

COMMENTARIES

The value of affordances

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Ecological psychology (see Gibson, 1979) is generally thought of as comprising two main claims. The first is that perception is *direct* insofar as it is not the result of information added to sensory representations. The second is that perception is comprised of *affordances* (at least most of the time) or opportunities for action that exist in the environment. Barrett explores the possibility of giving an objective account of perceiving religious meaning and value by means of ecological psychology. The attempt to utilize ecological psychology to account for values is not without precedent, however. Jayawickreme and Chemero (2008), for instance, used the ecological concept of “affordance” to sketch an account of both virtues and morally relevant situations. Surprisingly, Barrett never mentions this central ecological concept, choosing instead to focus solely on the directness of perception. We believe that this constricts his ecological account of religious value. While we agree with Barrett that the cognitive science of religion treats presence as an insider’s experience, such that religious experience is a “black box” phenomenon, intractable, and mysterious, and that ecological theory might provide an account of values, we are not convinced by his particular attempt at an ecological account of religious meaning.

Barrett begins by claiming that there are two dimensions to religious meaning. The first is the accessible dimension, labeled as such because it refers to the aspect of religious meaning that can be articulated and reported. The second is the inaccessible dimension, labeled as such because it refers to the aspect of religious meaning that is first person in nature and is “really felt” by the practitioner. This dimension can also be referred to as felt “presence.” Barrett claims that the motivation for which religious practitioners want to feel this presence is actually a motivation to search for religious value. According to Barrett, presence is the perceptual experience of meaning and religious value comes from presence as a perceptual experience. Perceptual experiences come in various forms such as participation in religious ceremonies and rituals. These ceremonies and rituals give rise to religious meaning. Thus, when a religious practitioner carries out a ritual, meaning emerges from the interaction of the agent acting in the environment of the ritual itself, and this experience, in toto, constitutes religious value.

Barrett’s ecological theory is intended to account for the outsider’s perspective of the religious experience. Ecological theory is readily capable of addressing religious experience because, as Barrett describes it, “the ecological approach views meaning as a basic property of the interactive relationship between an organism and its environment.” It is the ecological approach’s emphasis on meaning as a directly perceived environmental property, not a private creation of the computational mind,

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that is appealing to Barrett. It also appeals to us. With the ecological approach, Barrett believes that investigations can quantify interactions to obtain descriptions of how religious meaning occurs. The objects of investigation are the practitioners in rituals, ceremonies, and the like. In this way, religious meanings become accessible to outsiders, that is to say, in the manner that ecological psychologists quantify meanings in terms of affordances. We will address the issue of affordances below. However, as Barrett explicitly states, value remains inaccessible because value is a perceptual experience available only to the participant in the ritual—only to the believer.

Barrett's goal is to utilize ecological theory to give an objective account of the second dimension of religious experience, that is, the feeling of presence. Barrett is clear that the second dimension cannot be articulated and is inaccessible to outsiders. Nonetheless, he claims that ecological theory can give a description of the conditions that give rise to presence. Yet we contend: how does an investigator know if conditions give rise to presence, which is a phenomenon that is not reportable? Note, we utilize "reportable" here in a broad sense in terms of objectively quantifiable; for instance, an experiment participant verbally reporting or pushing a button, or an experimenter recording measurements of an activity.

We are not claiming that Barrett cannot apply ecological theory because the phenomenon he wishes to account for is "representation-hungry" (see Chemero, 2009; van Rooij, Bongers, & Haselager, 2002). In other words, we are not claiming that the perceptual, religious experiences discussed by Barrett reveal the limitations of ecological psychology in accounting for certain cognitive capacities. Rather, what is at issue is that, in the manner in which Barrett has set up the problem space, one would not know if a situation (e.g., ritual) gave rise to a perceptual or value experience unless somebody could report that it did. But if somebody could report it, they would not be reporting on the dimension of religious experience for which Barrett wants to utilize ecological psychology. It would seem that his ecological theory would be merely getting at the first, reportable dimension.

Surprisingly, Barrett does not address affordances, despite their central role in ecological theory. Much ink has been spilled over attempts to explicate the ontological status of affordances, how they relate to the environment, how they relate to the animal, and so forth (Chemero, 2003; Greeno, 1994; Jones, 2003; Stoffregen, 2003; Turvey, 1992). However, it is generally agreed that affordances are "directly perceivable, environmental opportunities for behavior" (Chemero, 2009, p. 23). Moreover, affordances are meaningful for the animal. When investigating the meaningfulness of animal–environment interactions, affordances are often all that you need. In other words, the meaningfulness of an object affording step-on-ability for an animal is captured by the animal's ability to step on the object. Although they can help speed along an experiment, subjective reports are not always necessary when investigating affordances. The objectively quantifiable, animal–environment interaction is often all that needs to be present in order to account for the meaningfulness of a situation in ecological terms (Lee, 1976; Warren, 1984; Warren & Whang, 1987).

Finally, and this seems to be the most relevant feature of affordances for a project like Barrett's, affordances straddle or dissolve many apparent dualities, as Gibson (1979) realized when he introduced the concept. Affordances are neither subjective nor objective, or they are both; they are neither physical nor mental, or they are both; they are neither fact nor value, or they are both (Gibson 1979, p. 129). This would

seem to make them the ideal tool for undertaking the scientific study of religious value, and potentially for bridging the gap between the two perspectives on religious experience that Barrett discusses. Indeed, Jayawickreme and Chemero (2008) use the concept of affordances to sketch a theory of moral value; and Jayawickreme and Di Stefano (2012) extend this sketch to give a theory of moral heroism. Why not also a theory of religious value? We thus applaud Barrett for his attempt to give an ecological theory of religious value. However, we think his account would be more convincing if he were to avail himself of all the resources that ecological psychology has to offer. The way that Barrett conceptualizes the two aspects of religious experience—one as in principle reportable and the other not—makes it difficult, if not impossible, for him to apply one of the central parts of ecological psychology, namely, affordances.

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