



Agency: What Does It Mean to Be a Human Being?

Richard N. Williams¹, Edwin E. Gantt^{2*} and Lane Fischer¹

¹Department of Counseling Psychology and Special Education, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, United States,

²Department of Psychology, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, United States

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*Correspondence:

Edwin E. Gantt
ed_gantt@byu.edu

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This paper will look at the results of what has been termed “the crisis of modernism” and the related rise of postmodern perspectives in the 19th and 20th centuries. It concentrates on what is arguably the chief casualty of this crisis – human agency – and the social science that has developed out of the crisis. We argue that modern and postmodern social science ultimately obviate human agency in the understanding of what it means to be a human being. Attention is given to the contemporary intellectual world and the way in which it has been deeply informed by neo-Hegelian and other postmodern scholarly trends, particularly in accounting for how agency has come to play little role in social science understanding of human action. The paper also offers an alternative conception of human agency to the commonly endorsed libertarian model of free choice. Finally, the paper argues that this view of agency preserves meaning and purpose in human action and counters the pervasive social science worldview that sacrifices agency and meaning to powerful invisible abstractions.

Keywords: agency, free will (freedom), Hayek F. A., modernism, postmodernism, positivism

INTRODUCTION

It has frequently been argued (see, e.g., Gay, 1969; Outram, 1995; Beiser, 1996; Gottlieb, 2016; Pinker, 2018; Williams and Gantt, 2018) that Enlightenment thought, as it matured from the early 16th century and on through the late 19th century, exalted the rational mind as the source of all knowledge worthy to be deemed real knowledge. The finished form of this creative rational process was thought to be found in formal logic and scientific discourse that could be shown to embody or pass the test of careful logical analysis in its structure, claims, and conclusions. This logic test, in more recent centuries, has also assumed the form of empirical demonstration, validation, or falsification. In our contemporary intellectual climate, it seems that such empirical demonstrations take their most impressive form, in the activities of the natural sciences and the technologies they produce (Wooton, 2015).

Rational science, as it developed, offered the promise of control over nature in the service of humankind on such a scale that a great host of human needs seemed finally on the brink of being met. As more human needs were met, the success of such control and technology gave impetus (and perhaps even lent legitimacy) to a sometimes subtle and unnoticed turning of attention away from human needs that had hitherto been largely physical and economic and toward human wants, many of which became mental, psychological, and emotional, or what we might term “mere desires.” With tangible needs largely fulfilled – at least in principle – it seemed conceivable and legitimate to turn attention to the fulfillment of mere desires.

In a sense, this historical success of Enlightenment thinking has in every subsequent era contributed to the appearance that the earliest promises of the Enlightenment, articulated perhaps most famously by Renaissance philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1,463–1,494), might actually be fulfilled. In his work, *De Hominis Dignitate* (On the Dignity of Man), Pico della Mirandola attributes to God the following description of our human nature:

We have set thee at the world's center that thou mayest from thence more easily observe whatever is in the world. We have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honor, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer (cited in Cassirer et al., 1948, pp. 223–225).

In the following paragraph in this essay, Pico della Mirandola expresses one other aspect of our nature for which, he suggests, we all ought to be properly grateful: “O supreme generosity of God the Father, O highest and most marvelous felicity of man! To him it is granted to have whatever he chooses, to be whatever he wills” (cited in Cassirer et al., 1948, pp. 223–225). In this passage, written at the earliest phase of the Enlightenment, we can see already uncovered the end to which Enlightenment thought aimed to carry humankind, and to which, to a great extent we still continue to aspire (see, e.g., Bellah et al., 1985; Wilkens and Sanford, 2009; Tallis, 2020).

The progress of the Enlightenment project, as begun in earnest in the 16th century and developed throughout the 18th and into the 19th century, surely raised the collective expectations of the Western world. The power of the rational mind to discover and to create in virtually every aspect of nature and every field of endeavor seemed limitless – in theory, at least, if not always quite yet in practice. Enlightenment rationality was applied to the questions of epistemology, to the subjects of natural philosophy, and to the dilemmas of moral philosophy. Indeed, to many, it seemed that every human question and problem would 1 day fall to the rational powers of the human mind (Gay, 1969). The invention of increasingly sophisticated methods of study, of observation and measurement, drew out of natural philosophy, a set of practices, both methodological and explanatory, that coalesced into the natural sciences of the 19th and 20th centuries and subsequently validated themselves in the form of the technologies of the 20th and 21st centuries (McClellan, 2015). Sophisticated processes of formal logic increasingly held out the possibility of rational certainty about the world and even about ourselves. Indeed, it was not clear that there were any predetermined limits to our capacity to know with absolute confidence virtually anything to which we might turn our collective minds (Pinker, 2018). Even moral philosophy, reaching into theology, underwent transformations as the tools of rational analysis were applied to moral principles and religious doctrines (Olson, 2013). The effect in this sphere was refinement of religious argument and new forms of apologetics, on the one hand, and more sophisticated

forms of scientism, naturalism, skepticism, and atheism, on the other (Olson, 2008).

By the early to middle 20th century, however, some very insightful and sophisticated voices began to question, with greater seriousness and sophistication than in earlier centuries, the hegemony and even the relevance of the rationalist project, and its ability to really make sense of all things – most especially, its ability to make sense of our humanity (Hayes, 2009). Europe had been the seedbed of the Enlightenment, and science, technology, political philosophy, art, and moral theory all bore the marks of the Enlightenment and its European cultural context (Gay, 1969). Thus, Europe was not only the seedbed of Enlightenment thinking, but it was also the bearer to the world of the intellectual, political, and technological fruits of that thinking. Unfortunately, despite the seemingly utopic promises of Enlightenment science and philosophy, the late 19th through the middle 20th centuries saw unprecedented turmoil and strife, including world wars that produced greater destruction and human suffering than anyone, from the perspective of the high point of rationalism in the 18th and early 19th centuries, could ever have predicted. This led some thinkers, beginning in the interwar period of the 20th century, to begin questioning the aims and legitimacy of the modernist project – arguing quite thoughtfully and persuasively that, for all of its success in furthering our understanding of the natural world, modern science and philosophy had failed to provide answers to the most pressing moral and existential questions human beings face, especially those regarding the very the nature of our humanity itself. In short, Enlightenment modernism had failed to safeguard the inherent meaningfulness of the human world. Thus, a rich and penetrating philosophical literature grew up centered on an analysis of the widely recognized “crisis” of the modern world (see Sharpe et al., 2017) and the resultant “malaise of modernity” that the issues at the core of the crisis subsequently engendered (Taylor, 1991; Gantt and Williams, 2018).

THE INTELLECTUAL LANDSCAPE FOLLOWING THE CRISIS

The crisis we are referring to here was a crisis of meaning, the inability to be sure about, or to find a stable ground for the human meaning-making and understanding that provides the necessary structure for pursuing science, philosophy, moral theory, art and culture, theology, and for creating and sustaining those social institutions founded on the rationalist tradition that had dominated Western thought for the previous three centuries. While the concept of “crisis” was primarily developed through the writings of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) and likeminded others (see, Hewitson and D'Auria, 2012) during the interwar period in Europe, the origins of this crisis in meaning, and the larger perception of the possible dangers of modernist rationalism, began to emerge earlier in the 19th century, in the writings of Søren Kierkegaard (see, e.g., analyses by Pattison, 2002 and Stewart, 2015), Fyodor Dostoevsky (e.g., *The Idiot*), and Nietzsche (2002), but was

perhaps most visible in the rise of such intellectual movements as Marxism, Darwinism, and, slightly later, Freudianism. Indeed, possibly the most sweeping and ambitious form of the Enlightenment project of modernist rationalism is the work of G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) in the early 19th century. In a sense, Hegel moved Enlightenment rationality forward from the original epistemic hegemony of the individual rational mind to the postulation of Mind (or Spirit or *Geist*) itself as the ultimate explanation of all that is – including human beings and our individual minds (Dale, 2014). Hegelianism was, in an important sense, the implicative endpoint of modernism as Enlightenment rationalism. This is so, in large part, because Hegelianism brought together in one grand system two of the fundamental questions of rationalism (and really, of the Western tradition itself): epistemology and metaphysics. The implications of this grand system for the third pillar of Western intellectual life (i.e., ethics and moral theory) have been significant and far-reaching.

The 20th-century philosopher, historian, and economist, Friedrich Hayek (1899–1992), provides what we believe is an important account of the intellectual history of the post-Enlightenment or “postmodern” period. In his book, *The Counter-Revolution of Science: Studies in the Abuse of Reason*, Hayek (1979) proposes that, although it is a great irony, the dominant thought of the late 20th century, and thus of the early 21st century, has been shaped by a conceptual alliance – perhaps a coalescence – of the rationalism of Hegel (or, the Hegelians) and the positivist thought of Auguste Comte (1798–1857) and his followers. The common element that allowed two such seemingly disparate intellectual traditions to come together as a genuine intellectual force in the 20th century and to continue up to the present time is, we argue, the willingness of both traditions to postulate the existence of certain powerful unembodied and timeless entities, constructs, or abstractions, capable of exerting substantive causal power over – and, thereby, governing and determining – events and entities in the real, material, temporal world that human beings inhabit. The power of these causal abstractions includes not only a controlling force (once underway), but also a creative force – or, expressed in terms more acceptable to proponents of this explanatory tack, a “constitutive power.” This is to say that, one way or another, the abstract, universal reality, or realities (e.g., constructs) – which are the products of both Hegelian and positivist thinking – make both things and events, including behaviors, thoughts, and feelings, what they are and how they are. All things come from – that is, all things are constitutive of – a higher, more abstract, more fundamental reality. It is worth noting here that the first and chief casualty of this ontologic–epistemic system is human agency itself (Dyde, 1894; Hayek, 1979).

To many students of the history of ideas, the possibility of the extreme rationalism of Hegel and his successors coming together coherently with the positivism of Comte and his successors may seem unlikely, if not impossible. Hayek clearly understood the strangeness of the proposition that these two schools of thought should come together and dominate 20th (and 21st) century’s thought and explanation. Nevertheless, he makes a

compelling case that such has indeed taken place. If looked at from a slightly different angle, however, this proposition is not terribly surprising. After all, both positivism and German idealism are what we might call “theories of everything” (Barrow, 1991). In substantive ways, both of these traditions represent the ultimate project of the Enlightenment.

Taking one’s route through philosophy, one ends up in the radical idealism descended from Hegel, wherein all is explained by the clash (or evolution) of ideas, which move both themselves and the events that constitute human reality. Truth and knowledge may reside in the individual mind, but they exist supra-personally at the highest and broadest possible level of reality. Hayek used the term “supermind” to refer to this elevation of the nature and function of the modern enlightenment conception of mind, and its creative power and receptivity to knowledge, to a cosmic level that affords – to those who can grasp the system and its evolution – understanding of the whole of the “system” of ideas at work and moving itself toward its own ends. Hayek (1979), it should be noted also uses the term “supermind” to refer to those individuals (the *Intelligentsia*) who have been able to grasp the reality of the workings of the grand system and who thus have the power to work with it and further its inevitable end. According to this line of thought, which has great currency in these early decades of the 21st century, abstract realities are the real source and cause of things. Thus, events and reality are known best and most fully as, or by means of, constructs and structures that exist, are on the move, and can be understood only at that abstract level. The individual mind knows by contacting and apprehending what is fundamentally an abstract reality.

The other grand achievement of Enlightenment thought is, of course, modern science. And, thus, taking one’s route to contemporary social theories and models of humanity through science, one ends up in some form of positivism – or, at least, positivists would have us understand positivism, or positivistic science, as the end point of just that epistemic certainty that has been held to be the standard of truth and knowledge in Modernist thought (Ayer, 1959). Positivism allows into the discourse and practice of science a number of powerful abstractions, which serve as an endpoint of science and explanation – even when they are not directly detectable or demonstrable. Such abstractions include constructs, laws, processes, principles, and structures. In positivist thought the things and events we encounter in the empirical world are best and most fully explained and understood in terms of such abstractions – by laying such abstractions “over top of” the empirical events of the world in order to produce coherent (typically causal) accounts of empirical events. The “goodness of fit” of the events under the umbrella provided by the abstract constructs, structures, and systems is taken as evidence for the reality and existence of the constructs, laws, structures, and systems themselves. Even when, as is often the case in contemporary social science, one is reluctant to use the language of “laws” to account for the human phenomena under study, the “regularities” that positivistic scientific investigations uncover are often taken to be “real” in some nontrivial sense, as the facts of the universe, so to speak – certainly more real than

the specific empirical events or relationships that we observe, and that the abstract regularities are invoked to explain. Such regularities are taken to be lawful in nature, that is, governed by something very abstract and outside the world of material reality and, thus, certainly “law-like” even if we wish to avoid the language of “laws.”

The important thing to note here about this cohesion of German idealism and positivism is that they both seek – and make readily available a language of – causal regularity (or lawfulness). In the most basic terms, (both Hegelian idealism and positivism) see powerful unembodied abstractions as real or names of things that are real enough to cause other events to happen (or to be responsible for their happening) in the material human world – as well as in the immaterial human world of thought, emotion, and desire. A central question – certainly what should be the question at the base of much activity in the contemporary social sciences – is just how these abstract realities are to be known, uncovered, or adequately captured and controlled. The subsequent, and perhaps the ultimate, next step for both idealists and positivists, then, is determining how these powerful abstractions, once known, can be controlled and deployed in the service of resolving problems and, thereby, creating or manufacturing a better human reality than the one that we have now – built around individual human rationality and agency. Because both German idealism and positivism presuppose that human beings are mostly living in ignorance of the fuller reality of the causal abstractions at work in the world and in their lives, both traditions require a specialized degree of academic sophistication and even intellectual transcendence in order to apprehend with clarity the powerful abstractions they “discover” or presuppose. Obviously, “getting at” or comprehending these powerful abstractions is not easy; it requires deep and searching investigation – something clearly beyond the capability of normal, garden-variety human beings. Thus, the necessary level of insight and understanding will be available only to an educated elite who have cultivated the capacities to reach the level of understanding in which the powerful abstractions can be known and ultimately controlled – in the service of the betterment of humankind, of course.

HAYEK AND THE SUPERMIND

What is required for this type and level of understanding requires invoking, in one way or another, what Hayek (1979) refers to as the “supermind” (p. 159). For Hayek, the supermind is straightforwardly derived from Hegelian thought. Any student of the history of ideas will understand that there is a sense in which Hegel moved explanation and understanding away from, or “outside of,” any and all particular, individual, rational minds and sought it in some sort of universal mind, *Geist* itself. The world must, thus, be finally understood as a product (in some sense) of a universal (or universalized) reason (i.e., thought). This process of ultimate reason that produces knowledge, truth, and understanding is described as the process by which “God comes to full consciousness of himself (becomes,

i.e., Absolute Spirit)” (McCormack, 2000; p. 102). It is in this light that we commonly understand Hegel’s meta-historical process of *thesis* → *antithesis* → *synthesis*.

What Hayek is suggesting is that this process is presumed – by both idealists and positivists – only to be discernible at the level of a “supermind” and in terms transparent to, the supermind itself. Thus, true understanding of ourselves and our world requires a supermind, actualized in and by an educated elite whose consciousness of “what is really going on” has been sufficiently raised and expanded to permit them to grasp the higher order, systemic processes, and realities that really move events and govern human affairs, and which are opaque to almost all of the rest of us. Sustained deep thought, intellectual acumen, and unyielding commitment to rational methods and the findings such methods produce are required to attain contact with the underlying, abstract reality that constitutes the world, the grasping of which represents achievement of true understanding.¹ Presuming all knowledge to be consilient, this will hold true throughout the human sciences, including psychology, sociology, political science, history, and across all social institutions, including family, government, religion, and so forth. Thus, it is believed that there is a great need for scholars and technicians who have the intelligence to master the intricacies and subtleties of the underlying (or overarching and ultimate) reality of the world and how it is enacted within and how it governs human affairs. These individuals, capable of rationally ordering, governing, and explaining the world in light of their superior knowledge and insight constitute the supermind, while almost all other (non-enlightened) human beings, because they are oblivious to what is really going on around them and within them – and why it is *really* going on – are relegated to being subject to the planning, oversight, and governance of the supermind (i.e., the rational and scientific intelligentsia).

It is at the level of the supermind (speaking for the enlightened body of scholars), and our confidence in its abilities, that the seeming improbable melding of German idealism (as the capstone of Enlightenment thinking) and Comtean positivism takes place. On a global level, one sees some intellectual kinship between the cosmic process of *thesis* → *antithesis* → *synthesis* as the legacy of Hegel and the Three-Stage Theory of cultural progress proposed by Comte (1988). Despite clear differences in theoretical details, both systems necessarily entail the same functional implications. As one of Hayek’s biographers, Ebenstein (2001) notes:

Hayek’s view of Hegel was similar to his perspective of Comte. He observed the paradox of joining Hegel and Comte, for the former is usually considered to be an idealist, and the later a (material) positivist. There was, however, little functional difference. For both, history moved in stages above and beyond the individual and

¹All this intellectual activity also both presupposes and requires acceptance of and allegiance to the principle that true understanding will always require accepting the ubiquity and reality of abstract entities and explanation in terms of these occult operative realities.

removed from his will. What Hayek terms “historicism” is the mistaken belief that there are laws of history as there are laws of nature. Almost by definition, historicism denies moral standards, for it denies free will. Comte’s and Hegel’s determinism followed from their “peculiarly unhistorical approach to history,” perceiving determinism where it does not exist (p. 109).

In reducing human beings and their history to mere manifestations of the impersonal operations of powerful invisible abstractions, discernible only by those who have been properly trained to perceive such things, Hegel, Comte, and their intellectual descendants systematically obviate a central feature of human experience and daily life (i.e., agency).

AGENCY: THE FIRST CASUALTY OF ABSTRACTIONS

Thus, the first casualty in the triumph of modern contemporary social theory is, indeed, any meaningful concept of human agency. At best, one is left with an empty Hobbesian concept of agency as being able to do what one wants (particularly in order to avoid unpleasant death or pain), despite the fact that our wants, which are the defining manifestation of our agency, are not of our own construction (Gantt and Williams, 2019). Additionally, one also senses strongly that similar sorts of training and education are required within both neo-Hegelian and positivist perspectives in order to fully “see” and “understand” the march of progress each school of thought describes. It is easy to see how and why post-Comtean positivists (including especially Comte’s students) saw Hegelians as allies and a certain kind of Hegelianism as part of the same intellectual project (Hayek, 1979).

At the same time, Comtean positivism has long been credited with introducing into science (including empirical science) the concept of *constructs*, hypothetical entities that enter the empirical process of science most directly at the explanatory level. The role of constructs is in suggesting, in terms that “make sense,” what forces might be at work in a particular (experimental) setting and then in suggesting how we can account for the results observed in a particular scientific study. *Constructs* are also manifest in terms of the operation of the definition and operation of *variables* in the events occurring during the experiment. Often, *constructs* are endowed with real causal efficacy at the level of models and theoretical explanations. Neither variables nor constructs can be detected by the sensory processes at work in the lived human world where most scientific experiments, including particularly social scientific experiments, are carried out. They are invisible to us as common human beings.

For example, one never sees a “stimulus”; one sees only light, objects, shapes, etc. The status of these real-world things as merely particular manifestations or instances of some underlying stimulus or combination of stimuli is a matter of conceptual inference. In other words, that such things are not actually taken to be what they appear to be, but are rather presumed to be examples of “stimuli” is a theoretical claim,

not an empirical, scientific one (Williams, 1990). At the same time, we never observe or detect “responses.” Rather, we observe only events; that such events are taken to be “responses” is equally a theoretical claim. In every common use of these constructs in social science, the abstract “stimulus” has been endowed with a real causal power to enable it to bring about a discernible real-world event. This whole process is so common and feels so natural in the social sciences that we seldom stop to think that in this seemingly innocent process, we literally have created an unembodied abstraction and endowed it with causal efficacy in the real world. Furthermore, it is commonly assumed that anyone not sufficiently educated to see the world in terms of “stimuli” and “responses” will be in some important way ignorant and unable to understand what is really occurring.

An excellent example of precisely this sort of thinking can be seen in Milgram’s (1992) description of the nature of social psychological inquiry. “The creative claim of social psychology,” he writes, “lies in its capacity to reconstruct varied types of social experience in an experimental format, to clarify and make visible the operation of obscure social forces so that they may be explored in terms of the language of cause and effect” (p. xix). Similarly, he notes:

The common view is that social psychologists derive their experiments from life, and there is an important measure of truth in this. But it’s also true that events, such as the Genovese case, are the inevitable unfolding of forces that experimental analysis will frequently pinpoint first. Underlying the silly incident in the restaurant was an important principle of social behavior; by focusing on that latent principle, and extending it through to a concrete dramatized experiment, one could foresee certain inevitable results of such a principle (p. xxxi).

The genius of social psychology according to Milgram, then, is that it can “make visible the operation of obscure social forces” that undergird and govern human action and experience, and which are in themselves, unless discerned and exposed by one who has been properly trained, invisible, and inscrutable to the ordinary mind.

Although this example drawn from the social psychology of individual behavior is quite simple, the process involved and its conceptual effects are exactly the same in more complex and higher order situations when large-scale constructs such as “sexism” or “identity” are declared to have the real causal power to produce real tangible effects – the agency of human beings and their determination to do otherwise notwithstanding. If the causal abstraction is, “there” the resultant effect will occur. In this way, causal abstractions ultimately obviate and thus destroy human agency. However, we are assured by qualified and trained scientists who have studied such things that variables and constructs are indeed real and are the basis of the causal world we inhabit (see Addis et al., 2019). Even when not explicitly stated, examples of the presumption of the real existence of these abstractions and their causal efficacy are abundantly evident in the

theoretical and methodological language of the social sciences. For example, it is present in the nearly ubiquitous obsession psychologists have with discovering the “main effects” and “interaction effects” that can presumably be revealed through careful analyses of variance and other forms of statistical examination, as well as in the extensive attempt to map the magnitude of between-person differences as indicators of the causal strength of these interactions (for a more detailed account of this issue and its many problems, see Lamiell, 2019). The interactions of principle interest are the interactions assumed to occur between various abstractions and the causal effects such interactions produce are particular human behaviors. In the social scientific literature, these powerful abstractions are known variously as laws, processes, principles, forces that work in and on us as “motivations,” “drives,” “needs,” “reinforcements,” “impulses,” “attractions,” “orientations,” “attitudes,” “stereotypes,” “traits,” “characteristics,” “schemata,” “scripts,” “structures,” “systems,” and so forth. In simplest terms then, German idealism and Comtean positivism have come together in the postmodern era due in large part to their shared metaphysical commitment to explaining the phenomena of human being in terms of powerful abstract entities possessing causal efficacy in human affairs at every level from the individual and internal to the external and global – or even cosmic. As both of these late-Enlightenment traditions came into contact with and were appropriated by postmodern thinkers, one of the principle results was the broadly defined “structuralist” movement – an intellectual movement that seemed to hold great promise for the humanities and the social sciences in the mid-1970 to late 1970 and which profoundly influenced cognitive psychologies, interpretations of Freudian psychologies, linguistic theories, and sociologies (see, e.g., Williams, 1978). Perhaps the most notable example of this movement was the resurgence of Marxist explanations for less economic or political and more local social and interpersonal phenomena. It is interesting to note that, in the opinion of some, the most lasting contribution of Marx’s philosophy was not in the area of political or even economic theory, but rather in epistemology. Marxism is perhaps the clearest and most accessible manifestation of the confluence of rationalism/idealism and positivism – only those trained to see the world in neo-Hegelian, neo-Marxist structural and systemic terms can really understand the phenomena of the human world. Thus, within this contemporary movement, the epistemological task is really the provision of training in recognizing abstract and causally efficacious structures and systems.

Granted, many scholars have suggested that we are now in a “post-structuralist” world, that we have gone beyond structuralist accounts and models. We question, however, whether this claim can be true since the essence of the structuralist account is the reality, causal efficacy, and enlightening power of unseen abstractions – be they structures, systems, processes, or whatever else. It is also unclear just what intellectual movements have captured the field previously held by structuralism when so many structural explanations (such as Marxism, some versions of feminism, Darwinism, and any

number of other “isms”) still enjoy such contemporary currency, both at the theoretical and meta-theoretical level and at the experimental level of variables, principles, and models of all sorts.

Finally, while many structuralists have traditionally eschewed the language of efficient or Newtonian causality, it is difficult to find any evidence that contemporary explanations of human phenomena in the social sciences are not causal in any real or substantive sense. In fact, we see no evidence that the social sciences have ceased to offer explanations obtained by virtue of their presumed ability to achieve contact with some external rational order or reality, either by immersion and sensitivity training or consciousness raising, on the one hand, or by rigorous scientific observation, on the other. Here, we propose, lies the seedbed of scientism in its many, varied contemporary manifestations. Scientism embodies a thorough-going commitment to a metaphysics of powerful, unseen, abstract causes – usually in the guise of materialist naturalism – as necessary to any and all legitimately scientific examinations or explanations (Sorell, 1991). Explanatory tacks invoking abstractions with causal efficacy are not really different in any important sense – particularly if one is concerned with the possibility and preservation of genuine human agency.

HUMAN AGENCY IN THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND BEYOND

As we have argued, one of the principle casualties of causal explanations grounded in either material substances or abstract, invisible causes is the possibility of any sort of meaningful human agency (see, e.g., Hayek, 1978). The most basic conception of human agency is “meaningful, purposive self-direction” (see, e.g., Williams, 1992, 2005, 2017; Slife and Fisher, 2000; Martin et al., 2003; Frie, 2008; Yanchar, 2011, 2018; Gantt and Williams, 2014). Human agency is, however, quite helpless, or at least hapless, in the face of powerful invisible, causally determinative forces. The more such causally efficacious constructs or causes there are, and the more arcane they are – insofar as they are available only to the intelligentsia or supermind – the less agency and freedom there is available to the mass of humanity. Ironically, it is not clear just how the intelligentsia themselves might acquire for themselves any genuine agency even as enlightened supermind, but it seems to be an article of faith that when properly enlightened, one is able somehow to harness the power of the causal nexus that is the human world and purposefully further its inevitabilities to one’s own purposes (a possibility anticipated by the ancient Epicureans). Perhaps this is as close to human agency or autonomy as one can hope to get in our neo-Hegelian modern/postmodern world. It is worth asking, however, whether there is a path to genuine human agency within the dominant metaphysical and epistemological regime, given its allegiance to, or even, insistence on, a “metaphysics of things” (Williams, 1990) – abstract things possessing causal efficacy. A brief historical review is, perhaps, the best way into this important question.

It is helpful to first point out that our contemporary conception of human agency – conceived of as an autonomous free will – is

a product of Enlightenment thinking and, therefore, a relatively new concept (see, Taylor, 1989). We will say more about this below. In the classical Greek tradition, what we would recognize as human agency took the form of the active powers of self-direction (Frede, 2011). While this is not unrelated to our modern conception of agency, there are important differences with the ancient view, but also shades of common understanding, not the least of which is a fairly close tie between the powers of self-direction and moral considerations – that is, the pursuit of happiness in the form of the Good and furthering the Good in ways available to us as the kinds of beings we fundamentally are. We see here, of course, the roots of what we recognize today as virtue ethics. As early as the Pre-socratics, the unique human capacity for reason – solidified later, in Aristotle, as the possession of a rational soul – provided a capacity to recognize “the good” in its various forms and even to be able to incorporate it into one’s person or soul. In fact, there was an obligation to do so in order to have what Socrates considered a life worth living, as well as in order to be a good and contributing member of the *polis*. From Plato’s metaphor of the rational charioteer controlling the less than rational aspects of our natures to Aristotle’s brand of virtue ethics, it was clear that human beings possess significant ability to direct their actions and choices and even the responsibility to do so.

This understanding of human agency and freedom of the will, centered on the acquisition and incorporation of truth and virtue in pursuit of the improvement or even perfection of the soul, endured from classical Greece into the early Christian centuries. Even as the concept of the soul, and of its perfection, became more intensely individual over time, moral responsibility remained a hallmark of human agency. This view, however, contrasts sharply with the understanding of human agency that began to emerge in the Renaissance and which came into full flower during the Enlightenment (Taylor, 1989). This emergent view of human agency is, perhaps best captured in the quote cited above from the essayist Pico della Mirandola: “O supreme generosity of God the Father, O highest and most marvelous felicity of man! To him it is granted to have whatever he chooses, to be whatever he wills.”

In this short but heavily laden passage, the spirit of the autonomous Enlightenment agent is clearly captured. This spirit of celebration of individual autonomy continues in entirely recognizable forms into the present modern/postmodern period. First, human agency is associated with felicity, with happiness. Now, clearly, the plain sense of this association is that our having freedom of choice ought to be a source of happiness. However, once admitted, it is a very short step to the position that the function and purpose of free choice are to produce human happiness – not just in general, but in individual lives. We choose whatever we believe will make us happy. Second, agency and freedom are explicitly connected to the act of choosing. However, choosing “whatever ... [we will]” is not the same thing as acquiring virtues and truth and acting accordingly (Schindler, 2017). Free will is associated with the capacity

for acquisition – getting what we want, virtuous or not.² And finally, the aspect of human agency that most clearly connects with the Enlightenment, and to our own time, is the notion that we can “be whatever [we] will ...” In Pico della Mirandola’s words (cited above), “with freedom of choice and with honor, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer.” Here, it is proposed that we have freedom of choice of a profound sort, the freedom and power to be makers of ourselves, and, as such, beholden only to ourselves. The nature, function, and power of the rational mind, taken to be the crowning feature of Enlightenment thinking, could hardly be expressed more clearly. The powerful rational mind, which is the source of apodictic (absolute) knowledge, is also the source of (absolute) freedom. And that freedom is manifest as power, as choice – the assertion or imposition of the individual will onto the world and even onto the self (the presumed seat and possessor of the will itself).

This tradition is the direct source of our common, modern definition of libertarian free will: Freedom of the will exists when a person in a given set of circumstances chooses response *X* but *could have* chosen another response, all circumstances remaining the same (Kane, 2005). Thus, human agency in its essential form consists in (autonomously) choosing from among alternatives. Obviously, few would seriously argue with this definition of human agency at the practical or pragmatic level – we are virtually all aware of making many perhaps hundreds of choices from among alternatives every day. Furthermore, we are all aware that, in very many cases, we really did not *have to* choose to act the way we did. We realize that we could in fact have done otherwise. However, on the theoretical, or analytical, level, this conception of human agency as free choice breaks down (see, e.g., Williams, 1992, 1994, 2005). And, it is actually quite easy to see why.

The essential defining characteristic of a choice *qua* choice is that there is a reason for it. Further, the reason somehow is sufficiently strong to “carry the day,” so to speak and determine the choice. Absent sufficient reason, no *choice* would or could emerge. Absent sufficient reason, any act would be simply a random act – produced by entirely contingent factors that just happen to be the case at the moment of “choice” (and the contemporary worldview of the social sciences offers no shortage of just such powerful abstractions as contingent causal factors). So, the traditional analysis of agency really offers only two possibilities. That is, either there is a deliberate choice based on reason, usually referred to as a free choice, or absent such reasons, the action must be understood as produced for no intelligible reason at all. At the same time, however, to the extent that reasons (and the circumstances that produce them) are strong and compelling, then to precisely that extent, one’s acts cease to be free. They must be understood as essentially compelled by the strength of whatever reasons produce them. If not, then why else would they have been chosen? We might even say, “only a fool would act otherwise.” However, in such

²Though Pico della Mirandola, as a man of the Renaissance, might certainly have expected or at least hoped that our freedom would be used for good.

a case, acting otherwise is not a free choice since the content of the foolishness itself prevailed and produced the choice. The conclusion here is that autonomous freedom of choice is ultimately too elusive a phenomenon to anchor and embody our innate human agency. It is also internally inconsistent and, thus, impossible in the very sense by which it is defined. In order to be a choice at all, there must be reasons for the choice that prevail over other reasons. But precisely to the extent that reasons are powerful and persuasive enough to prevail in the process leading up to the choice, the choice ceases to become genuinely free. It comes from the power of the reasons. This understanding of agency is self-contradictory – fatally so.

AN ALTERNATIVE ACCOUNT OF AGENCY

There is, however, an alternative way of understanding human agency, one that is based on a conceptual foundation sturdy enough to support it, but which, ironically, requires that we essentially give up our understanding based on the hegemony of the autonomous rational self, and its ability to choose for itself and impose its will on the world, as the foundation of our agency and our human nature. The conception of the autonomous self, as it developed from Enlightenment thought, seems to work well enough at the level of praxis, in civic society, and in the law. Indeed, we all do seem to have a capacity for self-control and self-mastery in most aspects of our lives. The conception of agency as self-control or self-mastery, involving at times the deliberate imposition of will and choice, allows us to live true to a moral code, care for others, and succeed in most purposes of life. It is not, however, the foundation or fount of our human agency – which agency is the defining characteristic of humankind.

To see what this defining characteristic might be, we refer back to our earlier example of making a “free choice.” The problem with free choices being truly free is that choices are actually based on reasons, and in any decision, reasons prevail – even if, ultimately, the prevailing reason is one we might bring into the decision at the last moment just to show that we are “in charge” and can do whatever we want. *That* motive itself – to show that we are in charge – now drives the choice and, thus, renders the choice no longer a genuinely free, unfettered, autonomous one. Thus, freedom must come into the model of choice prior to any moment of deliberated choice – indeed, often long before deliberation can take place or there can be a distinct, conscious moment of choice. Agency, if it is to be real, must enter this process of living and choosing at the level of the reasons – or reason itself – not at the level of the overt choosing.³ Agency simply cannot be understood as

free choice at the earlier level of considering reasons rather than later on at the level of choosing an action in response to those reasons because choosing among reasons, and evaluating them, is the sort of thing that itself requires reasons every bit as much as choosing an action (on down the timeline) requires reasons. So, to keep this model of free choice – we may refer to this type of deliberative conscious choice as Type 1 choice – as the *sine qua non* of our agency forces us into an infinite regress of reasons and decisions, the result of which is that we never arrive at any real point of the very autonomous freedom we take to be the *sine qua non* of human agency. Furthermore, this Type 1 choice is decidedly not the sort of choosing that characterizes the vast majority of our normal agentic lives. Very seldom in the course of daily living do we stop, enumerate, and evaluate alternative courses of actions, weigh them against each other, and then make a clear deliberative choice from among the alternatives. This is in spite of the fact that every life is composed of perhaps hundreds of agentic actions every day.

The solution to this problem really does lie at the level of our reasons for our acts, our acts of reasoning – and here we must note that by “acts” we obviously include both overt physical acts and mental acts, including evaluations, intentions, and even emotions and desires. However, the solution does not involve an act of choice of the sort that the modern/postmodern powerful rational ego – which is our legacy from Enlightenment thinking – is supposed to carry out. The Enlightenment ego imposes itself, asserts, and exercises control both upon circumstances and upon itself and chooses something or another at the expense of others. Although this choosing may happen at various times in the course of our lived experience, even several times in a single day, every time it is the same act of contemplating, deliberating, and opting from among alternatives and imposing our will on the situation. A moment’s reflection tells us, however, that for nearly all of our actions in the course of our lives, our agentic acts of choosing are not deliberative – that is, they are not the products of detached contemplation and analysis of alternatives, costs and benefits, etc. Most often, in fact, we deliberate not at all. We simply do what we intend to do, what needs to be done, what the situation calls for, in one way or another, and what makes sense. This phenomenological fact requires us to search for a type of agentic action alternative to any deliberative imposition of the will. We propose that there is such a class of actions and that these actions are more fundamental than the kind of deliberative choosing that defines the character and actions within the classical libertarian conceptions of “free” will.

It may seem paradoxical to say that the fundamental fact of human freedom is not the imposition of a choice by the will onto the world, but rather it is a sort of *yielding*, a yielding of oneself to a perception or conception of the world – or some aspect of our lived world. We may refer to this kind of “choosing” as Type 2 choice. The idea here is that agency entails a sort of *yielding of self* and a *taking up* of the world in a particular manner. This often produces a sense of obligation, of the sort articulated by the phenomenologist, Levinas (1969, 1990, 1995) and Williams (2002, 2005). As this yielding occurs

³Note here that it will certainly be the case that agency, at least in the way we will develop it here, can be correctly described as a “sort” of choosing, but of a nature and at a level much deeper and more intimately connected to our essential being-in-the-world than any libertarian-style conception of agency as rational, deliberated choosing from among alternatives could ever be. This discovering and remaking of our understanding of freedom and of choice will be developed in the remainder of this essay.

in the lived world, it will most often take the form of *taking on* or *giving over to* something some “reading” of the world, some sense of *settling into* or *granting* of some sense or reading of our situatedness – our being-in-the-world. We might take on or give ourselves over to a person, an idea, or an ideal. We might even take on or give ourselves over to a state of affairs – empirically real or imagined – seemingly incumbent in some decision with which we are faced. Whatever the case, the agency comes not in the assertion of control (or either self or circumstance) in the making of the decision, but in what both precedes and follows from it – the actually *taking on* of some aspect of life called for by the impending decision/action or *giving ourselves over* to some implication or requirement of the decision/action. This model of agency suggests that decisions (or “free choices”) are themselves really incidences of series of ongoing *yielding to*, of *giving over* and *taking on*. To decide is to give oneself over to something, or to take something on, or take something upon us. To develop and recognize a “reason” is also to take on or give oneself over to an idea, or understanding, or purpose. This activity of giving over and taking on really has no starting point nor conclusion, and it is as continuous and as long-lived as life itself. It is, in fact life itself, lived experience. But unlike the deliberations of the autonomous, libertarian agent, it is not supposed to have a beginning or an end whereby one recognizes a choice to be made, lines up the reasons, “freely” chooses an alternative, and chooses – end of process. Rather, genuine agency (Type 2) is an infinite regress of taking on and giving over at every level of life and really at every waking moment of life. This is, quite simply, what it means to be an agent; there is neither beginning nor end. After all, if agency had some starting point, if it arose from, if it was called into being by, some non-agentic condition, physical reality, or powerful abstract ubiquitous force of one sort or another, then we would not really be agents because our agency would be derivative and qualitatively dependent (not free), and thus, it would lack meaningful substance and meaning itself.

Ultimately, what the analysis presented here means is that to be human is to be creative, and truly and always open-ended, to be the very site and source of possibility, purpose, and meaning. As Ryan and Deci (2000) note:

The fullest representations of humanity show people to be curious, vital, and self-motivated. At their best, they are agentic and inspired, striving to learn; extend themselves; master new skills; and apply their talents responsibly. That most people show considerable effort, agency, and commitment in their lives appears, in fact, to be more normative than exceptional, suggesting some very positive and persistent features of human nature (p. 68).

Furthermore, as truly agentic beings, neither our past nor our future is “fixed in place.” This is not to say that nothing about the past is fixed and given, but that the meaning dimension of the past and the meaningful tie of past to future – the “thence” and the “wherefore” – are created and maintained

by agentic action itself (Williams and Gantt, 2013). In the realm occupied by meaning-making beings such as we are, we thus make and remake ourselves all the time. The lived world for us (for agentic beings of the kind we are) exists primarily as possibility and meaning. The aspect of our rationality – our legacy from Enlightenment thinking – that is most important for us is not the cold, detached, logical aspect of our human consciousness, but rather the evaluative aspect by which we can discern and judge, by many lights, the meaning and value of that which we have taken up and that to which we have given ourselves over. The moral dimension of life becomes more salient because the moral folds seamlessly into the agentic. In the positivist rational worldview, the moral requires its own set of rational and epistemological commitments, residing apart from, and in addition to, the flow of agentic living. And, thus, the moral dimensions of life are dependent upon the rational dimensions of life. In such a view, one can suspend issues of the morality of life pending definitive rational judgments about “objective” morality itself even as one’s real life, of necessity, proceeds within a moral landscape too often “fogged in” by rational uncertainty, awaiting the rational certainty that has eluded us now for centuries. This problem is at the heart of the “crisis” literature of the mid-20th century as we have described it above.

Agency, understood as the continuous taking up of the world and the giving of oneself over to the world in evaluative ways, is not to be understood as a mere attribute of the modern/postmodern Enlightenment-inspired, will imposing self. Actually, it is the other way round. Deliberative choosing and will imposing are ways of taking up the world and giving oneself over to it. Thus, the rational ego is the product of and not the source of truly agentic being-in-the-world. An astute interlocutor will no doubt observe at this point that any act of *taking up* or *giving ourselves over* can be thought of as a choice, made by a powerful rational mind as an act of free will. This is true enough. It *can* be thought of that way and agentic beings are certainly capable of acting and choosing that way. Indeed, the temptation to actually see it that way, dismissing what we have been saying about an alternative view of agency in the context of the sheer weight of the Modern rationalist tradition, might seem almost irresistible to a mind imbued with and trained in the Enlightenment thought. The problem is that agency as an act of deliberative free choice, such as an Enlightenment ego might make, is *not supposed to* end in an infinite regress – but, as we have seen, it does anyway, as we argued above. Agentive acts as conceived within the Enlightenment perspective are supposed to be self-defining and self-contained, consisting of simple stages start to finish – situation, deliberation, selection of an alternative, decision, action, and end of story. However, the implicit and necessary deliberation, selection, and decision about *reasons* for any decision to act presents another cognitive cycle of exactly the same sort as the decision to act itself (because the decision to give nontrivial credence to any reason is itself, indisputably, also an act of choice). In the end, then, every definitive answer as to how or why a particular decision to act was freely made will be question-begging, needing to invoke

or presume a prior deliberation–action cycle of exactly the same sort as the original one it is supposed to explain. However, in a rationalist-conceived universe, explanations of important things such as agentic actions are not supposed to end up that way – that is, invoking a prior process as complex and almost identical to the one they are supposed to explain. In contrast, agentic acts understood as freely taking up into the self or giving oneself over to ideas and possibilities are *supposed to* entail an infinite regress because our agency is, as our life is, constant and ubiquitous, influencing and being influenced by both prior and anticipated future “taking up” and “giving over.” Life itself is a constant doing, undoing, and redoing – in the sense of being open-ended and thus agentic all the time. And, thus, one’s past and one’s future are as fluid and remediable as one’s present evaluative taking on and giving over. For human beings, it is agency all the time and all the way down. The reality of agentic action is in the very hermeneutic circularity – or spiral trajectory – of life: what’s done is done and can always be undone (or redone) for any or all of a potentially very large number of reasons which can always be taken up (or put down) and to which we might give ourselves over (or hold ourselves back).

All of this is not to say that human agency, properly understood, ends up in a chaos of random reasons and impulses that would obviate any predictive power, as has long been feared in the social sciences. On the contrary, the lifeworld in which agency lives and unfolds is not chaotic. There is no documented human drive or even proclivity toward chaos. Chaos precludes reasons and thereby destroys meaningful agency. What does become apparent upon careful analysis of human agency is that genuine understanding of the behavior of human agents will be available only from what Rychlak (1988) has described as an “introspective theoretical perspective.” This is to say that sense must be made of a person’s agentic world from the perspective of the particular agent him- or herself, rather than from an “extraspective theoretical perspective,” based on theoretical assumptions developed and applied generically and emphasizing constructs, abstractions, forces, and meat and chemical. It is not to say, however, that there can be no prediction of behavior. There may very well be consistent patterns or reasons and actions across persons, just as there are certainly patterns of consequences for behaviors. Rather, the consistency and predictability of behavior are based on the common givens and constraints and conditions of our humanity, including commonalities across persons in social and environmental realities. So, agency, as the central manifestation of our common human ontology, will also manifest itself in various commonalities of acting, living, believing, and feeling. It should be apparent in this regard that agentic living always works so much better, operating with greater breadth and depth of possibility, in the context of a reality in which there really is truth – most helpfully understood, perhaps, as the knowledge of things as they really are in their unfolding openness and meaningful possibilities (see, e.g., Heidegger, 1977). It should also be apparent that human agency works not at all in the chaos that would infuse any post-truth world such as is on offer in the currently intellectual milieu

(Gantt and Williams, in press). Agency requires a source of truth and would be impotent, meaningless, and purposeless, without it (Williams, 1994).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON AGENCY AS TAKING UP AND GIVING OVER

The first section of this paper sketched out the predicament of the contemporary Western intellectual tradition, standing as we do on that ground where one finished form of rationalism, capped off by the German idealism descended from Hegel, met another finished form of rationalism, and capped off by the positivism descended from Comte. The result has been the creation of a “disenchanted” world (Taylor, 2007), a world where explanations of ourselves and our world are offered in terms of powerful, unseen, and immanent – that is, constituted by and constitutive of the inevitable nature of things – abstractions and structures that have real causal power in human affairs but which are discernible only to an educated intelligentsia functioning as a sort of “supermind” capable of apprehending and revealing these unseen abstractions, their manifestations, and the phenomena they produce. The influence of positivism in this intellectual activity can most clearly be seen in scientism (Sorell, 1991; Stenmark, 2001; Williams and Robinson, 2015; Gantt and Williams, 2018). In a similar vein, though not widely acknowledged, the impact of various postmodern movements can most clearly be seen in any number of (socially constructed) structures that are responsible for human behavior in any number of settings. While these movements hesitate to invoke Newtonian-style efficient causes, they still often propose the existence of certain structures and abstractions that are clearly active in the human world and move us to act, think, and feel in certain ways and serve as causal explanations for human phenomena of various sorts.

We have further argued that lost in this philosophical confluence is the flesh-and-blood human moral agent. The German philosopher, Wilhelm Dilthey (1989), recognized the inadequacy of rationalist accounts of human action in terms closely related to the argument we are making here: “No real blood flows in the veins of the knowing subject constructed by Locke, Hume, and Kant, but rather the diluted extract of reason as a mere activity of thought” (p. 50). Similarly, Dilthey’s colleague William Stern trenchantly remarked:

Of all the ways of thinking, the mathematical way is the most impersonal. The application of amount and number to personal being and doing seems to signify the reduction [of the person] to an entity merely comparable [to other entities], to a mere instance of a stiff lawfulness, in short, to a thing. It is a fact that in virtually every instance where mathematical methods – measurement, experiment, statistics – have been applied to personal life and experience as well as to cultural and social manifestations of personal communities, such a depersonalization has been the consequence. What is truly personal – the wholeness and individual

specialness, the inner origin and goal-striving nature of doing – has been submerged, and persons have been made over into mere pieces of the measurable and countable larger world (cited in Lamiell, 2009, pp. 189–190).

Furthermore, in addition to the de-personalization entailed by Enlightenment-inspired rationalist accounts, the models of agency rooted in these traditions simply do not work because they inevitably end in an infinite regress of causes and reasons. The positivist tradition has not really bothered to construct theories of agency because agency cannot really exist within the causal world presumed by materialist naturalism or by the constructs, forces, structures, and laws put forth in rationalist, most post-rationalist, and structuralist accounts of any or all human actions. Post-Hegel rationalist traditions have not bothered to construct theories of agency either since agency is subsumed by the inevitability of the onward sweep of objective systemic, all-inclusive reality. Unfortunately, however, if there is no place for agency in our self-understanding, then there is no space or possibility for genuine meaning, purpose, morality, or intimacy in the human world either (Martin et al., 2003; Williams, 2005, 2017; Gantt and Williams, 2014). Indeed, in a purely naturalistic world of the sort asserted in rationalist, structuralist, and positivist accounts, there is no space even for reason itself (Lewis, 2001; Plantinga, 2011).

Postmodern positions that have found their way into the human sciences have been somewhat ambivalent about human agency. On the one hand, postmodern thinkers typically want to reject naturalist explanations of our humanity and our behavior because such perspectives clearly partake of the mistakes and excesses of Enlightenment (modernist) rationalism, including positivism and scientism, and thus risk losing track of our humanity itself. However, on the other hand, most postmodern positions, at least within the social sciences, try to insert something into that space in modernist explanatory projects traditionally occupied by laws, forces, constructs, and material biological substances – or even reason itself. Postmodernist scholars of human beings must after all account for the orderliness and structured nature of the world. For a brief period of time,

structuralism, as Hayek suggested, seemed like a good compromise between rationalist scientism and chaos. However, over time, structuralism has fallen out of vogue among many postmodernists, and its most common replacement has been “discourse” or “discourse communities” (McHale, 2015). With such a move, though, we must still render an account of the nature, origin, and ontological status of “discourse” itself, as well as the effects of discourse and discourse communities upon real persons – individuals and groups. Seeking to avoid the pitfalls of proposing the powerful, individual rational ego as the source of human identity and action, many if not most postmodern thinkers are left endowing language, discourse, and community with some subtle but powerful and unseen influence (analogous to a “force”) on human thought, aspiration, and action. These forces, when discourse about them needs a name, and in instances of applied social science, as perhaps in social activism, are usually referred to as some sort of “_____ism” (e.g., racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, colonialism, heterosexism, classism). These “-isms,” we contend, often end up being very much like the structures and constructs Hayek originally warned us about and the structures and forces that pull “postmoderns” closer and closer to the mainstream of contemporary modernism of the Enlightenment of the Hegelian sort.⁴ The arguments presented in this essay comprise, in essence, a prolegomenon for the restoration of genuine human agency in the experience of our humanity and in our accounts of what it means to be a human being so that the best of what is in us as the sort of beings we are can truly unfold.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

RW was the primary author on this manuscript. EG was invited to make substantial contributions to the original rough draft by expanding and revising parts of the analysis, while linking key arguments up with relevant current literature. LF was brought in to provide further revisions aimed at increasing the clarity and readability of the manuscript. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

⁴Adequately detailed support for these arguments will need to await another forum.

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Globalisation, Agency, Theory: A Critical Analysis of Marxism in Light of Brexit

<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/01/05/globalisation-agency-theory-a-critical-analysis-of-marxism-in-light-of-brexit/>

JOHANNA SIEBERT, JAN 5 2019

Introduction

There has long been a vivid debate about the growing interconnection of the world into a global system of interaction referred to as globalisation.[1] Two centuries ago, Marx and Engels postulated that the global expansion of capitalism would lead to a “universal interdependence of nations”[2] through which national differences become homogenised under a ruling bourgeoisie that “creates a world after its own image.”[3] The Marxist debate on globalisation and its effect on the nation-state has come a long way since, and yet, it still centres around the question of whether growing economic interconnectedness automatically leads to a transnationalising process that gradually surpasses the nation-state, or whether instead, the fragmented character of the nation-state system is an inherent feature of capitalist modernity.[4]

This paper sets out to critically review these two main strands of the Marxist globalisation debate. The structure of this essay is as follows. Firstly, part one introduces Robinson’s theory of a global capitalist state formation and the decline of inter-state rivalry, which, to some extent, resembles Marx and Engels’ argument above. However, the essay argues that inter-societal fragmentation undoubtedly persists in the contemporary age of globalisation, which has only recently been illustrated with the British decision to exit from the European Union (Brexit). The second part then introduces the theory of ‘new imperialism’ advanced by Callinicos, who seeks to explain the persistence of geopolitical competition. Here, the essay supports the argument that a Marxist theory of the relationship between capitalism and the inter-state system must be able to take account of the centrifugal pulls of geopolitics, which demands the integration of the international as a determining feature in the analysis. However, in the following, it is argued that it is not enough to simply add the international as an external determinacy, as suggested by Callinicos.[5] Rather, in order to make sense of the complex socio-economic reality that shapes historically situated actors’ decision-making, the international must be re-integrated into an analysis of the social, as proposed by the theory of uneven and combined development (U&CD).[6] The third and last section of the essay is then applying this prior established critique to a case study of Brexit, in order to show that, while the theory of new imperialism enables the conceptualisation of the EU as an imperialist project in which national interests are at play, Callinicos’ ‘realist moment’ is unable to explain the complex social dynamics involved Britain’s decision to leave the EU.

Beyond the Inter-state System?

The Transnational State

In their portrayal of a world in which sovereign nation states give way to a single global system ruled by capitalism, Hardt and Negri’s understanding of Empire as ‘imperial postmodernity,’[7] as well as William Robinson’s account of the transnational state (TNS) can be described as a “Marxist version of the theories of globalization”.[8] Coming from an orthodox Marxist background, Robinson uses the classical social theory of historical materialism as a tool to theorise transformational processes of the current capitalist age and to draw out their implications for the international.[9] According to him, economic globalisation is gradually transplanting political decision-making from the national to the global level, resulting in the formation of a TNS, which operates in the name of a newly emergent

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transnational capitalist class (TNCC). The consequence of this development is the “‘deterritorialization’ of the relationship of capital to the state”[10] and the eclipse of national interest and inter-state rivalry.[11]

Robinson’s argument is best summarised by firstly outlining a materialist conception of historical change, before mapping out the author’s understanding of globalisation, the state and changing class relations. According to the concept of historical materialism, social change is driven by economic development.[12] Karl Marx has argued that changes in the means of production (e.g. due to technological innovation) create a tension with previously established relations of production that now constitute an obstacle to the newly established productive capacity.[13] The subsequent adjustment in the relations of production following from this tension then lead to a wider process of societal transformation. Thus, developments in the economic base are regarded as initiators of change in the institutional superstructure that encompasses the political establishment of the given society.[14]

Globalisation, so Robinson, represents such a change in the capitalist base. Capital is increasingly mobile across the globe and production processes are transnationalised, “unifying the world into a single mode of production”. [15] However, in contrast to many globalists, he regards this not as a new phenomenon but an ongoing process of capitalist expansion, gradually leading to the “total commodification or ‘marketization’ of social life worldwide.”[16] Subsequently, there is a growing disjuncture between the transnationalisation of economic processes and the hitherto existing relations of production institutionalised in the historically specific form of the territorial nation-state.[17]

In this, Robinson frames the state as the institutional embodiment of the respective class relations around a particular mode of production,[18] thereby regarding the political and the economic to be two “distinct moments of the same [capitalist] totality”. [19] Subsequently, the state does not possess an independent logic and is therefore not inherently territorial or national in character but may vary in its form across history.[20] Locating the origins of the territorial nation-state in early capitalist relations of production, Robinson draws the conclusion that economic globalisation is inevitably undermining the nation-state’s autonomy and heralding a new era of ‘deterritorialised’ politics. [21]

For Robinson, the key lies in the transformation of class relations. Prior to globalisation, class struggles centred around gaining control over the state’s regulatory capacities in order to take hold of surplus shares (e.g. in the form of the welfare state).[22] With economic transnationalisation however, production processes are shifted to the realm of the international, thereby surpassing the constraints that states impose on them.[23] According to Robinson this exposes the limits of the national state, whose policies are increasingly undermined by the rise of transnational institutions, in which new global class relations are manifested, polarising the world into denationalised classes of capitalists and workers.[24] Subsequently, global capitalists have significantly more power over and less responsibility for labour and social reproduction, which Robinson sees evidenced in deteriorating working conditions.[25] Under the hegemonic TNCC, national states no longer operate in the name of the national interest but are gradually incorporated into a larger framework of a TNS, whose sole purpose is to advance the bourgeois interests.[26] Hence, being part of the wider structure of the TNS, national states will no longer be in geopolitical competition with each other.

Returning to a Geopolitical Reality

However, conflicts over territory continue to appear in news headlines and extensive global interconnectedness seems to be complemented by persistent geopolitical competition among nation-states. The world has seen the emergence of a dense network of supra-national political and economic forums, such as the IMF, UN, WTO, G8 and OECD.[27] Policy-making and economic regulation is increasingly undertaken at an international level, compromising the policy-choices available to national governments, which are dependent on cooperation with other institutions in order to realise their domestic agendas.[28] And yet, one would have to live in an idealised parallel world to argue that geopolitics and national interest have been relegated to history with the end of the Cold War or the turn of the century. Eurasia has been described as “decisive geopolitical chessboard”[29] on which global and regional powers compete for economic and military dominance over energy resources in a post-cold war world. Both the war in Kosovo and Afghanistan can be framed as geo-strategic attempts by the US to control the regional flow of oil and thereby advance her interests over those of rising China and Russia.[30] More recent geopolitical developments have

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seen an increasingly assertive China making territory claims in the South China Sea and thereby contributing to the subsequent militarisation of the region.[31] The Russian annexation of the Crimean peninsula in 2014, whether undertaken for expansionist or defensive reasons,[32] is certainly Europe's most memorable concretisation of geopolitical rivalry. And lastly, the ongoing fighting in Syria serves as a good example. Arguably, the conflict has been transformed into a proxy war, in which predominantly Western countries and Russia struggle to advance their national interests by competing for strategic political and economic alliances with Arab countries.[33]

Clearly, Robinson's theory of the TNS seems to be stripped off this geopolitical reality, which cannot be said to follow his teleological account of the declining nation-state. In a sense then, it is what Benno Teschke calls a 'supra-historical abstraction, based on logical deductions untampered by historical experience.'[34] Starting from the historical materialist conception of the state in its single form, Robinson's theory of the TNS neglects the distinctiveness of the international, thereby succumbing to economic reductionism,[35] which explains his inability to account for the endurance of inter-state rivalry.

So why is it then that geopolitical competition persists in a post-cold war era of unprecedented economic interconnectedness?

The Intersecting Logics of Territory and Capital

New Imperialism

Callinicos and Harvey set out to answer precisely this question by proposing the concept of 'new imperialism', which is a reformulated version of earlier Marxist theories of capitalist imperialism.[36] They both identify three imperial blocs of political and capitalist power – the US, Western Europe and East Asia – which, although significant power differentials exist, engage in geopolitical struggles with each other, as well as with other states, such as Russia and China.[37] Contrary to Robinson, Callinicos therefore argues that despite international economic integration, the world continues to be shaped by conflicts over security, territory, resources and influence, which constitute "the main forms of interaction among units of the state system".[38] This broad definition of geopolitical competition allows Callinicos to reconceptualise the central issue of his paper. Arguing that few Marxists have looked beyond the nation-state in its singular form and have attempted to theorise the political and territorial multiplicity of the international, Callinicos's theory centres around the question of whether there is a "structural cause for the existence of a plurality of states under capitalism".[39]

In contrast to Robinson, Callinicos locates the origins of the inter-state system in pre-capitalist relations of production, where surplus appropriation took place in the form of territorial expansion.[40] Drawing on Brenner's idea of the 'rules of reproduction' that shape the behaviour of actors within a particular system of production,[41] Callinicos regards state-building to be an outcome of feudal strategies of surplus appropriation, whereby political organisation was increasingly necessary in order for lords to retain control over large territories.[42] Within this emergent system of absolutist states, capitalist relations of production proved to be a comparative advantage in territorial disputes, which eventually lead to the spread of capitalism across Europe.[43] According to this historical conceptualisation, capitalism and the inter-state system are not causally related, but follow independent logics. From this, Callinicos concludes that there is a "a realist moment in any Marxist analysis of international relations",[44] in order to account for the "spontaneous ideology of state managers".[45]

However, applying the method of 'non-deductive concretization' enables Callinicos to acknowledge the causal "determinacy of the geopolitical while denying it substantive autonomy".[46] Modern imperialism, he argues, must be understood as the subsumption of "interstate competition under that between capitals".[47] He locates this "transformation in the nature of competition"[48] in the 19th-century when economic power was increasingly concentrated in national monopolies, due to the industrialisation of warfare.[49] Thus, while avoiding the pitfalls of reductionism, Callinicos nevertheless assigns capitalist competition explanatory primacy, regarding territorial competition as but "one amongst many determinations of the capitalist mode of production".[50] Although, or rather because they are following distinctive rationalities, state managers and capitalists are subsequently assumed to be drawn into an alliance.[51]

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Having conceptualised the relationship between capitalism and the inter-state system, Callinicos finally turns to explain the persistence of international plurality.[52] The reason he identifies, lies in capitalism's inherent tendency to develop unevenly.[53] Drawing on Lenin, he argues that competition for surplus-appropriation constantly alters global power relations, thereby giving rise to conflicting interests among states, which in turn prevents any attempts of permanent integration.[54]

A 'Realist Moment' or Inter-societal Multiplicity?

Callinicos' argument seems well suited to make sense of the contemporary developments of economic globalisation alongside the persistence of geopolitical competition in international relations. Nevertheless, it has been widely criticised and not least for its high level of abstraction. However, keeping in mind the limits of this essay, the critique will be restricted to Callinicos' proposal of a necessary 'realist moment' in Marxist IR. While avoiding the pitfalls of reductionism, Callinicos has given in to reifying Realism through his incorporation of the international "as a theoretical externality".[55] When introducing the 'realist moment,' Callinicos assigns the international a structural determinacy whose source cannot be explained by Marxist theories and must therefore be found elsewhere, namely in the theory of Realism.[56] In doing so, he relies on Realism's structural and ahistorical explanation of complex social processes, by ascribing "one generic rationality of permanent politico-territorial (imperial) accumulation to state managers".[57] Consequently, he neglects to take into account the complex and historically specific context in which capitalists and state actors are situated and the various factors that shape their actions and interests.

In his letter exchange with Callinicos, Justin Rosenberg argues that the theory of U&CD precisely provides the necessary tool with which to avoid both reductionism and reification when theorising the international.[58] According to him, societal and geopolitical plurality pre-existed feudalism and cannot be derived from pre-capitalist modes of production.[59] Instead, he regards it a trans-historical phenomenon that fundamentally shapes social reality and historical development, by adding an interactive and multilinear dimension to it.[60] Not only is capitalism, but social development in general, inherently *uneven* in terms of the variations in the characteristics of different social units, and *combined*, meaning that local processes of development are necessarily shaped by external influences.[61] Employing the theory of U&CD, thus enables the 'reintegration' of the international into an account of the social, rather than to conceptualise it as independent logic.[62] While being a general theory and in this sense not dissimilar from Realism,[63] U&CD has the advantage of leaving the causal properties of social processes unspecified,[64] which allows for the incorporation of classical social theories and a much needed agency-centred approach that takes account of the spatio-temporal context in which historical actors are situated.

Agency and the International in 2016

Having outlined two of the major strands of the Marxist debate on the inter-state system, this final part of the essay is now moving beyond a purely theoretical endeavour to apply some of the arguments and their critiques to a case study of the 2016 Brexit referendum. According to Callinicos, the British decision to leave the EU can be explained by the conjuncture of the 2007-8 financial crisis and the erosion of US dominance, resulting from the geopolitical challenge posed by an increasingly assertive Russia and China.[65] His theory of new imperialism enables the conceptualisation of the EU as an imperial project that, although dependent on the US for military cooperation, is noticeably dominated by the national interests of its leading member states, which would individually be unable to pursue imperial agendas.[66]

Following his understanding of modern imperialism as the subsumption of geopolitical competition under that of capital, Callinicos assumes that economic and political actors enter an alliance. Yet, an agency-based analysis of the Brexit referendum draws a different story of complex negotiations and class conflict, a story that is necessary in order to move beyond the narrow realist account of geopolitics.[67] The case of Brexit shows how assigning "one generic rationality"[68] to either capitalists or state actors distorts the historically specific socio-economic reality that shapes their decision-making.

Far from being a homogenous entity, the EU is an arena of contestation and struggle over policies.[69] Thompson argues that Britain has long had an ambivalent relationship with the EU.[70] On the one hand, integration into the

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European community served as a means of propelling the City of London to its position as the world's leading financial centre in euro and dollar denominated business.[71] On the other hand, with the financial crisis and the subsequent move towards more regulatory policies, the EU posed a serious risk to the City's financial interests and threatened to marginalise its offshore business.[72] The proposal to hold a referendum on Britain's EU membership, made by the British Prime Minister David Cameron, can subsequently be regarded as a strategic "attempt to reconstruct British influence in the Union [...] by making a credible threat to the other EU states to leave the European Union"[73] in order to defend the City's financial interests by securing an opt-out of the new EU rules. However, governmental support for the City waned with the growing popularity of UKIP and the politicisation of the freedom of movement of labour that reoriented the Conservative's agenda towards issues of immigration in the run up to the general elections.[74] With his referendum promise, Cameron had effectively made the City's financial interests subject to a process of democratic decision-making, in which the City lacked political influence.[75] The eventual decision to leave the EU was a dramatic setback for Britain's financial sector and posed the serious risk of eroding London's offshore euro position by jeopardising its access to the Single European Market.[76] Subsequently, capitalist and political interests cannot simply be assumed to be aligned at all times, strictly following the structural logics of capital. In the case of the British referendum, the internationalisation of the economy was contested and politicised by the public, which ultimately limited the government's ability and eagerness to defend the City's interests.[77]

However, while having introduced some of the different issues at stake in the run up to the referendum, this essay has yet to make sense of its result. Why this sudden upsurge of Euroscepticism? Callinicos explains both the British referendum and the election of US President Donald Trump in 2016 as "voter revolts", [78] resulting from the socio-economic deterioration of living standards, which in turn were caused by the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent recession.[79] Such crises, so Callinicos, are inherent to the competitive accumulation of surplus under capitalism, which displays a tendency to uneven and combined development that gives rise to unequal power relations. Brexit is thus an attempt to "displace the costs of [the] economic crisis" [80] onto others.

However, by incorporating the international as external determinacy, Callinicos' explanation remains descriptive and unable to concretise the complex interaction of different factors involved in shaping the outcome of the referendum. Recently, Boyle and Rosenberg [81] have suggested what the inclusion of the inter-societal fragmentation as a determining factor in an analysis of the Brexit vote may look like. Conceptualising the referendum itself as uneven and combined development, they show how the national backlash against a neoliberal establishment was the product of growing income disparities that were merely aggravated by the financial crisis but ultimately caused by the rise of China and its growing share in manufacturing exports, leading to job losses in Britain and America.[82] Certainly, this is but one in many ways of how the international and its inherent societal plurality may feature as a causal dimension in an analysis of the Brexit vote. However, the point is that, contrary to Realism's rigid account of the international, the theory of U&CD does not rule out alternative non-structural and agency-based interpretations but allows for the international to be integrated as a causal determinacy into an analysis of the social.

Conclusion

In conclusion it can therefore be said that a Marxist account of the relationship between capitalism and the inter-state system must acknowledge the continuous existence of geopolitical competition, despite the increasing degree of economic and financial integration. In order to do so, the international must be acknowledged as a determining feature in the analysis and cannot be derived from the logic of capital. Yet, such an incorporation of the international must be careful not to reduce complex processes of decision-making to a structural, trans-historical explanation of Realism. Finally, it is suggested that the theory of U&CD provides a tool to recognise the distinctiveness of the international, while at the same time allowing for the necessary attentiveness to historical agency. This argument has been constructed in three main steps, of which the third and final part was aimed at re-grounding the highly abstracted arguments in a case study of Brexit in order to illustrate the relevance of this debate for understanding contemporary socio-economic events.

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Written by: Johanna Siebert
Written at: University of Sussex
Written for: Fabio Scarpello
Date written: 05/2018

Agency

The capacity to make intentional choices and to understand that you have such a capacity. With agency, you see yourself as a contributor and an agent of change in the world surrounding you.

A person *with* agency may say:

"I set my own goals and work hard to achieve them."

"I evaluate my own performances and make adjustments to perform better."

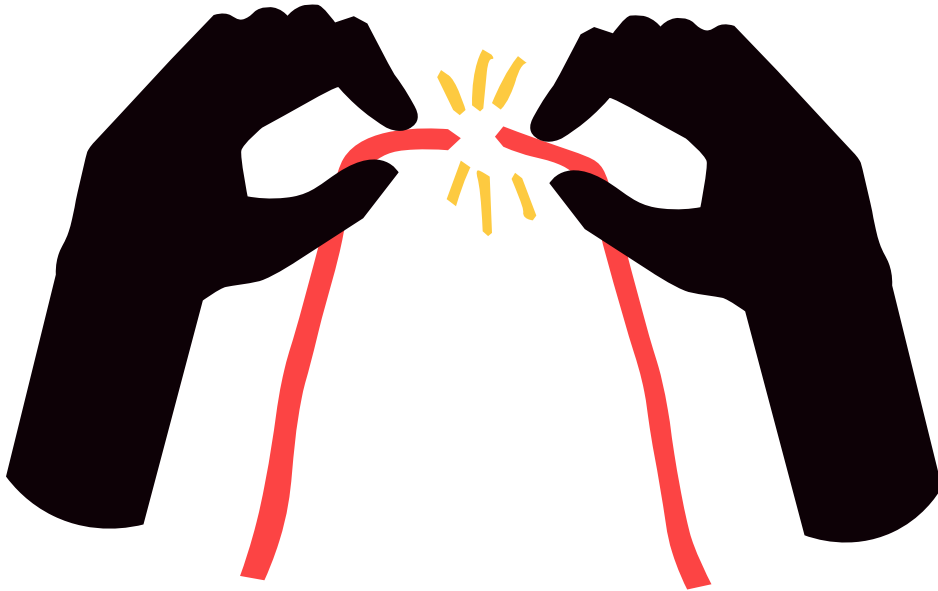
"I find opportunities to bring my voice and style to make a positive contribution to others."

A person *without* agency may say:

"I have done only what teachers have asked me to do."

Troubleshooting

A capacity to persist and to find solutions. If a project is not progressing as expected, you can use different strategies to diagnose and fix the problem. Not giving up requires patience, resilience, and resourcefulness as well as an investment in what you are working on.



A person who troubleshoots may say:

"I do not give up when something worked differently from what I expected."

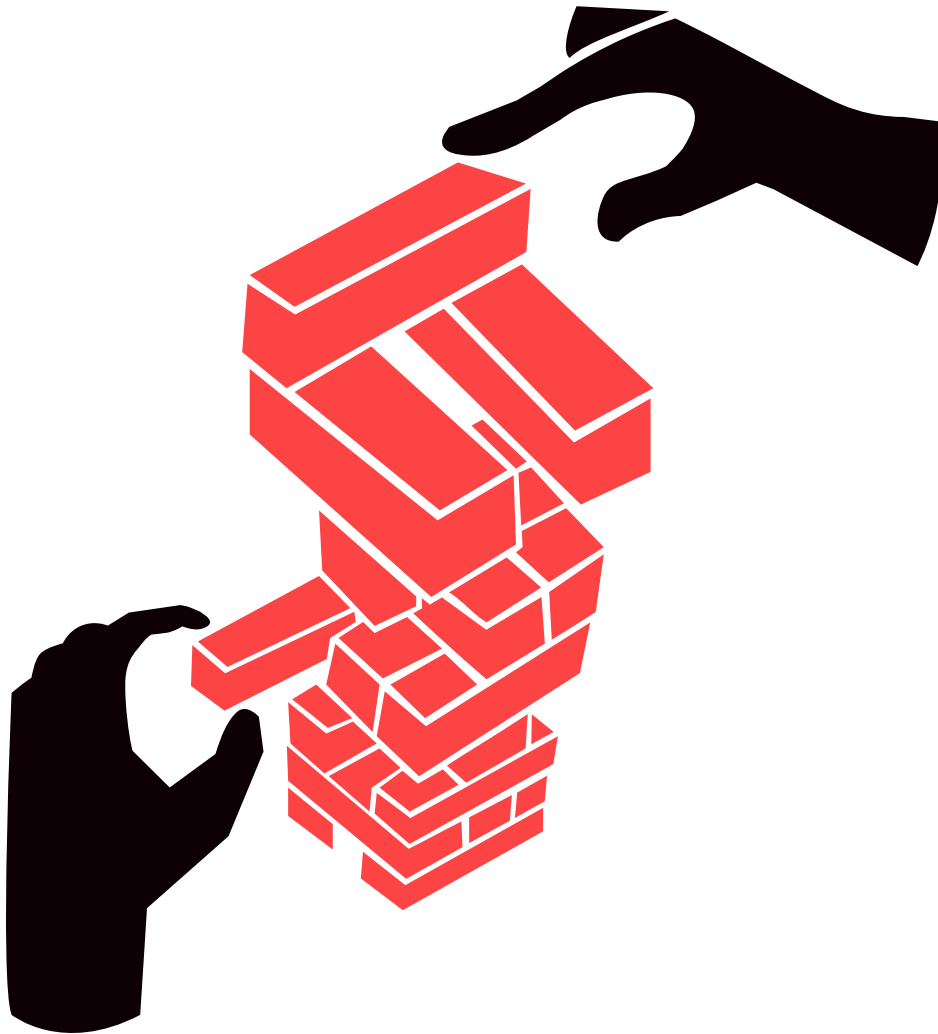
"I break down the problem and find reasons why this unexpectedly happened"

A person *who does not* troubleshoot may say:

"This does not work. I cannot do this anymore."

Productive Risk-taking

To try an idea or a solution beyond your comfort zone. Even when an action ends in an unexpected way, you can identify lessons learned and connect it to the next iteration or future projects.



A person *who takes* productive risks may say:

"I tinker with a variety of materials rather than only those I have used before."

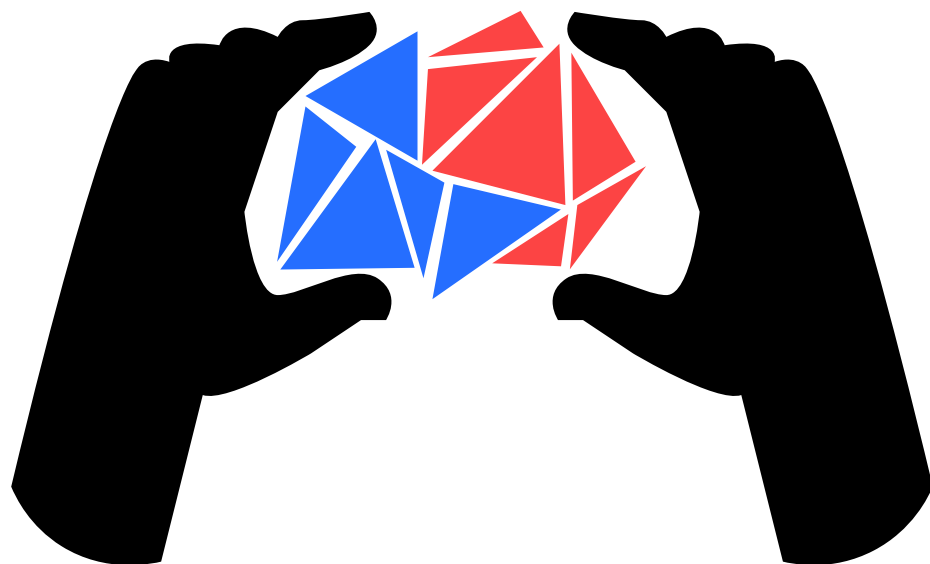
"I set a stretch goal that is beyond what I have tried before."

"I build a hypothesis and experiment to test it, even though it may fail."

A person *who does not take* productive risks may say:

"I'm afraid to try that because I'm not familiar with it."

Bridging Knowledge



A capacity to use knowledge from your lived experiences at home, community, and culture as well as from out-of-school experiences and other subject areas to benefit the project you are working on. You may draw connections between the themes and ideas of the project and past experiences or future challenges.

A person who bridges knowledge may say:

"I use knowledge and experiences that I learned in other subjects or activities at school for my work."

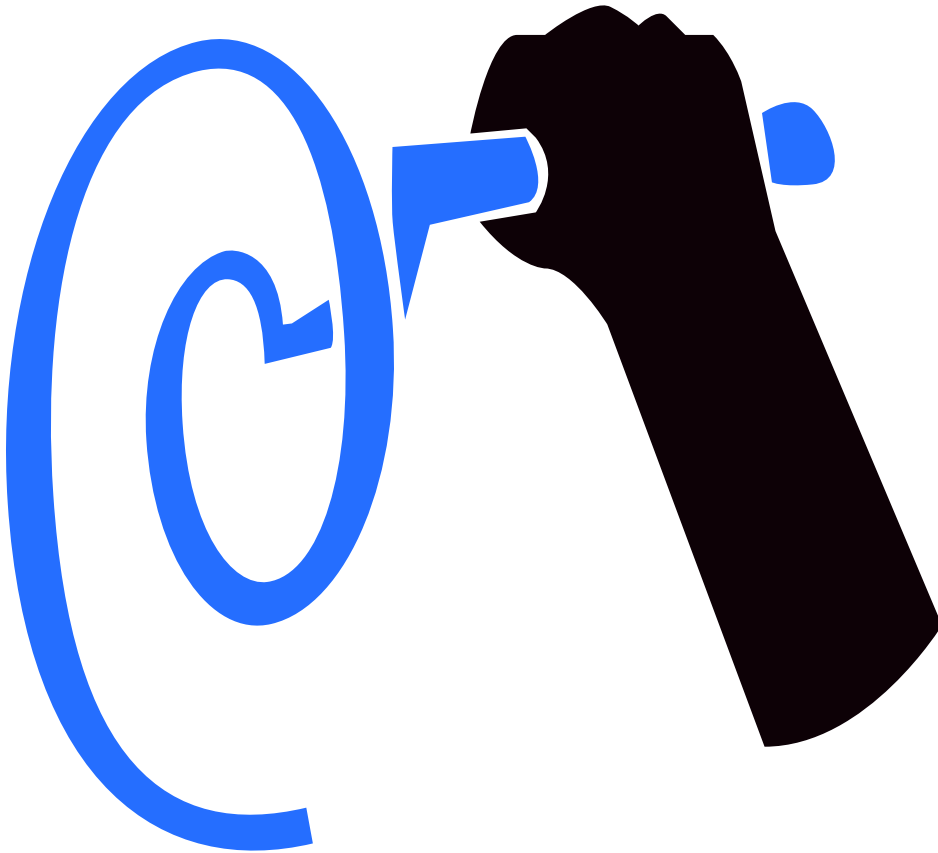
"I bring in my experiences outside school, in my family, and community by connecting them to what I do in a classroom."

A person who does not bridge knowledge may say:

"I don't see how this is meaningful for my own life."

Design Process

A way to approach challenges by brainstorming, prototyping, testing, and iterating. Designers are aware of the many steps to reach a solution and deliberately work on each step to improve a design.



A person who *uses* a design process may say:

"I carefully study and understand the challenges, and brainstorm solutions to address it."

"I break down the idea into steps and make progress one step at a time."

"I get feedback and iterate the design based on the feedback."

A person who *does not use* a design process may say:

"I created this idea but I don't know how to test if this works."

Content Knowledge



You may develop stronger conceptual understanding, be able to accurately understand why this do or do not work, or be able to use materials in safe and effective ways.

A person who *is building* content knowledge may say:

"I can select the right tools, frameworks, or formulas that help me solve a challenge I am facing."

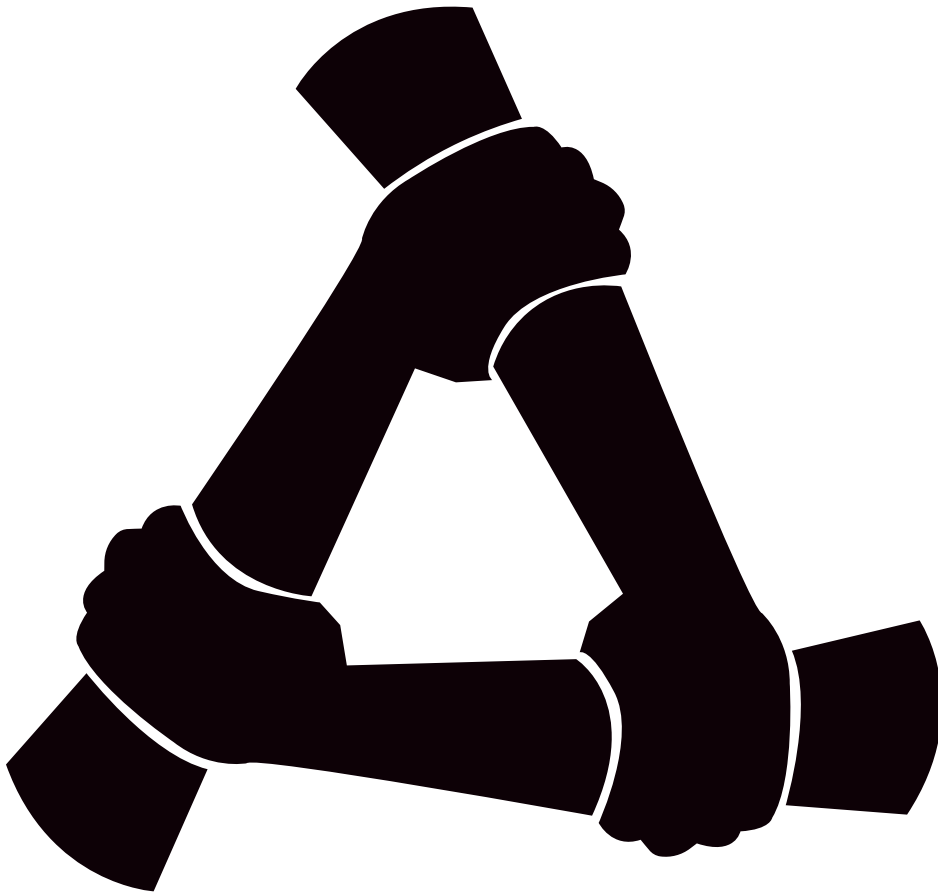
"I can safely and effectively use the tools, frameworks, formulas to achieve my own goal."

A person who *is not building* content knowledge may say:

"My project worked but don't know why it worked."

Social Scaffolding

The capacity to support and be supported by others by asking for help, giving feedback, sharing tips and tricks, or building on and remixing each other's work, even if you are working on different projects.



A person who *engages* in social scaffolding may say:

"I openly ask for help when I am stuck."

"I share tips and tricks that I found to help others."

"I give constructive feedback to others."

"I recognize values in other people's ideas and build off of them by remixing."

A person who *does not engage* in social scaffolding may say:

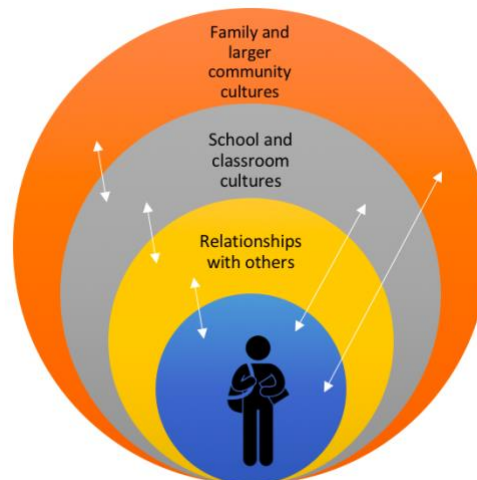
"I don't need anybody's help. I can do everything on my own."

AGENCY

Overview

Agency is a person's capacity and propensity to formulate intentions and take initiative to achieve them; these intentions are based on sense of purpose, individual values, goals, and needs. Ideally, agency has positive goals for the individual and reflects important prosocial values. Agency is contingent upon the person's mindset and skills and his or her interactions with the environment.ⁱ

Children and youth who are able to enact their agency are actively involved in making their experiences, better able to adapt to various environments, use their creativity to overcome obstacles and achieve their desired outcomes.^{ii,iii}



Mindsets & Skills That Undergird Agency	Environmental Factors that Support Agency
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autonomy • Self-efficacy • Reflection • Self-regulation • Growth mindset • Sense of purpose • Self-awareness (one's thoughts, identity values, and goals) • Social awareness (community's values, goals, and needs) • Awareness of resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships with others, such as teachers and peers • School and classroom cultures that provides opportunities for students to express thoughts, ideas, and opinions and respects them as "drivers" in their own learning • Family and larger community cultures that are aligned in supporting and encouraging an individual's sense of agency • Access to resources and social supports that help make goals attainable
<p><i>Agency requires individuals to integrate a wide range of mindsets and skills that empower them to seek and take initiative.</i></p>	<p><i>An environment that supports agency is conducive to self-directed decision-making and is critical to allow the expression of a person's agency.</i></p>

FOUR FACTORS THAT ENABLE STUDENTS TO EXPRESS THEIR AGENCY^{iv}:

1. Having access to options for different, but equally appealing, goals.
2. Having an understanding of actual and expected rewards to help motivate them towards achieving the goal. (Motivation can include sense of belonging, sense of competence, and sense of power or influence.)
3. Having the strategies needed to act on a plan, in pursuit of a goal.
4. Having the resources available to accomplish one's goal.

AGENCY ACROSS THE DEVELOPMENTAL SPECTRUM

Estimated Age group	Early childhood (ages 2-3)	Preschool (ages 3-6)	Middle to Late Childhood (ages 6-11)	Early adolescence (ages 12-14)	Late adolescence (ages 14-18)	Young Adulthood (ages 19-40)
Psychosocial stage in relation to agency	Children learn to exercise their will by making choices based on individual preference.	Children learn about purpose and their ability to initiate activities with others and carry out plans.	Children learn to be competent and effective at activities valued by others.	Adolescents look inward to understand their own sense of self and their role as a group member , while working to find a balance between the two.	Adolescents work to develop an understanding of themselves , their values and goals as they evaluate where they might want to go in adulthood.	Young adults work to form strong, loving relationships with others

PROMISING PRACTICES FOR PROMOTING STUDENT AGENCY

- **Student Portfolio Presentations** – Have students collect samples of their work to document their learning. Provide students the opportunity to identify goals for themselves, review and reflect on their work, and then showcase their learning at student-led conferences for parents or peers.^v
- **Feedback for growth** – Provide instructional feedback that (1) explains that you’re offering comments because you have high expectations of your students,^{vi} and (2) provides clear explanations and actionable suggestions that help students spot mistakes and clearly coaches them on how to improve.^{vii}
- **Engagement Exit Tickets** - Quickly gauge your students’ perspectives after a lesson with an exit ticket by asking them how much they agree on one of the statements from this Agentic Engagement Scale.^{viii} Discuss any trends that came up your students and identify what changes to implement to help amplify student voice in your classroom.
 - During class, I expressed my preferences and opinions.
 - During class, I asked questions.
 - I told the teacher what I liked and what I didn’t like.
 - I let my teacher know what I am interested in.
 - I offered suggestions about how to make the lesson better.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED READINGS & RESOURCES

- TransformEd’s Webinars, [“Routes to Agency,”](#) [“A Data-Informed Approach to Supporting Student Agency,”](#) and [“Promising Practices for Promoting Student Agency,”](#) [“The Intersection of Agency & Discipline”](#)
- Transcend Education, [Graduate Aims Database - Agency](#), includes example learner behaviors
- Competency Work’s [Mindsets and Student Agency](#)
- GripTape’s [Framework for Facilitating the Emergence of Learner Agency](#)
- Read more about how to [use portfolios to build student agency](#)
- Learn more about the facilitating students’ goal-setting by exploring [P21’s Pathway to Personalized Agency](#)^{ix}
- Explore Henry County Schools’ [Tools for Progress Monitoring, Goal Setting, Reflection & “WIN” Time](#)
- Next Generation Learning Challenges: [Honor Agency](#); [How Next Gen Learning Can Support Student Agency](#)
- P21’s “Agency in My Diverse Classroom”: [Part I](#), [Part II](#)
- NewTechNetwork’s Agency Rubrics for Grades [2](#), [5](#), [Middle School](#), [High School](#)

ⁱ This definition emerged from a literature review, as well as conversations with field experts. See the full references and acknowledgements for more information.

ⁱⁱ Sokol, B.W., Hammond, S.I., Kuebli, J., and Sweetman, L. (2015). The development of agency. In *Handbook of Child Psychology and Human Development, Theory and Method*

ⁱⁱⁱ Bandura, A. (2006). Toward a psychology of human agency. *Perspectives on psychological science*, 1(2), 164-180.

^{iv} Ferguson, R. F., Phillips, S. F., Rowley, J. F., & Friedlander, J. W. (2015). The Influence of Teaching Beyond Standardized Test Scores: Engagement, Mindsets, and Agency. Retrieved from *The Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University website*: <http://www.agi.harvard.edu/publications.php>.

^v Truong, G. (2016). Preparing Students for Portfolio Defense to Build Agency. Retrieved from: http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/learning_deeply/2016/08/preparing_students_for_portfolio_defense_to_build_agency.html

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^{viii} Items adapted from Reeve, J., & Tseng, C. M. (2011). Agency as a fourth aspect of students' engagement during learning activities. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 36(4), 257-267.

^{viii} Bellanca, J. (2015). Part II: Student Agency Goal Setting: A Pathway to Personalized Agency. Retrieved from P21's website: <http://www.p21.org/news-events/p21blog/1785-part-ii-student-agency-goal-setting-a-pathway-to-personalized-agency>.

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agency

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Etymology

From Medieval Latin *agentia*, from Latin *agēns* (present participle of *agere* (“to act”)), *agentis* (cognate with French *agence*, see also *agent*).

Pronunciation

- IPA^(key): /ˈeɪ.ɹ̩.dʒən.si/
- Audio (US) (file)

Noun

agency (*countable and uncountable*, plural **agencies**)

1. The capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power.

Synonyms: action, activity, operation

- **1695**, John Woodward, "(please specify the page)", in *An Essay toward a Natural History of the Earth: And Terrestrial Bodies, Especially Minerals*: [...], London: [...] Ric[hard] Wilkin [...], OCLC 1179517876 (<https://worldcat.org/oclc/1179517876>):

A few advances there are in the following papers tending to assert the superintendence and **agency** of Providence in the natural world.

- **2018**, Morris Zelditch, *Status, Power, and Legitimacy*, page 65:

Because structure in this argument means institutions— pregiven norms, values, beliefs, and practices— it is open-textured, incomplete, cannot guarantee its own applications, therefore, all behavior is action, has **agency** (Garfinkel 1964; Strauss et al. 1963).

2. (*sociology, philosophy, psychology*) The capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices.

Coordinate terms: free will, structure
*moral **agency***
*individual **agency***

- **2001**, Todd McGowan, *The Feminine "No!"*, SUNY Press, →ISBN, page 105 (https://books.google.com/books?id=K_BOEohXedgC&pg=PA105&dq=%22agency%22):

Formally, capitalism performs its fundamental gesture—reappropriation without transformation. This bears on the question of subjective **agency** because this "reappropriation without transformation" is exactly what **agency** seeks to avoid; such a process indicates, in fact, that one's **agency** has failed, that one really had no **agency** in the first place.

- **2012**, Edmund V. Sullivan, *A Critical Psychology*, Springer Science & Business Media, →ISBN, page 75 (<https://books.google.com/books?id=p5JyBgAAQBAJ&pg=PA75&dq=%22agency%22>):

Strictly speaking, at the level of personal **agency** one could say that power is a condition where one is "enabled." I would contend that this is a condition of personal **agency**.

- **2013**, Andy Clark; Julian Kiverstein; Tillmann Vierkant, *Decomposing the Will*, Oxford University Press, →ISBN, page 112 (<https://books.google.com/books?id=zu9oAgAAQBAJ&pg=PA112&dq=%22agency%22>):

The feeling of being in control of one's body should involve the sense of body-ownership, plus an additional sense of **agency**.

3. A medium through which power is exerted or an end is achieved.

Synonyms: instrumentality, means

4. The office or function of an agent; also, the relationship between a principal and that person's agent.

*authority of **agency***

5. An establishment engaged in doing business for another; also, the place of business or the district of such an agency.

Synonym: management

Hyponyms: advertising agency, dating agency, employment agency, escort agency, introduction agency, modelling agency, news agency, press agency, relief agency, syndication agency, travel agency

- **2012**, Simon Toms, *The Impact of the UK Temporary Employment Industry in Assisting Agency Workers since the Year 2000*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, → ISBN, page 277:

As an employment **agency** you have a responsibility to supply work to the individual **agency** worker, as well as a service to the client.

6. A department or other administrative unit of a government; also, the office or headquarters of, or the district administered by such unit of government.

Hyponyms: antitrust agency, intelligence agency, space agency

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry
Central Intelligence **Agency**

Derived terms

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| ■ <u>advertising agency</u> | ■ <u>dating agency</u> | ■ <u>news agency</u> |
| ■ <u>agency credit memo</u> | ■ <u>employment agency</u> | ■ <u>nonagency</u> |
| ■ <u>agency debit memo</u> | ■ <u>escort agency</u> | ■ <u>press agency</u> |
| ■ <u>agency pricing</u> | ■ <u>estate agency</u> | ■ <u>regulatory agency</u> |
| ■ <u>agency shop</u> | ■ <u>free agency</u> | ■ <u>relief agency</u> |
| ■ <u>alphabet agency</u> | ■ <u>Highways Agency</u> | ■ <u>service agency</u> |
| ■ <u>causal agency</u> | ■ <u>intelligence agency</u> | ■ <u>space agency</u> |
| ■ <u>coagency</u> | ■ <u>interagency</u> | ■ <u>subagency</u> |
| ■ <u>Crow Agency</u> | ■ <u>interagency</u> | ■ <u>superagency</u> |
| ■ <u>cyberagency</u> | ■ <u>introduction agency</u> | ■ <u>syndication agency</u> |
| ■ <u>dating agency</u> | ■ <u>marriage agency</u> | ■ <u>travel agency</u> |

Related terms

- act
- action
- agent

Translations

capacity of acting or of exerting power

- Arabic: فَاعِلِيَّة *f* (fā'iliyya)
- Bulgarian: дѣйствиѣ *(bg)* *n* (déjstvie), въздѣйствиѣ *(bg)* *n* (văzdéjstvie)
- Catalan: agència *(ca)* *f*
- Chinese:

Mandarin: 能动性 *(zh)*, 能动性 *(zh)* (néngdòngxìng)

- Dutch: macht *(nl)*, kracht *(nl)*
- Finnish: toiminta *(fi)*
- French: capacité d'agir *f*
- Galician: axencia *(gl)* *f*
- Georgian: მოქმედება (mokmedeba), ნება (neba)
- German: Wille *(de)* *m*.
- Hungarian: tevékenység *(hu)*, működés *(hu)*, hatóerő *(hu)*
- Indonesian: lembaga *(id)*
- Occitan: agència *(oc)* *f*
- Persian: فاعلية (fâ'eliye)
- Polish: sprawczość *(pl)* *f*
- Russian: дѣйствиѣ *(ru)* *n* (déjstvije), воздѣйствиѣ *(ru)* *n* (vozdéjstvije)
- Serbo-Croatian:

Cyrillic: посредство *n*
Roman: posredstvo *(sh)* *n*

- Spanish: albedrío *(es)* *m*.
- Swedish: agens *(sv)* *ç*, förmåga *(sv)* *ç*, handlingskraft *(sv)* *ç*
- Tagalog: kabisaan

capacity of individuals to act independently

- Chinese:

Mandarin: 能动性 *(zh)*, 能动性 *(zh)* (néngdòngxìng)

- Finnish: toimijuus
- French: agentivité *(fr)* *f* (*philosophy*)
- German: Agency *(de)* (*philosophy*), Handlungsfähigkeit *(de)* *f* (*philosophy*)
- Hungarian: cselekvőképesség *(hu)*
- Spanish: agencia *(es)* *f* (*philosophy*)
- Swedish: agens *(sv)* *ç*, förmåga *(sv)* *ç*, handlingskraft *(sv)* *ç*

medium through which power is exerted

- Hungarian: közvetítő *(hu)*, eszköz *(hu)*, ágens *(hu)*
- Serbo-Croatian: agens *(sh)* *m*.

office of an agent, or relation between a principal and his agent

- Arabic: وكالة *f* (wikāla)
- Bulgarian: посрѣдничество *(bg)* *n* (posrédničestvo), агѣнтство *(bg)* *n* (agéntstvo)

- Catalan: agència [\(ca\)](#) *f*
- Danish: agentbureau *n*
- Dutch: bureau [\(nl\)](#)
- Esperanto: agentejo
- Finnish: edustus [\(fi\)](#), agentuuri [\(fi\)](#)
- French: agence [\(fr\)](#) *f*
- Galician: axencia [\(gl\)](#) *f*
- Georgian: სააგენტო (saagento)
- German: Agentur [\(de\)](#) *f*
- Hindi: एजेंसी [\(hi\)](#) *f* (ejensī)
- Hungarian: közbenjárás [\(hu\)](#), közreműködés [\(hu\)](#)
- Irish: gníomhaireacht *f*
- Occitan: agència [\(oc\)](#) *f*
- Polish: agencja [\(pl\)](#) *f*
- Russian: агѐнтство [\(ru\)](#) *n* (agéntstvo)
- Serbo-Croatian: agencija [\(sh\)](#) *f*
- Spanish: agencia [\(es\)](#) *f*
- Swedish: agentur [\(sv\)](#) *c*
- Tagalog: kagawaan
- Turkish: acentelik [\(tr\)](#)
- Ukrainian: агѐнція [\(uk\)](#) *f* (ahéncija)

establishment engaged in doing business for another

- Albanian: agjenci [\(sq\)](#) *f*
- Arabic: وَكَالَة *f* (wakāla)
- Armenian: գործադարձություն [\(hy\)](#) (gorcakalut'yun)
- Belarusian: агѐнцтва *n* (ahjéncтва), агѐнцыя *f* (ahjéncyja)
- Bulgarian: агѐнция [\(bg\)](#) *f* (agéncija)
- Catalan: agència [\(ca\)](#) *f*
- Chinese:

Mandarin: 機構 [\(zh\)](#), 机构 [\(zh\)](#) (jīgòu)

- Czech: agentura [\(cs\)](#) *f*, kancelář [\(cs\)](#) *f*
- Danish: bureau [\(da\)](#) *n*
- Dutch: agentuur [\(nl\)](#) *f*
- Esperanto: agentejo
- Estonian: agentuur
- Finnish: toimisto [\(fi\)](#), agentuuri [\(fi\)](#), välitystoimisto
- French: agence [\(fr\)](#) *f*, action [\(fr\)](#) *f*, organisme [\(fr\)](#) *m*.
- Galician: axencia [\(gl\)](#) *f*
- Georgian: სააგენტო (saagento)
- German: Agentur [\(de\)](#) *f*
- Greek: πρακτορείο [\(el\)](#) *n* (praktoreío)
- Hebrew: סוכנות *f* (sokhnút)
- Hindi: एजेंसी [\(hi\)](#) *f* (ejensī)

- Hungarian: ügynökség [\(hu\)](#)
- Irish: gníomhaireacht *f*
- Italian: agenzia [\(it\)](#) *f*
- Japanese: 代理店 [\(ja\)](#) (だいいてん, dairiten)
- Korean: 대리점(代理店) [\(ko\)](#) (daerijeom)
- Ladino: adjensia
- Latvian: aģentūra *f*
- Lithuanian: agentūra [\(lt\)](#) *f*
- Macedonian: агенција *f* (agencija)
- Norwegian:

Bokmål: byrå *n*

- Occitan: agència [\(oc\)](#) *f*
- Persian: آژانس [\(fa\)](#) (âžâns), نمایندگی [\(fa\)](#) (namâyandegi), وکالت [\(fa\)](#) (vekâlat) (*now usually a lawyer's agency*)
- Polish: agencja [\(pl\)](#) *f*
- Portuguese: agência [\(pt\)](#) *f*
- Romanian: agenție [\(ro\)](#) *f*, agentură [\(ro\)](#) *f*
- Russian: аге́нтство [\(ru\)](#) *n* (agéntstvo)
- Serbo-Croatian:

Cyrillic: аге́нција *f*

Roman: agèncija [\(sh\)](#) *f*







- Slovak: agentúra *f*, kancelária *f*
- Slovene: agencija *f*
- Swedish: byrå [\(sv\)](#) *c*, agentur [\(sv\)](#) *c*
- Spanish: oficina [\(es\)](#) *f*, agencia [\(es\)](#) *f*
- Tagalog: ahensya, kagawaan
- Tajik: агенти [\(tg\)](#) (agenti)
- Thai: เอเย่นต์, องค์การ [\(th\)](#) (ong-gaan)
- Turkish: ajans [\(tr\)](#)
- Ukrainian: аге́нтство [\(uk\)](#) *n* (ahéntstvo), аге́нція [\(uk\)](#) *f* (ahéncija)
- Vietnamese: cơ quan [\(vi\)](#) (機關)

government office

- Arabic: دَائِرَة [\(ar\)](#) *f* (dā'ira)
- Danish: myndighedskontor *n*
- Finnish: virasto [\(fi\)](#), toimisto [\(fi\)](#)
- Galician: axencia [\(gl\)](#) *f*
- Georgian: სააგენტო (saagento)
- German: Behörde [\(de\)](#) *f*
- Hindi: एजेंसी [\(hi\)](#) *f* (ejensī)
- Hungarian: ügynökség [\(hu\)](#), képviselő [\(hu\)](#), kirendeltség [\(hu\)](#), fiók [\(hu\)](#), hivatal [\(hu\)](#), szerv [\(hu\)](#), iroda [\(hu\)](#), cég [\(hu\)](#)
- Indonesian: lembaga [\(id\)](#)

- Latin: ministerium *n*
- Mòcheno: omt *n*
- Occitan: agència *(oc)* *f*
- Polish: agencja *(pl)* *f*
- Portuguese: agência *(pt)*
- Russian: аге́нтство *(ru)* *n* (agéntstvo), о́рган *(ru)* *m*. (órgan)
- Serbo-Croatian: agencija *(sh)* *f*
- Slovene: agencija *f*
- Spanish: agencia *(es)* *f*
- Swedish: verk *(sv)* *n*, byrå *(sv)* *c*
- Tagalog: kagawaan

Further reading

- agency (<https://www.websters1913.com/words/Agency>) in *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary*, G. & C. Merriam, 1913
-  agency on Wikipedia.
-  agency (sociology) on Wikipedia.
-  agency (philosophy) on Wikipedia.
-  law of agency on Wikipedia.
-  moral agency on Wikipedia.
-  structure and agency on Wikipedia.

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Anagrams

- Cagney, gynæc-

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<https://www.thefreedictionary.com/agency>

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agency

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Related to agency: [Agency theory](#), [Job agency](#)

a·gen·cy (ă'jən-sē)

n. pl. a·gen·cies

1. The condition of being in action; operation.
2. The means or mode of acting; instrumentality.
3.
 - a. A business with agents that negotiate deals for clients: *a talent agency; a real estate agency*.
 - b. An advertising or public relations firm.
4. An administrative division of a government or international body.

[Medieval Latin *agentia*, from Latin *agēns*, agent-, present participle of *agere*, to do; see **agent**.]

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agency ('eɪdʒənsɪ)

n, pl -cies

1. (Commerce) a business or other organization providing a specific service: *an employment agency*.
2. (Commerce) the place where an agent conducts business
3. (Commerce) the business, duties, or functions of an agent
4. action, power, or operation: *the agency of fate*.
5. intercession or mediation
6. (Government, Politics & Diplomacy) one of the administrative organizations of a government

[C17: from Medieval Latin *agentia*, from Latin *agere* to do]

Collins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged, 12th Edition 2014 © HarperCollins Publishers 1991, 1994, 1998, 2000, 2003, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2014

a·gen·cy ('eɪ dʒən si)

n., pl. -cies.

1. an organization, company, or bureau that provides a particular service: *a welfare agency*.
2. a government bureau or administrative division.
3. a company having a franchise to represent another.
4. the duty or function of an agent.
5. the place of business of an agent.
6. a means of exerting power or influence; instrumentality.

[1650–60; < Medieval Latin]

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agency

In intelligence usage, an organization or individual engaged in collecting and/or processing information. Also called collection agency. See also agent; intelligence process; source.

Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms. US Department of Defense 2005.

Thesaurus


Legend:  Synonyms  Related Words  Antonyms


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Noun 1. agency - an administrative unit of government; "the Central Intelligence Agency"; "the Census Bureau"; "Office of Management and Budget"; "Tennessee Valley Authority"


 **bureau, federal agency, government agency, office, authority**


 **administrative body, administrative unit** - a unit with administrative responsibilities


 **executive agency** - an agency of the executive branch of government


 **FDA, Food and Drug Administration** - a federal agency in the Department of Health and Human Services established to regulate the release of new foods and health-related products


 **CDC, Center for Disease Control and Prevention** - a federal agency in the Department of Health and Human Services; located in Atlanta; investigates and diagnoses and tries to control or prevent diseases (especially new and unusual diseases)


 **Counterterrorist Center, CTC** - an agency that helps the Director of Central Intelligence coordinate counterterrorist efforts in order to preempt and disrupt and defeat terrorist activities at the earliest possible stage


 **Nonproliferation Center, NPC** - an agency that serves as the focal point for all Intelligence Community activities related to nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their missile delivery systems

 **Bureau of the Census, Census Bureau** - the bureau of the Commerce Department responsible for taking the census; provides demographic information and analyses about the population of the United States

 **National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, NOAA** - an agency in the Department of Commerce that maps the oceans and conserves their living resources; predicts changes to the earth's environment; provides weather reports and forecasts floods and hurricanes and other natural disasters related to weather

 **National Climatic Data Center, NCDC** - the part of NOAA that maintains the world's largest active archive of weather data

 **National Weather Service** - the federal agency in the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration that is responsible for weather forecast and preparation of weather maps

 **Technology Administration** - an agency in the Department of Commerce that works with United States industries to promote competitiveness and maximize the impact of technology on economic growth

 **National Institute of Standards and Technology, NIST** - an agency in the Technology Administration that



makes measurements and sets standards as needed by industry or government programs

↔ **National Technical Information Service, NTIS** - an agency in the Technology Administration that is a primary resource for government-funded scientific and technical and engineering and business related information

↔ **DARPA, Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency** - the central research and development organization for the United States Department of Defense; responsible for developing new surveillance technologies since 9/11

↔ **Department of Defense Laboratory System, LABLINK** - a defense laboratory that provides essential services in fundamental science for national security and environmental protection and provides technologies that contribute to industrial competitiveness

↔ **Department of Energy Intelligence, DOEI** - an agency that collects political and economic and technical information about energy matters and makes the Department of Energy's technical and analytical expertise available to other members of the Intelligence Community

↔ **PHS, United States Public Health Service** - an agency that serves as the office of Surgeon General; includes agencies whose mission is to improve the public health

↔ **National Institutes of Health, NIH** - an agency in the Department of Health and Human Services whose mission is to employ science in the pursuit of knowledge to improve human health; is the principal biomedical research agency of the federal government

↔ **BJA, Bureau of Justice Assistance** - the bureau in the Department of Justice that assists local criminal justice systems to reduce or prevent crime and violence and drug abuse

↔ **BJS, Bureau of Justice Statistics** - the agency in the Department of Justice that is the primary source of criminal justice statistics for federal and local policy makers

↔ **Immigration and Naturalization Service, INS** - an agency in the Department of Justice that enforces laws and regulations for the admission of foreign-born persons to the United States

↔ **United States Border Patrol, US Border Patrol** - the mobile law enforcement arm of the Immigration and Naturalization Service that detects and prevents illegal entry of aliens into the United States

↔ **Bureau of Diplomatic Security, DS** - the bureau in the State Department that is responsible for the security of diplomats and embassies overseas

↔ **Foreign Service** - the part of the State Department that supplies diplomats for the United States embassies and consulates around the world

↔ **Bureau of Intelligence and Research, INR** - an agency that is the primary source in the State Department for interpretive analyses of global developments and focal point for policy issues and activities of the Intelligence Community

↔ **FWS, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service** - an agency in the Department of the Interior that conserves and protects fish and wildlife and their habitats; assesses the environmental impact of pesticides and nuclear power site and hydroelectric dams and thermal pollution

2. **agency** - a business that serves other businesses

↔ **business, business concern, business organisation, business organization, concern** - a commercial or industrial enterprise and the people who constitute it; "he bought his brother's business"; "a small mom-and-pop business"; "a racially integrated business concern"

↔ **ad agency, advertising agency** - an agency that designs advertisement to call public attention to its clients

↔ **credit bureau** - a private firm that maintains consumer credit data files and provides credit information to

authorized users for a fee

↔ **detective agency** - an agency that makes inquiries for its clients

↔ **employment agency, employment office** - an agency that finds people to fill particular jobs or finds jobs for unemployed people

↔ **commercial agency, mercantile agency** - an organization that provides businesses with credit ratings of other firms; "Dun & Bradstreet is the largest mercantile agency in the United States"

↔ **news agency, news organisation, news organization, press agency, press association, wire service** - an agency to collect news reports for newspapers and distributes it electronically

↔ **service agency, service bureau, service firm** - a business that makes its facilities available to others for a fee; achieves economy of scale

↔ **travel agency** - an agency that arranges personal travel

↔ **transfer agent** - an agency (usually a bank) that is appointed by a corporation to keep records of its stock and bond owners and to resolve problems about certificates

3. agency - the state of being in action or exerting power; "the agency of providence"; "she has free agency"

↔ **activeness, activity, action** - the state of being active; "his sphere of activity"; "he is out of action"

↔ **Frankenstein** - an agency that escapes control and destroys its creator

4. agency - the state of serving as an official and authorized delegate or agent

≡ **delegacy, representation**

↔ **state** - the way something is with respect to its main attributes; "the current state of knowledge"; "his state of health"; "in a weak financial state"

↔ **free agency** - (sports) the state of a professional athlete who is free to negotiate a contract to play for any team

↔ **legal representation** - personal representation that has legal status; "an person who has been declared incompetent should have legal representation"

↔ **virus** - a harmful or corrupting agency; "bigotry is a virus that must not be allowed to spread"; "the virus of jealousy is latent in everyone"

5. agency - how a result is obtained or an end is achieved; "a means of control"; "an example is the best agency of instruction"; "the true way to success"

≡ **means, way**

↔ **effectuation, implementation** - the act of implementing (providing a practical means for accomplishing something); carrying into effect

↔ **dint** - interchangeable with 'means' in the expression 'by means of'

↔ **escape** - a means or way of escaping; "hard work was his escape from worry"; "they installed a second hatch as an escape"; "their escape route"

↔ **fast track** - a rapid means of achieving a goal; "they saw independence as the fast track to democracy"; "he took a fast track to the top of the corporate ladder"; "the company went off the fast track when the stock market dropped"

↔ **instrument, tool** - the means whereby some act is accomplished; "my greed was the instrument of my destruction"; "science has given us new tools to fight disease"

↔ **road** - a way or means to achieve something; "the road to fame"



↔ **stepping stone** - any means of advancement; "the job was just a stepping stone on his way to fame and riches"

↔ **expedient** - a means to an end; not necessarily a principled or ethical one

↔ **desperate measure** - desperate actions taken as a means to an end; "he had to resort to desperate measures"

↔ **open sesame** - any very successful means of achieving a result

↔ **salvation** - a means of preserving from harm or unpleasantness; "tourism was their economic salvation"; "they turned to individualism as their salvation"

↔ **tooth** - a means of enforcement; "the treaty had no teeth in it"

↔ **voice** - a means or agency by which something is expressed or communicated; "the voice of the law"; "the Times is not the voice of New York"; "conservatism has many voices"

↔ **wings** - a means of flight or ascent; "necessity lends wings to inspiration"

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agency

noun

1. **business, company, office, firm, department, organization, enterprise, establishment, bureau** *a successful advertising agency*
2. (Old-fashioned) **medium, work, means, force, power, action, operation, activity, influence, vehicle, instrument, intervention, mechanism, efficiency, mediation, auspices, intercession, instrumentality** *a negotiated settlement through the agency of the UN*

Collins Thesaurus of the English Language – Complete and Unabridged 2nd Edition. 2002 © HarperCollins Publishers 1995, 2002

agency *noun*

1. That by which something is accomplished or some end achieved:
agent, instrument, instrumentality, instrumentation, intermediary, mean (used in plural), **mechanism, medium, organ**.
2. A component of government that performs a given function:
arm, branch, department, division, organ, wing.

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Translations

Select a language:

Spanish / Español ▼

agencia

agency [ˈeɪdʒənsɪ]

A. *N*

1. (= *office*) → **agencia** *f*

see also **advertising**, **travel** **D**

2. (= *branch*) → **delegación** *f*

3. (= *institution*) → **organismo** *m*

International Atomic Energy Agency → **Organismo** *m* **Internacional** de **Energía Atómica**

4. (= *mediation*) *through the agency of* → **por medio de**, por la **mediación** de

B. CPD Agency for International Development *N* (*US*) → **Agencia** *f* para el **Desarrollo Internacional**

Collins Spanish Dictionary - Complete and Unabridged 8th Edition 2005 © William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd. 1971, 1988 © HarperCollins Publishers 1992, 1993, 1996, 1997, 2000, 2003, 2005

agent [ˈeɪdʒənt] *noun*

1. a person or thing that acts. *detergents and other cleaning agents*. **agente**

2. a person who acts for someone in business etc. *our agent in London; a theatrical agent*. **agente**

3. (especially **secret agent**) a spy. *an agent for the Russians*. **agente**

'**agency** – plural '**agencies** – *noun*

the office or business of an agent. *an advertising agency*. **agencia**

by/through the agency of

by the action of. *The meeting was arranged through the agency of a friend*. **por medio de**

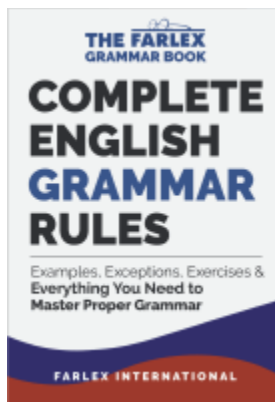
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agency → **agencia**

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agency *n* (*pl -cies*) **agencia**

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agency



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agency

noun

agen·cy ['ā-jən\(t\)-sē](#) 

plural agencies

[Synonyms of agency](#) >

- 1
 - a
 - : the office or function of an agent (see [agent sense 4](#))
 - b
 - : the relationship between a principal and that person's agent
- 2
 - : the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power : [operation](#)
- 3
 - : a person or thing through which power is exerted or an end is achieved : [instrumentality](#)
 - communicated through the agency of the ambassador
- 4
 - : an establishment engaged in doing business for another
 - an advertising agency
- 5
 - : an administrative division (as of a government)
 - the agency for consumer protection

Synonyms

- [arm](#)
- [branch](#)
- [bureau](#)
- [department](#)
- [desk](#)
- [division](#)
- [office](#)
- [service](#)

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Example Sentences

the federal *agency* in charge of printing money The employment *agency* helps those who have been recently laid off find jobs.

Recent Examples on the Web The *agency* said Thursday that Athena's sister was found outside Alysia Adams' home. — Minyvonne Burke, *NBC News*, 14 Jan. 2023 The *agency* said the process twisted the star into a donut-like shape in the process. — Julia Musto, *Fox News*, 14 Jan. 2023 The *agency* said that 2022 saw the most people in five years arrive from Libya, the main departure point in northern Africa. — *BostonGlobe.com*, 13 Jan. 2023 [See More](#)

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Word History

Etymology

[ag\(ent\)](#) + [-ency](#), perhaps after Medieval Latin *agentia*, derivative of *agent-*, *agens* [agent](#)

First Known Use

1640, in the meaning defined at [sense 1a](#)

Time Traveler

The first known use of *agency* was in 1640

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- [agency shop](#)
- [travel agency](#)
- [press agency](#)
- [employment agency](#)
- [sub-agency](#)
- [through the agency of](#)
- [news agency](#)
- [ticket agency](#)

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Kids Definition

agency

noun

agen·cy ['ā-jən-sē](#) 

plural agencies

1

: the office or function of an agent

2

: a person or thing through which power is used or something is achieved : [means](#)

3

: an establishment doing business for another

an insurance *agency*

4

: a part of a government that manages projects in a certain area

a health *agency*

Legal Definition

agency

noun

agen·cy

plural agencies

1

: the person or thing through which power is exerted or an end is achieved

death by criminal agency—W. R. LaFare and A. W. Scott, Jr.

2

a

: a consensual fiduciary relationship in which one party acts on behalf of and under the control of another in dealing with third parties

also : the power of one in such a relationship to act on behalf of another

Note: A principal is bound by and liable for acts of his or her agent that are within the scope of the agency.

— actual agency

: the agency that exists when an agent is in fact employed by a principal → see also [express agency](#) and implied agency in this entry

— agency by estoppel

: an agency that is not created as an actual agency by a principal and an agent but that is imposed by law when a principal acts in such a way as to lead a third party to reasonably believe that another is the principal's agent and the third party is injured by relying on and acting in accordance with that belief

Note: A principal has a duty to correct a third party's mistaken belief in an agent's authority to act on the principal's behalf. If the principal could have corrected the misunderstanding but failed to do so, he or she is estopped from denying the existence of the agency and is bound by the agent's acts in dealing with the third party.

— agency coupled with an interest

: an agency in which the agent has an interest in the property regarding which he or she is acting on the principal's behalf

— apparent agency

: agency by estoppel in this entry

— exclusive agency

: an agency common in real estate sales in which the property owner agrees to employ no agents to sell the property other than the one hired for a specified period

— express agency

: an actual agency created by the written or spoken words of the principal authorizing the agent to act → compare implied agency in this entry

— general agency

: an agency in which the agent is authorized to perform on behalf of the principal in all matters in furtherance of a particular business of the principal → compare special agency in this entry

— implied agency

: an actual agency created by acts of a principal that reasonably imply an intention to create an agency relationship → compare express agency in this entry

— ostensible agency

: agency by estoppel in this entry

— special agency

: an agency in which the agent is authorized to perform only specified acts or to act only in a specified transaction → compare general agency in this entry

— universal agency

: general agency in this entry

b

: the office and function of an agent

even when granted discretion in carrying out his agency— R. C. Clark

c

: the law concerned with the relationship of a principal and an agent

3

: an establishment engaged in doing the business of another: as

a

: an establishment authorized by an insurance company to sell insurance policies and provide services offered by the insurer

b

: an establishment authorized by property owners to find a buyer for their property

Note: Many businesses that use the term *agency* are not truly agencies as defined in sense 2.

4

: a department or other unit of government created by legislation to administer the law in a particular area of public concern

→ called also administrative agency

→ see also [enabling statute](#), [exhaustion of remedies](#), [Administrative Procedure Act](#)

Note: When a legislature determines that government involvement is needed in a particular social activity or problem, it may write legislation creating an agency either directly or by authorizing the executive to set it up. Agencies exist at the federal, state, and local levels. Most federal agencies are attached to the executive branch of government. Some agencies (such as the Environmental Protection Agency) are called an agency. An agency may, however, be called such other names as *board* (as the National Labor Relations Board), *commission* (as the Securities and Exchange Commission), *administration* (as the Social Security Administration), and *service* (as the Internal Revenue Service). Agencies at the federal level are governed by the provisions of the Administrative Procedure Act, which is found at title 5 of the U.S. Code.

— independent agency

: an agency that is not part of any of the three branches of government

— regulatory agency

: an agency that is authorized by the legislature to establish and enforce rules regulating its particular area of concern —often used interchangeably with *agency* or *administrative agency*

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