

## OPEN PEER COMMENTARIES



## Agency and Authenticity

Christian Carrozzo

MedStar Washington Hospital Center

Within the passages of a laudable attempt to provide a framework via which some clarity can be brought to questions regarding the ways in which differing aspects or “dimensions” of agency are interconnected and mutually influential, the authors of “Mapping the Dimensions of Agency” (Schönau et al. 2021) make the claim that, as one of these aspects, a notion of “(a)uthenticity is central to human agency” (176), and that the feeling we associate with agency (that our actions are, indeed, effectual) becomes somewhat illusive and perhaps alienating if our sense of self suffers from some form of discontinuity in light of this reliance. Facing a problematic concept, the authors do well to provide a definition of authenticity from which they construct their framework, i.e., “the ability to reflect on one’s past, envision one’s future, and work to align one’s actions with this vision while preserving continuity” (176). Yet, under an embedded understanding of agency, one that allows for broader ethical consideration via the inclusion of *non-intentional* action, it does not require these. Roughly, an embodied/embedded/enactive account of agency attaches itself to a long line of reasoning in the philosophy of mind that sees consciousness as part of its environment, as opposed to a “detached observer” that operates on its environment, as if individuated from it (Demski and Garrabrant 2019; Dreyfus 2002). Indeed, agency does not require a corresponding mental representation at all, and thus does not require an experience of authenticity, as defined. That is, at least as presented, authenticity is not central to agency when agency is understood as constituted by both *intentional* as well as *non-intentional* causal relations between agents and events. Certainly, a notion of authenticity as it relates to conscious experience

will inherently lend itself to ethical considerations. Nevertheless, a much broader realm of ethical considerations surrounding agency can be realized when agency is understood as instantiated, even in the absence of a corresponding mental representation (i.e., non-intentional). For the purposes of this writing, I refer to *non-intentional* actions/effects as those which cannot be verified to be causally associated with an appropriately corresponding mental representation at all (i.e., in the absence of mental representation), as opposed to *unintentional* actions/effects, meaning the effects were simply not *anticipated* by the action’s corresponding mental representation.

### AGENCY IN THE ABSENCE OF MENTAL REPRESENTATIONS

Subjectively, our phenomenal sense of agency is said to be the feeling we experience in our active capacity to engage in effectual behavior. That experience, that feeling, is what we can say counts as verification of a causally appropriate cognitive disposition in relation to the activity – i.e., the sense that the effects are indeed the result of our agentic engagement when accompanied by mental representations that make appropriate sense of the effects experienced as being the results of my will to act. For instance, I *believe* that my fountain pen has run out of ink, so I pick it up with the *intention* to change the cartridge, and do so. The experienced effects of my action have resulted in a phenomenal (seeming) confirmation that my beliefs and intentions are what caused my will to be effectual via the act of picking up and changing the cartridge. To be clear, the general approach to agency that posits appropriate relations of cause and effect as

verifiable (at least subjectively) between mental representations and events is what we might consider the *standard* theory of agency.

Theories of consciousness have largely focused on the idea that our cognitive processes bear representational content. What some might call a preoccupation with representationalism as an approach to studies of consciousness in cognitive science has been argued as overly detached from the phenomena in question, and ignorant to the relational dynamics between our neurologic equipment and the environment. (For a recent review of the general critique, see Gallagher 2018). In the context of a discussion on agency, the general approach fails to capture important modes of agency that occur in the absence of corresponding mental representations from which to gauge something like subjective intention. Justification for a move away from the standard theory is often expressed as having the aim of including non-humans in our considerations of agency. This is not to say that non-human animals are lacking intention, necessarily (although some argue this on behalf of the lack of a language ability, since without language it becomes difficult to see how exactly non-humans would experience, let alone communicate, something like intention or any representational state). However, non-intentional acts are the case for humans, as well – unlike non-human agency, i.e., clearly not in that we lack the appropriate conceptual language by which to fix and communicate our subjective experiences, but in that many of our actions simply occur as a matter of what is sometimes called “skilled-coping,” or cognitive habituation (Dreyfus 2002; Hoffding 2014; Schmid et al. 2014). Habituated actions are those we perform without any conscious deliberation or reasoning, such as when we find ourselves immersed in an activity while in the absence of any relevant reflection or judgment. Thus, these are actions that occur without *intention*, such as the effortless way in which we operate a vehicle on the road even though our cognitive reflection and corresponding representations may be entirely consumed with experiencing the music that is playing as we drive. To be sure, my ability to operate a vehicle hasn’t always been non-intentional. Having this ability indicates on behalf of the psychological concept of habituation that I once engaged quite reflectively over the many learned nuances of operating a vehicle. The point is, the habituated act is still an instance of causally

effectual and appropriate (the behavioral effect came from the behavioral cause) agency, even if without anything like *present* intention.

### **BROADENING THE SCOPE OF ETHICAL ANALYSIS VIA THE RECOGNITION OF NON-INTENTIONAL AGENCY**

Not only can directed action (i.e., in response to the environment) be exemplified in the absence of corresponding representations, its effects are precisely the kind we make our object in the moral evaluation of *non-intentional* acts. That is, should we define agency as only including intentional acts, then effect-based justificatory views like those of consequentialism lose a good deal of the matters to which they appear to be the most appropriate theoretical approach, i.e., justification based on *consequences*, either because effects are all we have available to judge *or* because the act was subjectively *non-intentional*. We need not look anywhere past our example of the habituated operation of a vehicle to conjure up a situation in which a non-intentional act is still one we would be willing to judge morally had it resulted in ethically objectionable circumstances. Whether the vehicle’s operator was reflectively engaged in every single move she made on the road, or whether we take the cognitive science of habituation seriously and understand that she was mostly operating via skilled-coping, we will nevertheless judge the operator as a morally responsible agent should she kill someone on the road via intentional (representational) or non-intentional (non-representational) action.

Consequentialist theories are prepared for exactly the sorts of moral evaluations that might lack, for various reasons, an intentional component. Claiming that authenticity, as defined, is central to agency is claiming that agency requires intention, but as we can see, requiring that agency require intention disregards an entire realm of human action worthy of ethical consideration as non-intentional. And without the recognition of non-intentional agency, how otherwise are we to adequately judge the moral permissibility of an act in light of nothing but habituation and consequence? Certainly, if one finds consequentialism to be basically inadequate to ethical evaluation in general, perhaps without knowledge of intention one might think ethical evaluation simply cannot occur (a staunch Kantian, perhaps). But, for any ethicist prepared to adjudicate based on

consequences in order to avoid those same effects in the future (and not in order to judge an individual's intentions), moral agency, and thus, agency *in general*, must often be understood as instantiated even when we don't have evidence of intention for every particular action.

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