

Affordances and Postphenomenology

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The notion of ‘affordance,’ first articulated in J.J. Gibson’s ecological theory of perception, is a powerful concept in STS approaches to technology. Given the proximity of postphenomenology to STS, it is worthwhile to consider how we, as postphenomenologists, can integrate affordances into our methodological approach to technologies. In this paper, I provide a framework to do so. I start by presenting two typical interpretations of Gibson’s notion of affordances: the ‘realist’ reading and the ‘relational’ reading. The former holds that affordances are real properties of the ecological environment – irrespective of the actual presence of a perceiving animal – while the latter asserts that affordances always imply reference to an active, perceiving animal in the environment. Although both readings seem to be textually supported in Gibson’s work, I will argue that the relational reading is the most promising way to integrate affordances into postphenomenology. To do this, I will focus on the differences between the noun, ‘affordance’ and the verb, ‘to afford.’ Gibson moves seamlessly between verbal and nominal formulations in his work. On my reading, the verb, ‘to afford’ takes conceptual precedence over the noun, ‘affordance.’ Thus, rather than asking, ‘what is an affordance?’ I suggest we focus on what it means to say that ‘X affords Y.’ Doing so will allow us to integrate affordances into postphenomenological theory, and thereby clarify and extend ontological implications implied by the postphenomenological thesis that humans and technologies co-constitute each other.

Keywords: affordance; postphenomenology; ontology

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