Affordances and social injustice

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Ecological psychology has maintained that perception is a process in which the action of the subject and the physical features of the environment converge. The opportunities for action (affordances) perceived by a person depend on the interaction between subject and environment. However, perceiving certain affordances can be conditioned by the norms that govern our social practices: the unjust norms related to an unprivileged identity group can limit the set of affordances available for the people of that group.

(pd) Marjorie Collins.

The notion of affordance was initially introduced by psychologist James Gibson (1979) and defined as "opportunities for action", within the theoretical framework of ecological psychology (Heras-Escribano, 2012, http://www.cienciacognitiva.org/?p=535). Broadly speaking, ecological psychology conceives perceptual processes as processes where perception and action form part of a continuum between what a person does and the information she receives from the environment. Affordances are the objects of perception, constituted by the relationship between the subject and the environment (Heras-Escribano and Pinedo, 2018, 2015). The graspability of a book is an example of affordance.

Over the last ten years, the notion of affordance, initially proposed in psychology, has been widely discussed and applied to the field of social sciences and philosophy. On the one hand, it has stimulated discussion on the social and political dimension of affordances in general, and also the social impact of affordances that have made some technological devices possible. These latter affordances (e.g., the

possibility offered by some devices to communicate with people in other parts of the world) have been called "technological affordances" (Tufekci, 2017), and have played a pivotal role in the development of some significant social movements. On the other hand, social epistemology has broadened the notion of affordance to propose a novel conceptual framework that allows to specify what occurs in certain social injustices and to identify others.

As an example of the social and political dimension of affordances in general, perceiving the possibility to take a sit on a bus may have a social and political dimension to the extent that social norms prevent the agent from taking advantage of that affordance: an African American might not take advantage of this affordance if certain social norms explicitly or implicitly prohibit an African American from sitting on a bus. This way of highlighting the social and political aspect of affordances is compatible with the original definition of the notion and respects the principles of ecological psychology (see Heras-Escribano, 2019).

In recent years, the term "affordance" has been introduced into the realm of social epistemology, where it has undergone significant modification: the opportunities and obstacles to carry out certain actions do not only depend on physical traits. The rules and norms that govern our social practices can also determine perceived affordances, in a non-intellectual and broader sense of 'perceiving'. This expanded notion of affordance does not respect some of the central principles of ecological psychology. However, given the purposes of social epistemology, this is not necessarily a problem.

In this line, Ayala (2016) refers to the set of actions that a person can carry out with her words as "speech affordances". The idea is that our practices are governed by social rules and norms, explicit and implicit, that place each person in a particular node of a socio-normative network, and each node has a limited set of speech affordances associated with it. For example, a homeless person has a limited set of things she can do with her words when addressing someone because of her position in the socio-normative network. Ayala (2016) introduces this notion to specify what happens in some cases of discursive injustice (Kukla, 2014), that is, cases in which a person tries to carry out an action with her words (e.g., an order) and her words are systematically interpreted as doing something different (e.g., a suggestion), due to her belonging to a socially disadvantaged group. In cases like these people belonging to unprivileged groups see their speech affordances unjustly restricted: the rules governing our social practices facilitate and impede certain discursive actions.

One line of research currently under development proposes to extend Ayala's proposal to the set of opportunities for action that a person has at her disposal and that has to do with what that person may know, i.e., opportunities for the action of studying, feeling interested in certain fields of knowledge and other similar epistemic practices. This application of the notion is called "knowledge affordances" (Almagro, unpublished manuscript). The idea is that some people have unjustly fewer knowledge affordances than others due to social norms linked to the position they occupy in the socio-normative network, either because of their gender identity, geographic origin, sexual orientation and preference, accent, or other social identities of this kind.

According to this broadened notion, affordances are also directly perceived by subjects, although perhaps in a different sense, and are not the result of inferences or explicit recognition of the social norms that facilitate or impede them. Although this notion does not respect some principles of ecological psychology, it is useful to specify what occurs in some social injustices and to detect others.

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