

Existential Affordances and Psychopathology: A Gibsonian Analysis of Dissociative Identity Disorder

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Abstract : A Gibsonian approach is used to understand the existential dimensions of the human ecological niche. Then, this existential-Gibsonian framework is applied to rethinking Hacking's historical analysis of multiple personality disorder. This research culminates in a generalized account of psychiatric illness from an enactivist lens. In conclusion, reflections on the implications of this account on approaches to psychiatric treatment are mentioned. J.J. Gibson's theory of affordances centered on affordances of sensorimotor varieties, which guide basic behaviors relative to organisms' vital needs and physiological capacities (1979). Later theorists, notably Neisser (1988) and Rietveld (2014), expanded on the theory of affordances to account for uniquely human activities relative to the emotional, intersubjective, cultural, and narrative aspects of the human ecological niche. This research shows that these affordances are structured by what Haugeland (1998) calls existential commitments, which draws on Heidegger's notion of *dasein* (1927) and Merleau-Ponty's account of existential freedom (1945). These commitments organize the existential affordances that fill an individual's environment and guide their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. This system of a priori existential commitments and a posteriori affordances is called existential enactivism. For humans, affordances do not only elicit motor responses and appear as objects with instrumental significance. Affordances also, and possibly primarily, determine so-called affective and cognitive activities and structure the wide range of kinds (e.g., instrumental, aesthetic, ethical) of significances of objects found in the world. Then existential enactivism is applied to understanding the psychiatric phenomenon of multiple personality disorder (precursor of the current diagnosis of dissociative identity disorder). A reinterpretation of Hacking's (1998) insights into the history of this particular disorder and his generalizations on the constructed nature of most psychiatric illness is taken on. Enactivist approaches sensitive to existential phenomenology can provide a deeper understanding of these matters. Conceptualizing psychiatric illness as strictly a disorder in the head (whether parsed as a disorder of brain chemicals or meaning-making capacities encoded in psychological modules) is incomplete. Rather, psychiatric illness must also be understood as a disorder in the world, or in the interconnected networks of existential affordances that regulate one's emotional, intersubjective, and narrative capacities. All of this suggests that an adequate account of psychiatric illness must involve (1) the affordances that are the sources of existential hindrance, (2) the existential commitments structuring these affordances, and (3) the conditions of these existential commitments. Approaches to treatment of psychiatric illness would be more effective by centering on the interruption of normalized behaviors corresponding to affordances targeted as sources of hindrance, the development of new existential commitments, and the practice of new behaviors that erect affordances relative to these reformed commitments.

Keywords : affordance, enaction, phenomenology, psychiatry, psychopathology

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