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Stream C: Innovating for Adaptation

Title: Affording Affordances

Abstract: A striking feature of the latest version of Dennett's 'big picture' of the evolution of life and mind is the way that cognition is understood in terms of 'affordances'. An affordance is, roughly, a possibility for action given a creature and an environment. Many combinations of creatures and environments will provide more than one simultaneous affordance. In such cases, a reasonable question is: what will the creature *actually* do? I argue that affordances pose a problem of selection, and that a good general solution to this problem of mind-design has two parts: (a) to 'soft-assemble' final common paths enabling co-ordination of low-level degrees of freedom to produce functional activity, and (b) in at least some creatures to implement a system of preferences to attach utilities to competing affordances. The argument here is broadly Dennettian in spirit: Preferences are an enabler of competent, uncomprehending selection. Few philosophers have been as consistently concerned with processes of selection, or for as long, as Dennett. The exposition in *From Bacteria to Bach and Back*, though, is relatively cryptic on the matter of affordance selection, so it is worth working through this explicitly. (188 words.)

Keywords: Affordances, Action Selection, Preferences, Final Common Paths

Bio: David Spurrett is based at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (in South Africa), where he is Professor of Philosophy, although presently serving a five-year sentence as a Dean. His main current research area is the evolution of systems of behaviour determination and utility representation. His previous work focuses mostly on metaphysics, philosophy of cognitive science and addiction. He is a co-author of *Midbrain Mutiny* (MIT, 2008), co-editor of *What is Addiction?* (MIT, 2010) and *Distributed Cognition and the Will* (MIT, 2007), and co-author of two chapters of *Everything Must Go* (OUP, 2007). He studied at the former University of Natal, and King's College, London.