



LECTURE

## Perspectives on affordances, or the anthropologically real

### The 2018 Daryll Forde Lecture<sup>1</sup>

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Anthropology is defined by the vast scope of its concerns. We often forget to ask, however, what makes something a matter of concern, and for whom. A matter of concern is contingent on its relationship to some “we” for whom it is relevant. But that “we,” and those concerns, are neither given in advance nor are they pure creations. The perspective of affordances offers an alternative to reductive determinism, on the one hand, and the stronger versions of social constructivism, on the other. This perspective is an argument for possibilities: people are perpetually discovering new things about themselves (including who “we” might be) and about their worlds (including what matters for “us”) that they didn’t put in there in the first place. These points are developed through discussions of American feminist consciousness-raising and Melanesian theories of mind.

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In founding the anthropology department at University College London, Daryll Forde brought to England that American peculiarity, four-field anthropology, picked up, perhaps like a strain of malaria, during his time at Berkeley. In the US, the four-field idea has taken quite a battering over the last few decades. But we should pause to admire its swashbuckling ambitions, transgressing all boundaries of method and scale, from the slow hours of fieldwork to the fast-paced eons of evolutionary theory. Yet does the idea that any discipline could understand humans from so many perspectives cohere? In a self-proclaimed era of post-humanism, is there even an “anthropos” left on which to base a discipline? Such questions have been the stuff of some of the most miserably unedifying faculty meetings many of us have ever had to suffer through. In those early days, the old timers tell

us, one could aspire to master, or at least contribute to, all the fields. One hears echoes of Marx’s utopia, “To hunt in morning, to fish in the afternoon, to rear cattle in the evening, to criticize after dinner, just as I have in mind.” Well, even if we were to give credence to this Arcadian vision of a lost world, it’s hard to imagine the hubris it would take to aspire to it today. But we can still scout along the borderlands where disciplines converge. My own disciplinary passport has gotten me through the immigration authorities standing between all sorts of borders, from the archaeology of the Neolithic to the semiotics of cell phones.<sup>2</sup> These forays have persuaded me that we gain more than we lose by assuming—with no metaphysical presumption other than the application of Occam’s razor—that we—whoever that “we” may be—in some significance sense inhabit the same world as those we interact with in the field, the dig, or the lab. At the same time, however, that gain should manifest itself in a transformation of that “we” who enter into that interaction—on the hope that some reconfigured if unpredicted “we” will emerge. For none of this alters

1. This is a revised version of the Daryll Forde Lecture, given on January 24, 2018 at University College London. It draws in a few places on materials previously published in Keane (2003 and 2016). I am grateful to Ruth Mandel for the invitation and to those who participated in the discussion at the lecture for their input and provocations.

2. For instance, Keane (in press and 2010).



the fundamental anthropological vocation to challenge our deepest assumptions—although with luck it may challenge any notions about just who gets summoned by that word “our.”

Like so many early anthropologists, the archaic simplicity of Forde’s writing may help illuminate things the discipline has long since so taken for granted as to hardly notice. Thus, his Frazer Lecture, devoted to fetishism among the Yakö of Nigeria, states that “In seeking to reach any adequate degree of understanding of the supernatural beliefs accepted . . . by a given people, it would seem necessary . . . to explore empirically the actual contexts in which they are manifest so that the interplay of psychological, sociological and ecological factors can be determined” (Forde 1958: 8). Here, of course, we see the Boasian ambition to encompass everything from believing minds and instinctual psyches to social structures and material environments. But one may well ask, what brings these together such that they can *interplay*? Forde tells us it is “context.” But what is that? In the Frazer Lecture, context is what helps us understand concepts. Those concepts in turn are meant to help us understand the Yakö.

But *why* would we want to understand the Yakö? Who are they to us? They hardly loom on the global stage—they don’t even field a contender in the Olympics. Just what *is* the question to which Forde seeks an answer? Here’s what he says in his now long forgotten *Habitat, economy, and society*, written for a popular audience: anthropology aims “to convey something of the special genius of a particular culture” (1934: vii). Notice the holism this assertion presupposes, with its echoes of Ruth Benedict and, behind those, Johann Gottfried Herder. What does it mean to speak of a particular culture having a “genius”? One of Forde’s Berkeley teachers, Alfred Kroeber, would have replied that it’s “the superorganic,” that is, something defined over and against materiality. The concept of superorganic here distinguishes between that materiality which humans share with all animals, and something that is definitive of humans as such—that which remains after you’ve excluded the body and its material circumstances. For several subsequent generations of anthropologists, that remainder would consist of ethos, or conceptual structures, or meanings, or ideology, or cultural orders, or the political; even today’s Deleuzian anti-representationalist reaction bears its traces. And you don’t have to be a specialist in material culture to notice how the distinction between organic and superorganic replays an old theological distinction between body and soul. But, as Forde

might ask, what then about the ecological, the psychological, the technological, each in its way to varying degrees human and non-human, material and immaterial? And what about social relations anyway—do they really transcend the organic altogether? What brings these back into the picture?

I just said that concepts are meant to help us understand the Yakö: but wait, isn’t it the Yakö who are to help us understand the concepts? After all, the initiating question Forde poses is *how to make sense of fetishism*. Does the distinction matter? I think so. More than materialism versus idealism, analysis versus interpretation, causality versus meaning, science versus humanities, perhaps even activism versus observation, the question of where you start and to what end your questions are directed marks a key conflict among various ways of doing the human or social sciences. Put another way, at stake is the question, what makes something a matter of concern, and for whom?

It’s surely relevant that Forde was first trained in geography. For it was to this field that Franz Boas turned, in “The study of geography” (Boas [1887] 1940), in order to characterize the particular sort of knowledge that a nascent four-field anthropology would seek. Like the historian, and in contrast to the natural scientist, Boas states, the geographer does not seek general laws, but rather “the thorough understanding of the phenomena” as singular facts. It is precisely because of the distinctive way in which the historian takes an *interest* in them that he or she is, in Boas’ words, “unwilling to consider” peoples and nations “as subject to stringent laws.” Boas here makes two distinct points at once. First, he poses as alternatives the taking of the singular as evidence for a law, on the one hand, and the singular as worthy of attention for its own sake, on the other. Second, these are not merely perspectives. They are in conflict, for only when peoples are taken *for their own sake*—or as some might say, when they are *taken seriously*—can they be seen as *agents* and thus not subject to *deterministic laws*. And it is only then that they can be said to be the kind of beings that have histories and make cultures.

But Boas makes two further, mutually implicated claims as well. In contrast to the physicist, who analytically resolves the phenomenon into constituent components, the geographer takes “The whole phenomenon, and not its elements” as the object of study. Yet the geographer’s phenomena have no objective unity at all. Rather, they form “an incidental conglomerate” of such things as geology, meteorology, hydrology, and so forth. To take the Yakö example, it is *only the view from the*



*perspective of a given culture* that brings psychology, sociology, and ecology into a single field of vision. What else, then, do these disparate domains of reality have in common, other than their convergence in forming the Yakö? For isn't it the Yakö who, by virtue of having an interest in their own world, constitute the unity of everything that goes into making that world for them?

Like the Yakö, the geographer's interest in any given constellation of entities is contingent. It is motivated, Boas writes, by "love for the country we inhabit." Let's imagine a teenager on that quintessential American rite of passage, the road trip west, encountering the Grand Canyon for the first time. The canyon is interesting—it matters—our teenager feels, because it is part of my world. Its weather, color, age, and size cohere into a single object of knowledge only insofar as they are unified as components of a singular, contingent, entity, *this* canyon in *this* place. There are also others for whom the country they inhabit contains that canyon as well: knowing ourselves to inhabit the "same" country is part of what makes us the "we" who love it, in Boas' words. Put another way, the geographer's object of study is conditional on the situated character of human experience. And having a place in my world *motivates* my interest in the object—it's why *I care about it*. It is relevant *for me* much as the French Revolution is of interest to the French historian, the Aberdeen census rolls to a Scottish genealogist, or Suharto family finances to an Indonesian journalist. Relative to the French historian, the Scottish genealogist, and the Indonesian journalist, each of these is constituted as what Bruno Latour (2004) might call "a matter of concern"—contingent on a relationship to a "we" of a particular scope and location. For "we" consist of those who are interested in (curious about) that in which they have an interest (a source of value or well-being)—those summoned by matters of concern they recognize in common.

Seen in this light, the Grand Canyon is not an example of stratification, of erosion, of climate change, each one of which requires its own distinct field of study. It matters to me because of where I find myself: it matters in the same way that refugees, robots, social media, suicide bombers, genome researchers, drug addicts, Brexit, and, god help us, Donald Trump matter. They are part of my world and constitute the world for "us." Or so the newsfeed on my iPhone tells me.

Boas goes on to contrast this kind of curiosity and the knowledge to which it aspires to that of the physicist. Physics (which, incidentally, was the field in which Boas himself was originally trained) disassembles those

elements in order to determine *a more general law* that by definition is not limited to a particular context. As a result, the physicist, being disinterested, "loses sight altogether of the spot from which he started." For the geographer, the holistic object is constituted and made relevant, by virtue of certain contingencies. They are part of a world that is *for me*. For the physicist, the object is also constituted as rendered distinct and knowable through observation, experimental intervention, and analysis that render it generalizable, and thereby relevant. It is motivated by the ideal of disinterested understanding, the world *in itself*, and *for anyone at all and no one in particular*.

The two knowledge projects seem to travel in opposite directions. The geographer starts from a singular but complex object (Grand Canyon) and from there traces out the heterogeneous elements (hydrology, weather, stratigraphy, et cetera) that combine to make it what it is. The thing to be explained is that complex object formed by their convergence. The various elements are of interest, are relevant, only insofar as they help explain *it*. The physicist starts from an open set of objects (canyons) whose unity is due to a postulated law (stratigraphy). The thing to be explained is the law extracted from the contingencies that exemplify it. The objects are of interest, are relevant, only insofar as they help us formulate it correctly.

All this, of course, recalls Wilhelm Windelband's distinction between the idiographic and the nomothetic. Yet Boasian anthropology would bring together the geographer and the physicist, the idiographic and the nomothetic into a single discipline. And that discipline forms itself in relation to an indefinitely open set of possible "countries" that we might "inhabit." The apparently paradoxical discipline Boas proposes assumes, as it were, that there is a shared "we" for whom the world is constituted as an object of inquiry, a matter of concern motivated in *both* respects.

Well, we all know the standard objections that practitioners of each set of knowledge practices might pose to the other. Here are just a few. To the physicist: does the world described by laws and probabilities eliminate any role for people's volition, morals, politics, and self-interpretations? Can we square causality with meaning or value? Is your vision so hegemonic that you can't take seriously that people can inhabit other worlds? To the geographer: would you deny that we cohabit this planet, that our very differences depend on the capacities and constraints of bodies and minds that we share? Aren't we also animals and thus, like the others, subject to cau-





sality? Whose “country” is this anyway? *Who is this “me”* for whom the contingencies of a given society matter in the first place? Grand Canyon might be in that roaming teenager’s country, but is it also in that of the Hopi, the Navajo, or Havasupai—each of whom claims an indigeneity that clashes with the others? What about the German photographer? Or the Japanese rock climber? Or the mining industry? If the object of social analysis is a constituted whole, how do we escape treating those objects (cultures? societies? classes?) as self-contained bubbles, each separate from others? And can we square meanings and values with causality? Should we even be talking about “humans” at all?

This is not the place to take on all of these issues, but they’re the background to this question we might ask of the geographer: do refugees, robots, social media, suicide bombers, genome researchers, drug addicts, Brexit, et cetera, define the *limits* of any world I would call “mine”? Put another way, what is “my” world such that the Yakö inhabit it and “I” should care about them? What are the boundaries of the *we* who want to know? Or do post-colonial critique, theory from the South, or the anxieties of representation demand that we cautiously decline to take them as part of our world at all lest we become complicit in the all-encompassing claims of empire? In a minor key, such questions lurked in the rejection I met from the first editor to whom I pitched my first book: “The problem with you anthropologists is that you write about people no one cares about.” To which I would now say, “That depends on what makes something worth caring about, that is, what you are able to recognize as a matter of concern.” Should the newsfeed on my iPhone be in charge of defining the limits of my concern? Answering this question might pull the geographer and the physicist back a bit closer together. For whether we are geographers or physicists, shouldn’t our anthropology aim to displace us from what we thought the center was (defined for “us,” perhaps, by tweets, “likes,” podcasts, blogs, and newspapers that insist they know who “we” are and what country we inhabit)? And in the process, can we define our matters of concern in ways that justify the breaching of disciplinary borderlines that I have advocated, an opening beyond which deep past or biological present are not alien domains? Anthropologists have justifiably left behind the usual answers to these questions, along with the grand metanarratives that sustained them. But we can’t ignore the underlying question: what is the anthropologist even up to and why? And might returning to these

questions invite us to recognize the emergence of a new *we*?<sup>3</sup>

Let’s approach this question on the tangent. Before he went to Africa, Forde pioneered so-called “ethnography at home” with research in Wales. Although he left that behind to take on a more conventional field site of that time, the hinterlands of empire, we might find something of the traces left by his journey in the following passage from *Habitat, economy, and society*: “The Samoyed would be amazed at the Tasmanian’s ignorance of domestic herds, the Melanesian at the Samoyed’s ignorance of agriculture, the East African at the Melanesian’s lack of metal tools, the Indian at the East African’s lack of carts and his failure to use his beasts for burden and plough” (1934: 2). At first glance this sounds conventional enough, the ecumenical Family of Man stuff found in generations of anthropology textbooks. And it lends itself to that tradition of pedagogical self-estrangement in the service of familiarizing the

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3. After I had delivered this lecture, I became aware of a forthcoming volume that directly addresses the problem of “we,” albeit from a different angle. The editors’ introduction (Chua and Mathur 2018) focuses on the social and epistemological biases built into the discipline of anthropology, as a theory-building enterprise supported within the institutional structures of the North, and dominated by a largely white, male, middle-class professoriate. As they observe, the apparent solidity of these categories is cross-cut by the anthropologists’ ambivalent stance, typically critical of their societies of origin, locating themselves in a triangular relation to a presupposed Northern reader and the Other. Yet anthropological writing retains an underlying assumption that a Northern researcher addresses a Northern audience—the “we”—about some others, a “they.” Where my essay converges most directly with theirs is in asking about relevance, of what constitutes a matter of concern. Chua and Mathur point out that what motivates one’s questions and what counts as a good answer differ dramatically in places where, say, states limit freedom of movement and publication, funding is directed to nation-building outcomes, and “the field is at one’s doorstep.” For the “native anthropologist,” the field site is likely to be “in my world” much as the French Revolution is for the French historian, a matter of concern in itself. As I hope becomes clear below, I am broadly sympathetic to their call, while trying here to evoke an emergent “we” that goes beyond either academic discipline or the usual socio-political categories of identity.



Other familiar to earlier generations of teachers of introductory anthropology.

This familiarization and defamiliarization strategy can lead to a rudimentary perspectivism of the simple algebraic form, still popular, in shinier forms, today: if we are X then it follows mathematically that they are negative X. You can fill in what you want for X: if we are Cartesian dualists, they are monists; if we are mechanistic, they are organic; if we are rationalists, they value affect; if we are individuals, they are dividuals. And so forth. But it is not the task of Samoyeds, Melanesians, and the rest just to provide “us” with a useful “other.” Notice, then, that Forde’s perspectivism, at least in this passage, is not a simple matter of binaries, organized on the distinction between the West and the Rest, *for it has no center*. Samoyeds look at Tasmanians, Melanesians at Samoyeds, East Africans at Melanesians, and so forth.

But what are these perspectives *on*? In this example, they are perceptions of the failure to take up affordances. This brings me to my main topic, the *perspective of affordances*. George Herbert Mead ([1934] 1962) put the root of the idea succinctly: “The chair invites us to sit down.” The psychologist of perception James J. Gibson provides a definition: “the affordance of anything is a specific combination of [its] properties in light of what it offers, provides, or furnishes for the animal that perceives it” (1977: 67–68). Now although the properties are *objective* phenomena, with an existence wholly independent of values or meanings, they serve as affordances only in *particular combinations* and relative to *particular actors*.<sup>4</sup> Thus, if an object that rests on the ground, has a surface that is itself sufficiently rigid, level, flat, and extended, and if this surface is raised approximately at the height of the knees of the human biped, then it affords sitting on, he says. But knee-high for a child is not the same as knee-high for an adult. For the small child, that chair is not an invitation to sit down. Three crucial points in this original definition are, first, that affordances are *objective features*, second, they are in *contingent combinations*, and, third, that they only exist as affordances relative to the properties of *some other* perceiving entity and *relative to that entity’s activity*. In

4. Whereas Gibson is interested in animals more generally, my use of the concept of affordance is confined to humans. Having said that, I will suggest that the transformation of “we” must be open to challenging the boundaries of the “human” as well as those of the “ethnos” or any of the other standard categories of identity.

them we might see the physicist and the geographer begin to converge.

One’s response to an affordance does not depend on cognitive representations. A weary hiker may ease herself onto a rock ledge without conceiving of it as chair-like or even being aware that she is doing so at all. But the idea of affordance does give great weight to perceptual experience with the forms of things. We do not need to appeal to people’s *concepts* in this account. Responding to an affordance is part of a project, not a representation. Affordances presuppose a world independent of people’s interpretations of that world. But they cannot themselves come into play without particular actions and projects. And those actions and projects are themselves contingent on people’s self-interpretations—*notions of who they are and what they are up to when engaged in an action—within what is for them a (more or less) meaningful world* (Keane 2003).<sup>5</sup>

Affordances thus contribute to the emergence of meaning within a world of causality. And they do so, in part, through the configurations of “we” who respond to them. As Gibson pointed out, a chair does not afford sitting to an animal whose legs don’t bend the right way, or a person of the wrong height, or, we might add, to someone who is most comfortable squatting on a floor mat—or someone whose prison cell condemns them to stand. I would go further: if the characteristics of the “we” summons up the affordance, their interaction may transform the “we” in turn—a world of chairs, let’s say, produces chair-sitters. I’ll return to this point below.

What is crucial here is the fact of (mere) *potentiality*: a chair may invite you to sit, but it does not *determine* that you will sit. You may instead use it as a stepladder, a desk, a paperweight, or a lion tamer’s prop, or to hold up an artwork, to burn as firewood, to block a door, or to hurl at someone. Or *you may not use it at all and simply ignore it*. Affordances are properties of the chair vis-à-vis a particular activity. As such they are real and exist in a world of natural causality (chairs can hold down

5. The concept of affordances has been explored by others in and around anthropology, such as Knappett (2005), Norman (2002) and perhaps most thoroughly, Ingold (2000 and elsewhere). I don’t have space here to discuss where the similarities and differences are among these approaches, which, at any rate, seem to be closely related in their fundamentals. Where I go beyond them most apparently is in extending the concept’s range beyond perceptions of the material environment.



loose papers or catch fire), but they do not induce people to respond to them in any particular way. Affordances are not just the properties of physical objects. Anything at all that people can experience, such as emotions, bodily movements, habitual practices, linguistic forms, laws, etiquette, or narratives, possesses an indefinite number of combinations of properties.

The idea of affordance usefully draws us away from treating material forms as wholly transparent in four ways. First, an affordance comes into view through the process of picking out certain features or properties from the world and ignoring the rest with which they are bundled, and of which *in principle there is an undecidable and indefinite number*. Second, as an ethnographic matter, it commonly shows the role of past experience, for people usually respond not to immediate percepts in isolation but to recognizable patterns over time. Third, affordance can be understood to refer not to objects or people who interact with them but to entire situations. Finally, the idea of affordance brings out the fundamental sociality of those situations—if it is projects that make affordances visible, those projects are typically the work of people in plurality, whose motives and goals too are not likely to be private.

In any given circumstance, properties are available for being taken up in some way within a particular activity, while others will be ignored. They register as matters of concern. But this isn't just a matter of interpreting or representing the world. First, affordances only come into play within actions, parts of larger projects and practices. Second, in taking up the affordances of things in human projects, both those things and the projects are transformed. Finally, new affordances can be discovered. This is crucial: it implies an unexpected world beyond us that nonetheless remains always available. Even a world constituted as meaningful, in the classic anthropological sense, doesn't thereby contain only what people have put into it.

I use the term “affordance,” rather than, say, “precondition,” as a useful way to foreground the overall activity involved. To call something a precondition suggests that there is only one relevant outcome. Affordances leave things more open-ended—without, however, turning people into Promethean creators of their worlds, as if from scratch. Affordance is an alternative to the more reductive versions of determinism, on the one hand, and the stronger versions of social constructivism, on the other. I want to suggest that the idea of affordance does a better job of illuminating links between the particular-

ities of social and historical circumstances and the universal capacities on which ethical responses draw than do the more traditional versions of cultural construction or attempts to apply a single causal logic at all planes of analysis.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, it is an argument for the possibilities of discovery: people are perpetually learning new things about themselves and their worlds that they didn't put in there in the first place. This argument aims to open up a more productive relationship between disciplines that stress diversity and change on a historical scale, on the one hand, and those that stress universality and change on an evolutionary scale, on the other. It places people into a world not defined wholly by their own representations of it, nor utterly apart from others who are also there (in whatever indefinite range of possibilities that copresence may involve—for instance, as neighbors, intruders, allies, imitators, subordinates, exploiters, et cetera).

Much of the anthropological discussion of affordances has focused on material culture. The last talk I gave here at UCL, on “spirit writing” (Keane 2013) is an example. Spirit writing refers to practices in which people take advantage of the material properties of writing, such as flammability, visibility, or durability, in order to manipulate the relations between seen and unseen realities. Paper with a passage of scripture can be burned and the ashes ingested. Sutras can be tattooed on the skin. Mantras can be encased within statues. A tablet inscribed with spells can be washed clean and the wash water used for blessings. I proposed that these practices enact a parallel between the relations of inner speech to outer sound, on the one hand, and that of divine beings and bodily humans, on the other. The power of these practices lies in the transduction of material into immaterial or vice versa.

However, here I want to focus on the affordances offered by the capacities of humans as animals that have bodies and minds of a certain sort. These are not necessarily visible, nor are they necessarily objects that people perceive as external to them. I will draw on two exam-

6. I use “ethics” here to refer to the broad domain of value that is a fundamental component of human actions, and to the ways that actions are oriented with respect to socially and historically specific notions of human flourishing. This approach is in conversation with other participants in the ethical turn, including Fassin (2012), Faubion (2001), Das (2007), Lambek (2010), Laidlaw (2014), and Mattingly (2014).





ples from my book *Ethical life*. The first is about the emotion of anger and the sense of a collective first person as these were transformed by second wave feminism in America. The second is about the so-called opacity of other minds in Pacific ethnography. I will make three points. First, the idea of affordances entails distinctively anthropological realism. There's a "there there," but it's only known in its effects. People discover affordances through their projects, which are directed by meaningful definitions.<sup>7</sup> Second, it follows that the meaningful and the causal can coexist in our analyses: they are not opposed to one another. Third, none of this requires a particular theory of representation or any particular metaphysics—the idea of affordances is agnostic beyond the minimalist claim that there's a world apart from our conceptualizations of it. It must be agnostic if we accept the affordances of the world cannot be known in advance of some project that engages them. That project might be new mystical practices, new philosophical arguments, new political movements, or new experimental interventions in the laboratory. But the concept of affordances does require us to attend to people's projects and to their plasticity: new projects lead to the discovery of new affordances. Moreover, as I hope to show in a moment, the very denial of a capacity can itself be a way of responding to its affordances. And this, too, can produce a new "we" with new affinities and affiliations, new grounds for relevance referring to new interests.

The technique of consciousness-raising that was developed by American feminists at the end of the 1960s drew on two kinds of affordance. One kind consisted of practices and concepts, along with the institutions that supported them and the media that facilitated their global circulation, which could be combined and repurposed to new ends. These included the rap sessions that women had taken part in as activists in the Civil Rights movement, Chinese revolutionary "speak bitterness" sessions they had read about in the press, Frankfurt School theories, and various forms of psychotherapy popular in mid-twentieth-century America. The new ends to which these could be put were inspired by the growing literature of feminist writing, the cultural relativism popular-

ized by figures such as Margaret Mead, and new lifestyles opened by America's post-war prosperity.

These are the familiar materials of social history. But there was a second set of affordances as well. These were found in the largely untheorized practices and patterns of everyday conversational interaction. They included the ways in which small group dynamics could reinforce the participants' sense of intersubjectivity and produce emotional harmonies among them. As women spoke of their experiences, they would discover similarities among incidents and feelings that had seemed peculiarly their own. Hearing others speak led to mutual affirmation, that in some painful event one had not been mistaken, or at fault. Much as in the present "#MeToo" moment (for which, arguably, consciousness-raising was an important precedent), the process of speaking about individual experience led to the revelation of a social phenomenon ranging well beyond the confines of personal subjectivity alone. Above all, the consciousness-raising sessions drew on the ways in which formerly inchoate experiences could come into view and become recognizable to others, and on the emergence of new ways of speaking and thinking. Once nameable and objectified, apparently trivial or idiosyncratic incidents could be seen as symptoms of social formations with political meanings. It became possible to take seriously the conclusion expressed in the movement slogan "the personal is political." A woman's uncomfortable feeling of anger at her boss or husband, for example, could be reconfigured as legitimate criticism of workplace harassment or male chauvinism.

But the change is not just a matter of representations, concepts, or categories. It is not cultural construction understood as a description of the furniture of the world (some cultures furnish the cosmos with spirits and souls, some with Quarks and DNA). Nor are the feelings in question independent of their material basis, the physiology and psychology that become "anger." Along with this comes a shift in the matters that concern her: there are other cases she cares about—what happens to other women, for instance. And in the process, who "we" are is reconfigured. To be sure, even the most individualistic middle-class American of the mid-twentieth century had some identification with a first-person plural. It might be as narrow as "we" members of this family, neighborhood, union local, bowling team, or high school class alumni, or as broad as "we" Presbyterians, Republicans, dentists, golf players, or Americans. Practices such as consciousness-raising produced new pos-

7. Although the power to define the terms of a project is a political effect, that politics cannot be understood independently of the relevant definitions—even Marx acknowledges that it makes a difference whether one must don the Roman toga to steel oneself to undertake a nineteenth-century coup.



sibilities for who “we” might be and endowed them with newly potent relevance.

I want to emphasize that the linguistic act of naming in this analysis is somewhat incidental to my argument. To be sure, it can play a crucial role in the objectification process by which experiences come to be stabilized for the self and capable of circulating in public. Historical objects like the vocabulary of “date rape” or the institutional structure of an activist group often draw heavily on the act of naming. But affordances appear in response to projects and practices, which do not require representations, just as the hiker might use a ledge as a chair without giving it any thought. What’s crucial, rather, is that even representations only appear within activities. And activities are never entirely reducible to representations, concepts, or even meanings, to the extent that they respond to affordances and have entailments and consequences that exceed them. Among those consequences is the reshaping of the scope of moral concern.

One common outcome of the consciousness-raising moment was the participant’s discovery that she had been angry. Either she had not acknowledged this anger, or she had taken it to be a personal failing. The sessions helped her realize that her anger was shared by others and was justified. It was a legitimate response to the oppressive conditions that all women faced—a recognition that depended on the individual participant recognizing herself in the “we” of womankind.

The emergence of this identification with a new sense of “we” worked in tandem with the emotional discovery of having been angry about their treatment as women. This discovery and the transformations it entails depended on what is arguably a general feature of human neurophysiology. Consider a famous experiment in which individuals were injected with epinephrine, which induces a state of arousal similar to the effects of adrenalin (Schachter and Singer 1962). The researchers then had some of these individuals spend time with someone who was playful, others with someone hostile. Those with the playful companion reported the injection made them euphoric, the others, that it produced anger. The point is this: the actual neurophysiological effects of epinephrine, while indisputably real, were not in themselves sufficient to define the specific emotion that results (an observation apparently consistent with some of the ideas of affect theory). On the other hand, the meaningful definition of the emotion is not utterly independent of those effects. Rather than,

say, forming social constructions tout court, they take up the affordances that neurophysiology makes available. And the playful and hostile companions in this experiment might stand in for the whole range of historical factors that anthropologists rather glibly call “context.” A vague feeling of personal unhappiness could become the specific emotion of feminist anger, targeted at a social system.

Although affordances do not depend on conscious acts of appropriation, they can enter into the dynamics of reflexivity in important ways. The feminists who developed consciousness-raising did not set out, first and foremost, to come up with descriptions of the world. They were engaged in an ethical and political project that led them to the affordances they discovered and took up. They were responding to the experiences of shared human capacities and context-specific problems posed by them. But given any particular set of concepts, developed within a certain social context, those cognitive, emotional, and interactive sources will harbor *other* possibilities that in the instance remain more or less unacknowledged. Those very possibilities may, however, be what some other community focuses on and elaborates. Again, the basic cognitive, emotional, or interactive phenomena are not simply things waiting for someone to name them. But neither are they simply cultural inventions *ex nihilo*. And when they do become subject to reflection, the concepts that emerge are not prompted by metaphysical speculation but by the ways they touch on matters of concern. They are concerns, in turn, because they matter for some distinctive “we”—*one not given in advance*. For matters of concern—interests—are in a mutually constitutive relation to those for whom they are concerns. The “we women” of second wave feminism emerged along with the concern for particular forms of harm that came to be defined as matters of concern within the same process.

It would seem that a given conceptual and linguistic context constructs ethical worlds whose particularity lies in their internal relations, not in the more or less raw, possibly universal, materials with which they work. But that particularity does not depend on those ethical worlds being entirely self-contained and self-constructing cultures. The ethical worlds that give rise to concepts such as feminist anger, or, to mention other examples I’ve discussed in the book, Puerto Rican respect, Chewong *pu-nen*, eighteenth-century English condescension, or Sumbanese *dewa* are not utterly closed off to one another. One reason is that they draw on potentialities of affect,





cognition, and social interaction that humans share by virtue of being the kinds of animals they are. Another, however, is that human social worlds interact with one another. They borrow, mimic, rebel, admire, fear, and enter into schizogenesis with one another. This ability to clash and converge, however, depends on some degree of mutual recognizability, even if it turns out to be mutual misrecognition.

With this, let's turn to my other example, the so-called opacity of other minds. The point of this example is that affordances can be negative as well as positive, that human projects may actively refuse to take up what is before them and that very resistance can be a form of practical reflexivity. Denying an affordance can be an affordance itself. Ethnographers of Melanesia and the Pacific, among other places, report the prevalence of an "opacity doctrine," what Joel Robbins and Alan Rumsey (2008) define as the belief that "it is impossible or at least extremely difficult to know what other people think or feel." This doctrine is one example of how ethnographic evidence seems to push the range of human possibilities beyond the universals reported by psychologists. Here, I will follow the more recent ethnographers whose work with people who make opacity claims to propose an alternative perspective on them, one that seems to be illuminated by the idea of affordance.

The opacity doctrine is a claim that one person cannot know the thoughts or intentions of another. It plays a role long familiar in anthropological argument, one of those ethnographic topoi pitted against essentialist and universalizing models of humanity. Just as other ethnographic cases relativized adolescence, gender binaries, and the economic maximizer, so too the opacity doctrine is meant to falsify the privileged role that intentions have been granted in Euro-American ideas about self, other, and meaningful communication. A more specific version of this general picture is something developmental psychologists call "theory of mind," a propensity that supposedly emerges in very early childhood to guess at other people's intentions, and to distinguish between beings that do or do not seem to have them. Indeed, many linguists hold that a child cannot really learn to speak without this capacity, since language in use is never simply a code, but requires people to constantly draw inferences from linguistic forms that necessarily underspecify meaning. Otherwise language would be a rigid system of far more limited possibilities than it in fact possesses. True to anthropology's relativizing tradition, the opacity doctrine is taken to be counter-evidence

to such purportedly general human capacities, asserting that people in certain societies be marked by deep cognitive differences from people in other societies.

Recent research, however, suggests that the doctrine is about something more limited, the relations between public evidence—how people talk and act—and private states—what they think, feel, intend, or desire. For example, Bambi Schieffelin (2008) shows that in many cases, people in societies expressing the opacity doctrine who do not meet adult norms, such as children and people who are considered to be mentally ill, openly impute intentions to other people (see also Besnier 1993). In other words, opacity claims are not about whether people have *access* to others' intentions but, rather, whether one should probe those intentions, openly or even covertly. The opacity doctrine thematizes interiority, its value and its vulnerability.

There are many cases (for example, people I have worked with on Sumba, or the Korowai of West Papua about whom Rupert Stasch writes) in which people talk about their thoughts as if they were reporting a conversation. In Sumba, you quote your thoughts, treating the heart (the seat of consciousness and feeling) as the speaker. Your own actions are responses to that inner speech. One effect of this mode of portraying thought is to simultaneously stress its inner nature and to suggest that what goes on inside is not radically distinct from what goes on *between* people. People who portray thought this way often seem to link it to some of the problematics of gift exchange. For, if the heart is a hidden speaker who lies behind manifest actions, the interior is also like a room, a basket, or a pocket where one can hide valuables from those who might make a claim on them. Like the basket or pocket, then, the privacy of one's thoughts is vulnerable to others, and gives special value to the capacity to hide or reveal one's innermost spaces. At stake is both one's autonomy and the basis on which one may forge or deny relations with others.

When living with Korowai, Stasch (2008) has been privy not just to explicit propositional statements, like "We cannot know what is in others' hearts," but also the off-stage flow of gossip, complaint, scheming, and actions that remain wholly unremarked on. As a result, he has given us some of the best insights into opacity claims and the world that motivates them, and in which they make sense. One familiar example of the occasion for an opacity claim is prompted by an ethnographer witnessing an act of gift giving during a feast. She might ask something like, "Why did he give you that pig?" and



obtain in answer something like “Who knows?” Yet such acts take place in a context in which people are deeply aware of the consequentiality of exchange and recognize the normativity of giving and reciprocating, even if they can’t hold specific individuals to those norms in any given moment.

Stasch points out that statements by Korowai about not presuming to impinge on one another’s self-determination are normative models of the political terms of people’s coexistence. Opacity, then, is a component in how they conceive of autonomy. Opacity claims are not necessarily assertions of epistemological or psychological truth. Rather, they are, among other things no doubt, expressions of anxiety about the inescapable and morally ambiguous role of other people in one’s own life and capacity for action.

The philosopher Richard Moran (2001) describes the first-person perspective as putting one in a position to speak on behalf of, or take responsibility for, one’s thoughts. The Melanesian opacity claim, is a way to acknowledge this. It explicitly disclaims a responsibility for what only another person can rightfully avow. Notice the word “rightfully” here—it’s a term not of description or ontology but of ethics and politics.

Let me be clear, I am not claiming that opacity statements are false consciousness, intentional lies, or simply ideological constructions irrelevant to what people really do. We shouldn’t be surprised that people do all sorts of things of which they are unaware or only partly able to articulate. That’s just one of the ordinary conditions of everyday life anywhere. And people’s assumptions about minds, intentions, selves, and so forth will have real consequences for how they think, act, and interact with one another. For instance, if you emphasize others’ autonomy, you are not going to be prone to demanding they commit themselves to future actions, nor will you be disappointed when they fail to live up to some expectation (Robbins, n.d.; Rosaldo 1982). Indeed, as Matthew Carey (2017) has argued, regarding the very different context of the High Atlas, to insist on the unknowability, or in another idiom, the untrustworthiness, of others is a way of acknowledging their freedom of action in a world in which autonomy is highly valued. If, on the other hand, you expect other people to catch your drift without having to spell things out, or to keep to the precise minute of an appointment, you may be insulted or angry when they fail to. Entire aesthetic and political systems may depend on one or another of these premises.

Following Stasch, the Korowai version of the opacity doctrine links the ability to control what is hidden and what is to be revealed to broader ethics of social interaction and the problems of political power. It takes the experience of having inner thoughts as an affordance for inhabiting quite specific social conditions and ethical ideals, ranging from dispersed settlements to personal autonomy. The ethical significance of the distinctions between self and other that opacity claims assert matter to Korowai because of their bearing on that freedom of action as they seek to enact it, as an ethics, a source of human flourishing.

What, then, does this have to do with affordances, “we,” and the anthropologically real? The key point is this: if we treat Korowai claims that they cannot intuit another person’s thoughts to be merely one expression of a particular worldview, culture, cosmology, or ontology, we might learn something about human diversity. But if along with that we also recognize that this denial flies in the face of something they are actually doing, we may learn more about them *in their ethnographic specificity*. Not just the banal lesson that humans are much alike, but something more interesting. Denying a universal human propensity, the opacity doctrine draws attention to and conceptually elaborates certain familiar experiences of inner thought, interactive miscues, secrecy, and deception. It uses the affordances of subjective experience and social interaction as sources for practical, embodied, reflections on specifically Korowai ethical problems.

But if those problems arise from the specific sociological, demographic, and economic circumstances of Korowai life (and why should *I* care about *those?*), as responses to the challenge of intersubjectivity, they also put them into *our* world—a world in which I am interested. “My world” here is to be understood not as that of the present moment in the news cycle, nor the location of my “ethnos,” however defined. It changes the “me” and the “world” that I take to be relevant and summons me as part of a distinctive “we.” In this respect, like feminist consciousness-raising, the ethnographic project has the capacity to produce a new “we.” Not necessarily the familiar ones postulated by empires, racial systems, globalization, census categories, theology, revolutionary movements, liberal humanism, or neuroscientific universalism, common enough though those have been in the history of the discipline. (Nor need it necessarily come down to the Northern ethnographer reporting back to the Northern reader, the model challenged by



Chua and Mathur noted above.) A reconstruction of the anthropologically real should open up the possibility of as yet unanticipated ways of being a “we” who are matters of concern for one another on the basis of equally unanticipated terms of relevance.

So who are “we” and what is “our” world? Is it anthropos? ethnos? bios? What do I want to know about them, and why should I care? Well, while it seems most useful to keep the matter open, here are some possible directions these questions might point us. The Korowai share with us two fundamental conditions that make them, at least potentially, matters of concern for us, part of our world. One, they, like anyone at all, are animals of a certain sort, whose recognizability imposes ethical and political limits on their otherness. Today we hardly remember the revolutionary role anthropology played in displacing humans from their position between God and His Creation in the Abrahamic religions, and situating them on the same plane with one another, as well as with other animate beings—but we live with the consequences. Second, to be human is to be surrounded by other creatures and to enter into intersubjective and interobjective relations with them. Those others may include the shaman’s jaguar, the shepherd’s sheepdog, the bishop’s Christ, the laborers’ mill owner, the butcher’s chicken, the Australian’s Alice Rock, as well as the commodity, the android, and the algorithm. Whatever those others may be, they form part of a sociality irreducible to its individual components.

These common conditions are not assimilable to the one-point perspective of a discrete Northern discipline, even at its most perspectival. Nor are they best captured by the category of “human,” as understood in the humanistic tradition that grants Promethean powers to the will, or reason, or self-presence. An alternative to imagining humans as supreme world-creators is to postulate a reality with causal effects and constraints with which they engage but which exceeds their conceptual grasp. However you may construe the dialectical possibilities for bringing the geographer and the physicist onto the same ground, anthropological realism should be seen as a productive, not reductivist, enterprise. The perspective of affordance offers one way to imagine this. It suggests an approach for which meaning-making and causality are not opposed to each other in a zero-sum game. It offers one response to the discipline’s mandate to take people seriously, which includes our mutual capacities for discovering something new about ourselves, by encountering unexpected affordances—including those

immanent in our social encounters with one another. We should expect that those self-discoveries will alter the boundaries of who we think “we” are, and therefore what counts as “my” world.

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