Proffitt et al. 1995, 2003).<sup>9</sup> Second, Withagen et al. note that some affordances are more important from an evolutionary perspective. Consequently, those affordances that contribute to survival and reproduction will “likely attract or repel the agent” and “be acted upon immediately” (ibid.). Third, culture and social conventions play an important role. The example they give is that chairs afford many things (e.g. picking up, throwing, standing on) but in our culture, the affordance of ‘sitting on’ tends to stand out. Fourth, Withagen et al. emphasize the personal history of an individual: “for example a person who initially liked chocolate but had suffered from gastroenteritis after eating it is likely to be repelled by its affordance for some time”.

Although there may be additional factors at play in determining whether an affordance solicits action, the current paper will focus on needs and concerns because these play an important role in determining not only whether an affordance solicits (cf. question 1 in the introduction), but also in determining the phenomenological character that a solicitation may have (cf. question 2 in the introduction).

<sup>8</sup> Research on how to formalize and operationalize such a ‘concerned’ interaction with our environment is steadily increasing (see e.g. Bruineberg and Rietveld 2014; Dotov and Chemero 2014; Kiverstein and Rietveld 2014; Withagen et al. 2017).

<sup>9</sup> In a study by Proffitt et al. (1995) subjects overestimated the degree of incline of a slope when fatigued. Similarly, Proffitt et al. (2003), showed that only those participants who carried a backpack overestimated the perceived distance. In both cases, the perceived affordance (walking towards or climbing a hill) was less inviting.



## 4 Different experiential characters of affordances: An exploration

Let us then turn to the second question that was mentioned in the introduction, which pertains to the phenomenological differences in *how* an affordance solicit action. Note that the importance of concerns *as such* does not give us an answer to this second question. For pointing out *that* an object comes to solicit action because of relevance to a particular concern does not yet tell us anything about experiential differences in *how* things solicit. Recall Ratcliffe's (2015, p.61, fn. 24) worry that "Things do not simply 'afford' activities; *they appear significant to us in all sorts of different ways*" (emphasis added). Indeed, from a phenomenological perspective, an experience of solicitation seems to be experientially rich and nuanced: the experience of a soliciting affordance may be accompanied by a distinct and characteristic phenomenal 'feel'. How should we understand this particular 'character' that a soliciting affordance may have?

Answering this question does involve our concerns, but it requires us to better understand the characteristics of those concerns. Thus, I propose that phenomenological differences in our experience of a solicitation are best understood by taking into account the particular characteristic of a concern to which an affordance is relevant. In other words, an understanding of experiential differences in solicitations has to be based on a phenomenological appreciation of how we experience our responsiveness.

There are three such characteristics of concerns that I want to explore in the present paper. The starting point is that our concerns are not homogenous. For one, our concerns can be, generally speaking, positive or negative. In our experience, this is revealed through the phenomenological character of *valence*. Second, concerns can be more or less urgent. When an affordance is relevant to such an urgent concern, we experience the soliciting affordance as having the phenomenological character of *force*. Third, concerns can be identified with or committed to. In such cases, we experience the phenomenological character of *mineness*.

In what follows I elaborate on these claims. In subsections 4.1 and 4.2 I discuss valence and force, which are deemed least controversial as these are already acknowledged in affordance research. The remaining subsections are devoted to an exploration of the experience of mineness.

### 4.1 Valence

Perhaps the most obvious candidate when investigating the different ways in which affordances solicit action is *valence*. Valence is central to many theories in emotion-science and is increasingly being discussed in emotion-philosophy (Charland 2005). Hence, one might think that affordance research could draw on this existing work on valence that has been done in other (adjacent) fields of research. Unfortunately, those fields of research suffer from a lack of conceptual clarity regarding the concept of valence. Specifically, it is often unclear (i) what valence pertains to, i.e. what 'is valenced' and (ii) what kinds of valence there are.

Regarding the first issue, Colombetti (2005) points out that many authors do not define valence, presumably because they take it that people have an intuitive grasp of it (see Lambie and Marcel 2002 and Kristjánsson 2003 for similar remarks). Yet, as Colombetti explains, there are various ways in which scientists talk about valence. In different theories, what is valenced may be an object, a behavior, an emotion (as a

whole or aspects of an emotion), or the experience of an emotion. In the context of affordances, this first issue becomes extra intricate as there is much debate concerning the ontological status of affordances. Depending on the position one takes in that debate, the valence of an affordance may pertain to the experience of an affordance, to the affordance itself, to the object that affords an action or to the behavior that the affordance may lead to. In turn, this has implications for whether one wishes to characterize such valence primarily in terms of pleasurable/non-pleasurable or in terms of approach/avoid. The former entails an experiential view; the latter a behavioral view.

Regarding the second issue: Valence tends to be construed as dichotomous; pleasure versus pain or, more behavioristically, approach versus avoidance. (see Charland 2005, p.91 for a discussion). Charland (2005) labels this tendency as ‘hedonicity’. Importantly though, there has been much recent criticism of such hedonicity: the dichotomy of positive and negative does not seem to capture the wide range of how things may be valenced (Solomon and Stone 2002; Lambie and Marcel 2002; Kristjánsson 2003; Charland 2005; Colombetti 2005).<sup>10</sup> On some occasions, valence is discussed in the context of affordances and we encounter the same problems here (e.g. Frijda 1986; Colombetti 2005; Klaassen et al. 2010; De Haan et al. 2013).<sup>11</sup> There are indeed differences in *how* things solicit action and hence affordances may be valenced in different ways. This is not to reject that affordances are valenced and that this may best be understood in terms of e.g. positive/negative or approach/avoid (see e.g. Frijda 1986; Klaassen et al. 2010; De Haan et al. 2013; see also footnote 9). Rather, the variety of ways in which an object may solicit action, seems to entail more than merely a dichotomy of positive and negative.<sup>12</sup> This claim bears resemblance to the objection to hedonicity in emotion-research, as well as to the worry that Ratcliffe expressed (see section 2). At any rate, more research is needed to elucidate the character of ‘valence’ that affordances may carry (and affordance-research might here, but only to some extent, draw on results regarding valence in emotion-research).

#### 4.2 Force: Demand versus invitational character of soliciting affordances

Recall that Withagen et al. discuss how affordances may ‘invite to act’. At times however, it may seem safer to say that they ‘force to act’. To use Koffka’s (1935) phrasing, some objects have a ‘demand character’. Hence within the group of ‘soliciting affordances’ (which is already a subset of the affordances that one might experience), we can distinguish affordances according to their ‘force’, which ranges from ‘demanding affordances’ to ‘inviting affordances’. To illustrate, consider the difference between what an incoming spear affords in comparison to what an incoming tennis ball affords. Obviously, both afford catching, but the incoming spear strongly forces to act (e.g. catching or, more likely, dodging), whereas the tennis ball invites to

<sup>10</sup> Note that not all authors make the exact same point, given that some are concerned with emotion themselves carrying valence and others with the experience of an emotion having valence. Moreover, it is generally acknowledged that there is a dichotomy between positive and negative valence; the critics emphasize that this dichotomy is *insufficient* to capture all varieties of valence.

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly enough, Gibson (1986, p.137) is not an exception here. See also his quotes in section 2.

<sup>12</sup> Take, for example, the suggestion by Siegel (2014, p.7, fn.10) that some objects seem to ‘anti-afford’ action. An experience of anti-affording occurs in situations where objects *prohibit* achieving a goal. In the example provided by Siegel, someone has to make an urgent phone call but cannot do so because she is in an airplane.

act. Or consider three beverages that all afford drinking and quenching thirst, but some may be more inviting. As the thirst prolongs, what they afford changes from an inviting- to a more demanding character. In terms of bodily readiness to act, force may be experienced as a more or less *immediate* responsiveness. So a solicitation that has a strong demand character, i.e. which forces one to act, might be experienced as involving a diminished sense of free will or agency.

In this regard, consider a similar idea in Siegel (2014, p.5), who argues that the phenomenal aspect of “differences in increments of felt solicitation” consists of what she calls *feelings of answerability*. Affordances that have a high degree of solicitation, carry a lot of answerability. Siegel calls these “experienced mandates” but I prefer to label them as affordances with a demand character because this latter term allows for contrasting this experience (with affordances that carry an inviting character).

The demand-or-invitational-character of how an affordance solicits likely depends on the ‘importance’ of the relevant concern. ‘Survival’ or ‘avoiding pain’ are undoubtedly examples of important concerns. Consequently, things that ‘afford pain’ or ‘dying from’ have (in addition to a negative valence) a demand rather than invitational character. I thus agree with Withagen et al. (2012) who argue that the evolutionary importance of an affordance affects its soliciting character.

### 4.3 Intermezzo: Affordances, concerns and selves

Before turning to the third character of mineness, let us briefly turn our attention to the question of which concerns are relevant when we are trying to understand the character of soliciting affordances? It seems that a demarcation of the relevant concerns relies heavily on what theory of self one adopts. That is, the range of concerns that one intends to investigate depends on one’s definition of ‘who we are’.

To illustrate, if I see myself as a human being (*Homo sapiens*), then such a biological or evolutionary understanding of the ‘self’ makes particular concerns come to the fore, such as survival, the need for nutrition and reproduction. And indeed, these concerns are important for understanding certain behaviors but at the same time seem insufficient for others. Similarly, if I conceive of my-self as ‘a philosopher’ or as ‘a Dutch citizen’ then again particular concerns gain importance and other concerns drop to the background.

Yet to gain a *full* understanding of the differences in how affordances may solicit actions, we need to take into account *all* the ways in which things can appear significant to us, which implies incorporating as many different concerns as possible, which in turn means that we need a theory of self that can account for this variety and complexity in ‘who we are’.

Although the exact theory of self is up for debate, it seems clear that ‘broad theories’, which emphasize the complexity and plurality of aspects that makes up a ‘self’, are to be preferred. That is, selves are best understood as not just, say, bodily aspects, but include also affective, social, psychological, narrative and extended aspects.<sup>13</sup> Adopting such a broad view on the self means acknowledging that who we are, and thus what can matter to us, ranges from biology, to culture and one’s own personal, narrative concerns.

The role of narrative concerns in understanding solicitations is explored in the next subsection. Then, in subsection 4.5, I discuss the potentially re-emerging worry of Cartesianism in response to including narrative concerns. In section 5 I will discuss an

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Gallagher (2013) for a recent theory of self that fits this criterion.

implication of the proposal to broaden the range of concerns, namely the corresponding widening of self-referentiality of affordances.

#### 4.4 Narrativity and ‘mineness’

I want to argue that another character of a solicitation is its ‘mineness’: the extent to which an affordance is experienced as being close to ‘who I am’ or, more precisely, ‘who I take myself to be’. On the one hand, this can be understood in terms of actual possession. Indeed, psychological research on the so called ‘mere ownership effect’ shows that an object that is ‘mine’ (as in ‘my property’) is experienced with increased value (cf. Beggan 1992). Consider an example by Baumeister who, during a hiking trip, needed a decent hiking staff. He “spent the better part of the first day trying out various unsatisfactory branches and wood fragments in order to find a decent hiking staff. None was quite right, so I finally settled on the least objectionable and used it for the rest of the week (...). On the last day, a few miles from the destination, I finally spotted a piece of wood that looked just right. Immediately I tossed aside my well-worn staff and picked up the new, better one. But somehow I couldn’t just abandon the old one like that. Even though the new one was unquestionably better and might have served me well even on future trips, I felt oddly loyal to my old one, and so I retrieved it and used it for the rest of the hike” (Baumeister 1991, pp.94–5). What I take this example to show is that although several branches afforded to be used as a hiking staff, near the end of the trip, one particular branch stood out, i.e. *solicited* action rather than merely *afforded* action, and did so because it had a particular feel to it that I subsume under the label of ‘mineness’.<sup>14</sup>

Importantly, the notion of mineness that I want to introduce here goes beyond mere ‘mineness as property’. The claim that I want to defend is in line with a proposal by Slors and Jongepier (2014), who suggest that:

the mineness of experiences may be accounted for in terms of their holistically fitting into a *background* of earlier and co-temporal experiences, thoughts, memories, proprioceptions, interoceptions, etc. against which an experience occurs. The bottom-line of such a coherentist account is this: what makes a conscious experience mine is not some inner core or intrinsic structure of the experience; it is the *implicit realization* (...) that the experience is part of a much larger whole, i.e. a ‘psychobiography’. (Slors and Jongepier 2014, p.201, second emphasis added)

Indeed, I want to argue that an affordance that has the character of ‘mineness’ entails such an implicit realization: that the experience fits an individual’s psychobiography.

An important factor in understanding this ‘psychobiography’ that Slors & Jongepier stress and which I want to highlight for present purposes, is the fact that our concerns are temporally extended: we sometimes consciously set goals, which take years to

<sup>14</sup> Material objects, and their corresponding feeling of ‘mineness’, can thus contribute to ‘who we are’. Closely related ideas can be found in philosophy (cf. James 1890 on ‘material self’ and the gradual transition from ‘mine’ to ‘me’, and Gallagher 2013 on ‘extended aspects’) and psychology (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Gosling 2008).

achieve and which we commit ourselves to (Klinger 1975). In other words, ‘who we are’, has a fundamental diachronic component to it: our *narratives*. In line with Slors & Jongepier’s proposal, I want to emphasize the importance of narrative for how things can appear significant to us. And, consequently, that narrative may contribute to a character of ‘mineness’ of affordances that solicit acting upon.

To illustrate this last claim, consider some of the following examples by narrative theorist Schechtman, who argues that:

the larger narrative context can impact and condition experience. This impact can be seen, for instance, (...) in the differences between what someone experiences and does walking up to the door of *his* house rather than to the door of *a* house. Or of walking up to the door of his *new* house rather than to the door of the house he has lived in for many years; or to the door of a house in which his loving family waits rather than to the door of an empty house after a bitter breakup—even if it is the same house and the same door in each case. (Schechtman 2007, p.162)

There are two additional points that I would like to stress regarding the link between one’s narrative and the character of mineness that can be experienced in a solicitation. The contribution of narrative to a sense of mineness implies that this character (or more specifically, the lack of it) mainly comes to the fore in the case of major narrative changes (or changes to parts of our ‘psychobiography’ as Slors & Jongepier would call it), such as life-events. It is in those cases that the affordance that an object affords is no longer experienced as ‘mine’. In addition, because a lot of our narratives and our narrative goals involve other people, we might assume that the character of mineness is most visible in the case of affordances that have a strong social connotation.

An illustration of these two points can be found in the following quotes:

Consider the potential effects of marital break-up on how things matter to a person: ‘this is no longer the bar where we go together to enjoy free time’; ‘this is no longer our home’; and so forth. (Ratcliffe 2017, p.155)

What we find salient and how it is significant to us reflects various coherent and enduring projects, commitments, and concerns, all or almost all of which implicate other people in one or another way” (ibid. See also Ratcliffe 2015, p.105)

These quotes also help to make clear what the particular phenomenality of a character of mineness consists of. Such mineness then, should be quite literally understood in terms of ‘what it is like for me’ to experience the affordance of a certain object. Given the current emphasis on narrative, one could further specify this in terms of ‘what it is like for me as the protagonist in this particular narrative’ to experience an affordance. Thus, prior to a marital breakup, a house or door (in Schechtman’s quote) or a bar or home (in Ratcliffe’s quote) may be experienced with a certain *familiarity*, a feeling of *making sense* as well as an *anticipation* of these feelings. Post-breakup, however, the object no longer has this specific meaning. Moreover, it may still be familiar to the extent that one knows exactly how the door creaks when opened but at the same time carry a sense of *unfamiliarity* (rather than a lack of familiarity) because it

has become a ‘thing’ – it is no longer experienced as ‘ready-to-hand’ or making sense (Heidegger 1962; Dotov and Chemero 2014). Indeed there may be a slight hesitation in one’s bodily responsiveness. The readiness to act (and perhaps one’s body as a whole) may become less inconspicuous.

The proposal to incorporate narrativity has several further implications. First, recall that Withagen et al. mentioned ‘personal history’ on their list of factors. However, their (brief) discussion of this factor focused on humans as biological beings, and the examples they give pertain to the biological need for food.<sup>15</sup> The current proposal goes beyond this in two ways. On the one hand it incorporates the full breadth of ‘self’ – that is, it includes our affective, reflective and intersubjective history. On the other hand, it adds the importance of narrative, which entails that not only the actual past impacts our present experience of affordances, but also the story we tell about the past; our interpretation of past events. Moreover, the narrative structure of our lives entails that the (expected) *future* can impact our current experience of an affordance.

In addition, our narrative affects our agency (understood here as the extent to which we consider ourselves capable of performing an action). Withagen et al. (2012, p.256) pointed out, correctly I believe, that “if the actualization of an affordance requires great effort, it is not likely to invite the agent to act”. In subsequent work (e.g. Prieske et al. 2015), Withagen and his colleagues focus on bodily capacities and thus again seem to have a ‘self’ in mind that is first and foremost an embodied biological being. However, whether I ‘feel that I can do X’ is not only a matter of actual bodily capacities, but also of our self-narrative, of how we conceive of our body and bodily capacities: “whether one thinks of oneself as a devoted surfer, or thinks of oneself as suffering from aquaphobia, will have a great impact on how one perceives [what is afforded by] the waves crashing in on the shore” (Slors and Jongepier 2014, p.204–205). Hence I would claim that for example the fact that we experience the world around us and the possibilities for action that it offers differently as we grow older (see e.g. Heft 1989, pp.20–22), cannot be explained by adhering merely to our changing bodies and bodily capacities, but also has to do with a change in narrative or, more generally, our ‘self-theory’ (Dweck 2000).

Another way of understanding the phenomenological character of mineness is to acknowledge that there are some goals or concerns that we identify with (cf. Frankfurt 1982, 1988). For example, we do not identify with our concern of ‘not walking on the cracks of the sidestep (Frankfurt 1982, p271), but we do identify with ‘wanting to contribute to society’ or ‘being a successful philosopher’. The concerns that we *do* identify with are those that are central to our narrative (cf. McAdams 2006; Schechtman 2007). These are concerns that we *commit* ourselves to and which are experienced as personally salient (Klinger 1975). Moreover, actions that carry personal significance (i.e. that are “are part of the larger projects and concerns of the person”) are performed better and more flexibly (Gallagher and Marcel 1999, p.12). Finally, if an affordance solicits action in the context of a ‘personal’ concern, then it carries a kind of personal value, which is experienced as being ‘closer’ to who we are.

<sup>15</sup> Withagen et al. appear to consider eating merely as a biological concern, but “Eating is much more than just filling your stomach with nutrients: what you choose to eat is meaningful, and with whom you eat, and how you eat. Our eating habits are part of our identity, reflecting socio-cultural practices, and personal values, and often even religious convictions” (De Haan 2015, unpublished manuscript, p.149).

Interestingly, the current proposal matches some similar ideas in motivational psychology.<sup>16</sup> Specifically, the experience of (a solicitation of) actions being ‘closer to who you are’ is well captured by the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to act. According to this distinction, the so called ‘perceived locus of causal intentionality’ can be ‘internal or external to the self’ (cf. deCharms 1968; Deci and Ryan 1985). If it is internal, then we perform a certain action because *we* want to. In contrast, if this ‘perceived locus of intentionality’ is external, then we get cases like the unwilling addict who “(...) may meaningfully make the analytically puzzling statements that the force moving him to take the drug is a force other than his own, and that it is not of his own free will but rather against his will that this force moves him to take it” (Frankfurt 1988, p.13).

#### 4.5 The worry of Cartesianism and the idea of self-programming

The plea to broaden the relevant concerns so as to include narrative concerns might reintroduce the worry of Cartesianism. In section 3 this worry was rebutted by indicating that concerns are typically not internal private states such as conscious thoughts, but rather embodied states of responsiveness. Yet one might argue that narrativity implies conscious, reflective and non-embodied activity and hence that by including narrative we still end up with a Cartesian picture where an agent “makes a decision and imposes its will on the environment via the mechanical body” (Withagen et al. 2017, p.17).

To show why this is not the case, consider the following (hypothetical) example of Peter. Like many other academics, Peter is what you could call a workaholic. An average evening or day in the weekend for Peter consists of grading papers and writing proposals. At some point, Peter comes to realize that he is not as good as a father as he would like to be. After some (narrative) deliberation in which he discusses the issue with his wife, Peter feels that he needs to spend more time with his children and to take better care of them.

Now, the mistake that would lead to a Cartesian view of narrative concerns, is to conflate these concerns with the narrative deliberation that Peter engaged in. In contrast, I want to argue that narrative concerns are fundamentally diachronic and that, as time passes, the reflective, narrative deliberation results in an embodied responsiveness. To connect this to the example of Peter, we might say that Peter’s concern of wanting to be a good parent may eventually result in his home-office no longer soliciting him during the weekend.

The point then, is that a conscious intention to be a better parent has altered the embodied responsiveness of Peter: he has ‘programmed’ himself as it were, to become more -or- less- responsive (cf. Slors 2015). So although Peter is still concerned with ‘being a good parent’, this concern is no longer a private internal state (as it was when he was consciously deliberating or narrating to alter his behavior). Rather, due to the Peters identification with or commitment to this concern (cf. Klinger 1975), it has

<sup>16</sup> See especially the work Eric Klinger on current concerns (Klinger 1977), the work of Edward Deci and Richard Ryan on self-determination (e.g. Deci and Ryan 1985), the work of Robert Emmons on ‘personal strivings’ (e.g. Emmons 1986) and the work of Brian Little on ‘personal projects’ (e.g. Little et al. 2007).

become an embodied responsiveness which entails, amongst other things, that he is no longer solicited by his study during the weekends.

The idea of self-programming, for present purposes, boils down to the claim that human beings have the capacity, up to a certain point at least, to alter their concerns and responsiveness. In other words, agents play an active role in the formation of what one could call an individual's 'responsiveness profile'.<sup>17</sup> To be sure, the idea of self-programming does not entail that one simply 'decides' that a particular way of responding to the environment changes. More realistically, the 'decision' is a diachronic process of alternating states of reflection and concerned interaction with the world. So at some point in time an agent deliberates or narrates her actions such as to establish a responsiveness to X. Then, after a while, this responsiveness is not yet experienced and another moment of reflection occurs. This process is likely to repeat itself for some time, until the agent *is* responsive to X and no longer reflects on her interaction with X.

To make this more concrete, imagine that Peter, after he talked to his wife about becoming a better father, walks up to his study on a Sunday afternoon and experiences a hesitation in his responsiveness to the laptop that is calling him to act. This hesitation may reveal to Peter the *meaning* of his action, which in turn may alter his experience of the solicitation (cf. what Frijda 1986 calls the *significance* of an affective experience). Moreover, the hesitation (i.e. the diminished fluidity in his responsiveness) may surprise him as it reveals a discrepancy between his narrative concerns and the concern that leads to a solicitation. As a result, Peter is likely to change his subsequent actions such as to become more in line with his personal, narrative goals.

Undoubtedly, much more work is needed to further elucidate this admittedly speculative theory of narrative self-programming. But if this picture is even remotely correct, then our experience of affordances and solicitations plays a key role in our (narrative) process of self-programming. In future work I intend to further explore the importance of affordances for narrativity research, as well as to elaborate on the idea of narrative self-programming (<name omitted>, in preparation). What I have hoped to make clear in this paper is that narrativity is also important for affordance research – a claim which I will continue to emphasize in section 5.

## 5 Implication for self-referentiality of affordances

At this point one might further object that my proposal says more about the subject than about the affordance that is experienced. Indeed the idea that I am presenting is that an affordance that carries the character of mineness reflects who *I am* - in the broadest sense of the word. But this also has implications for how we understand affordances, specifically that their *self-referentiality* is more encompassing than is sometimes acknowledged.

Gibson famously argued that our perception of the world, and especially our perception of affordances, entails a degree of self-referentiality. Self and environment

<sup>17</sup> A responsiveness profile is best thought of as an elaborate version of the figure by De Haan et al. (2015) that was used in section 2. Thanks to <name omitted for blind review > for suggesting the term 'responsiveness profile'. Note that the idea of self-programming might be interpreted in terms of what Gibson (1986, p. 254) calls 'education of attention', which entails that we learn by fine-tuning or sensitizing our perceptual system (which includes not just our brain but also their neural and muscular linkages) to particular features of the environment.



are inseparable: an affordance “points two ways, to the environment and to the observer” and hence Gibson argues that “to perceive the world is to coperceive oneself” (Gibson 1986, 141).

But what is this ‘self’ that is coperceived when perceiving the world? On Gibson’s account, this ‘self’ seems to be, first and foremost, an embodied biological actor. This becomes clear if we look at the text surrounding the just mentioned quote:

An affordance, as I said, points two ways, to the environment and to the observer. So does the information to specify an affordance. But this does not in the least imply separate realms of consciousness and matter, a psychophysical dualism. It says only that the information to specify the utilities of the environment is accompanied by information to specify *the observer himself, his body, legs, hands, and mouth*. This is only to reemphasize that *exteroception is accompanied by proprioception* - that to perceive the world is to coperceive oneself. [Emphases added]

In other work on affordances, we similarly see a tendency to conceive of the ‘self’ primarily in terms of an embodied actor (e.g. Gallese and Sinigaglia 2011). Such a view on the self seems adequate if one is, like Gibson and others, primarily concerned with understanding *which* objects afford *what* action.

However, if one is concerned with *how* affordances are experienced as soliciting actions then we need to broaden the ‘self’ that is at stake. I thus want to make the stronger claim that indeed, to perceive the world is to coperceive oneself, but that this ‘self’ that one co-perceives should not merely be thought of a body but also, amongst other things, as a narrative self.

To perceive the world is to co-perceive one’s narrative self, then, means that when I experience a possibility for action, the phenomenological character of how this affordance invites action may refer back to my narrative, much like the experience of an affordance might more generally refer to my bodily structure and capacities.<sup>18</sup> Phenomenologically speaking, the experience of a solicitation *reveals* my narrative concerns. Consider the following quote by Slors & Jongepier (2014, pp. 204–205):

There are numerous examples that illustrate the way in which one’s identity contributes to the content of our experiences. A drug-dealer will see a particular alleyway where he has set up to meet with someone in quite a different way than someone on his way home late at night; a mother who has just given birth will experience the crying of a baby differently than a nurse; the walkway towards the airplane will be experienced in a different way by someone who is trying to get over his fear of flying than by the banker making her hundredth flight, etc.

The current proposal argues that the various objects mentioned in this quote (i.e. an alleyway, a crying baby, a walkway towards the airplane) all *afford* the same thing to different people (e.g. walking on, comforting, etcetera), but only *solicit* some people to act, and solicit these actions differently *depending on* (amongst other things) *the narrative of the person who experiences the soliciting affordance*.

<sup>18</sup> See Glas (2017) for a similar proposal of self-referentiality in the context of emotions. See also Taylor (1985) on the subject-referring properties of import.

The implication of my proposal then is that we have to *broaden* the self-referentiality of affordances. I concur that if my bodily configuration or bodily capacities change, then the field of affordances that I experience would thereby come to differ in terms of width and breadth (cf. the framework by De Haan et al. 2015, discussed in section 2). But in a similar fashion, a change in my narrative would generate a corresponding change in the height and color of the affordances in my field.

## 6 Conclusion

A complete understanding of people's interaction with affordances requires us to grasp the phenomenological differences in *how* affordances may solicit action. The current paper intended to contribute to that endeavor. Specifically, it addressed the worry by Ratcliffe (2015) that the notion of 'affordance' may be insufficient to accommodate the diversity in how things matters to us.

Several claims were defended. First, that whether an affordance solicits action or not depends on the needs and concerns of the agent. Second, that the particular phenomenological character of the solicitation depends on the character of the relevant concern. Concerns were conceived of as bodily forms as responsiveness, and solicitations are taken to be experienced through this responsiveness. Hence, it was argued that an understanding of experiential differences in solicitations has to be based on a phenomenological appreciation of how we experience our responsiveness to those solicitations.

Furthermore, it was argued that in order to gain a *full* understanding of the experiential differences in how affordances may solicit action, we need to take into account *all* of the ways in which things can appear significant to us, which implies incorporating as many different concerns as possible, that is, to account for the full complexity of 'who we are'. As a result, affordances have a much broader self-referential character. An important consequence of this broadening of self-referentiality is that it does justice to the dynamics of an agents responsiveness profile, because it allows us to include the *reflective* capacities of human beings, such as their narrative deliberations, which is an important variable of understanding human-world-interaction.

Given this feature, I expect the current proposal to contribute to making affordance- and solicitation-research more applicable to domains that are interested in 'the whole human', rather than merely say, the bodily aspects of human beings. One of these domains may be the clinical context that Ratcliffe (2015) is interested in.

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