CHAPTER 3

Gnomic Agency

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There are many different ways of framing agency, and thereby fore-grounding different kinds of agents. My point in what follows is not to endorse any particular frame, but merely to sketch some of the key features of several pervasive frames. Such frames—as ways of understanding and interrelating flexibility, causality, and accountability—have grounded the intuitions of many influential thinkers. And so it is useful to understand, if only to undermine, their characteristic assumptions.

ARISTOTELIAN AGENCIES

Aristotle (2001) famously described four kinds of causes that may underlie any entity. There is the material cause (the substance something is com-posed of, however heterogeneous), the formal cause (the way this substance has been shaped, organized, or patterned), the final cause (the functions such a formed substance may serve), and the efficient cause (that which gives form to substance, often for the sake of some function). Aristotle's word for cause was *aition*, which is closely linked to notions of responsi-bility. In some sense, such causes are responsible for the existence of an entity. This is not to say that they should be held accountable in any legal or moral sense, but only to say that we may make reference to such causes when we try to account for such entities.

Such causes, broadly construed, provide one useful way of framing agency. In particular, we might define (Aristotelian) agents as causes that

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we can take account of. Acting alone, or in concert, they are a salient condition of possibility for the existence of entities, or the occurrence of events. Natural selection is thus an agent. A worker is an agent. A tool is an agent. An enzyme is an agent. Oxidation is an agent. Even lightning bolts, and chance phenomena more generally, are agents. Note, then, that while it is easy to make a splash by calling some non-intentional actor an "agent" (a land mine, dust, concrete, continental drift, worms, the trade winds, a comet, etc.), this is only because so many people have a limited sense of what an agent is. In this Aristotelian framing, in contrast, anything of causal account is an agent and, indeed, interestingly so. Such a framing is thus not limited to the kinds of causes enumerated by Aristotle, but may include whatever causes are (deemed) worthy of account: ghosts and gravity, sieving and serendipity, witches and wishes, global warming and political apathy, semiotic practices and thermodynamic processes, and much else besides.

Needless to say, most entities and events have many causes (each of which can itself be an entity or event with many causes, and so on, ad infinitum). And so agency is necessarily distributed in depth (each cause of some effect is itself the effect of some cause), and necessarily distributed in breadth (each effect has many causes; each cause has many effects). This is not to say that all such causes are salient enough to show up in some account: causal accounting, as the figuring (out) of agency, tends to focus on those causes that are particularly relevant to the agents who are doing the accounting: for example, those causes that are least expected; those causes most easy or difficult to intervene in; those causes that are most powerful, marketable, or useful; those causes most amenable to our intuitions; those causes that seem most intentional; those causes with the most dire effects; and so forth. To study agency is to study causal understandings, and imaginings, of the world: not just the conditions for, and consequences of, entities and events; but also the conditions for, and consequences of, particular accountings (of such conditions and consequences). *There is no interesting account of agency that is not simultaneously an account of those agents who are trying to account for agency.*

BACONIAN AGENCIES

We may extend this framing, and get a better sense of its stakes, by applying some categories of Bacon (2000) to those of Aristotle. If knowledge turns on the discovery of causes, power turns on the directing of causes. Knowledge and power are thus necessarily coupled: in directing known

causes, we may discover new causes; and we may use such discoveries in our subsequent directings. From this standpoint, a Baconian agent exhibits a kind of meta-agency: whatever has knowledge about, or power over, the sorts of causes described above. Such an agent can offer an account of such causes, so far as it can discover them; and it may make such causes count, so far as it can direct them. Indeed, for such agents, we can often invoke accountability in the strong sense. That is, not only can we account for such agents (e.g., thematize them, characterize them, reason about them), but we can also hold such agents accountable for their actions and effects (e.g., hinder them or hasten them, reward them or punish them, praise them or shame them). Finally, and reflexively, it is often the case that such Baconian agents have yet to discover all the causes that direct them. Such "blind spots" constitute one key sense of the unconscious: we often have limited knowledge over precisely those causes that have power over us.

This way of framing agency foregrounds not only the recursive and reflexive nature of agency, but also the relative nature of agency. In particular, different agents have different degrees of knowledge and power, and so different degrees of agency. But, that said, because there are so many different kinds of causes, most kinds of power and knowledge are incommensurate, so that it makes little sense to contrast them by degree. For example, while we might compare the strength of two men, it is difficult to compare the strength of one man with the speed of another. Similarly, while we might compare how much you know about chemistry with how much I know, it is difficult to compare your factual knowledge (know that) with my practical knowledge (know how). And so on, and so forth. That is, it only really makes sense to talk about different degrees of agency when we can isolate out a shared dimension of agency (for example, how much money, or credit, one has at one's disposal). And for many, if not most, kinds of agents, with their potentially heterogeneous suites of context-specific and event-contingent causal capacities, that is impossible. Modes of agency are as heterogeneous and incommensurate as the causes they direct and discover, as the entities such causes enable, and as the events such causes occasion.

INSTRUMENTAL AGENCIES

Returning to Aristotle, it is sometimes useful to set aside material causes and formal causes, and instead focus on efficient causes (understood as "means") and final causes (understood as "ends"). In this more restricted

framing, agents are relatively instrumental: they wield a variety of means to achieve a variety of ends. Philosophers like James and Peirce went so far as to define "lively agents" and "mindful agents" in related terms. For example, James stated, "The pursuance of future ends and the choice of means for their attainment are thus the mark and criterion of the presence of mentality" (1918:8). Indeed, in some sense, the Baconian framing treats knowledge and power in terms of instrumental reasoning: to what extent does an agent understand which causes lead to which effects; to what extent can an agent create such causes (as means) in order to bring about such effects (as ends).

Such agents might be considered more or less agentive as a function of the range of means they have at their disposal, and as a function of the variety of ends they may seek to achieve. That is, from the standpoint of this particular framing, the more open or flexible an agent (in regard to its means and ends), the more agentive that agent. Such means may include tools, utterances, paths, forces, compositions, signs, representations, affects, traps, goods, and so forth. Such ends may include any kind of resource or value potentially securable through such means: money, food, sex, reputation, freedom, enlightenment, power, security, certainty, information, territory, transcendence, immortality, revenge, and even agency itself. And such openness or flexibility is often imagined to be causally grounded in some putative human-specific capacity: imagination, generativity, cognition, metaphor, reason, displacement, the symbolic, language, mind, choice, meta-representations, culture, reason, and so forth.

That said, any number of distinctly "non-lively" and "non-mental" entities exhibit characteristics of instrumental agency: they are means that may be used to pursue ends (e.g., a rock used as a weapon); and they may even have been made for the sake of achieving such ends (e.g., a bowl made for holding soup). While such made or used agents reflect the purposes of those agents who make them or use them, they don't seem to undertake purposeful actions themselves. For this reason, they are sometimes understood as derivative agents, as opposed to originary agents. Note, then, that from the standpoint of the first framing of agency, they would be agents without qualification. But once we restrict ourselves to focusing on means and ends, as a particular subset of Aristotle's causes, such agents are thereby demoted, showing up in causal accounts as "less than" fully agentive. By way of contrast, the mindful or lively agents introduced above often seem to exhibit a kind of reflexive agency: they are auto-technic (using themselves as a means) and they are auto-telic (having themselves as an end). Indeed, it is often useful to unitize agency (and thereby enclose "agents") by reference to such modes of reflexive coherence.

EVALUATIVE AGENCIES

Just as any effect may itself be a cause that gives rise to another effect, any end may itself be a means to a further end. And so we again find a relatively recursive pattern: a means-ends chain that stretches on indefinitely in two directions at once. Or does it? We just saw how many affordances, like the branch one uses to climb a tree, are means (insofar as one may use them to undertake an action), but not themselves ends (insofar as the branches were not made for the sake of climbing). Nature is often romantically understood to be constituted by this bottoming out of instrumentality. Conversely, Aristotle argued that such means-ends chains had to stop somewhere, and thus "top in." In particular, there must be some end that is not itself the means for further ends. He called such a final end *eudaimonia*, which is often translated as human flourishing, or happiness. And he thought that this highest good, or supreme value, was of utmost importance to philosophy and politics.

Whether or not such higher goods are crucial to philosophy and politics, they are certainly crucial to many understandings of agency, which are just as prone to promote value-oriented agents as they are to demote derivative agents. In particular, a related tradition understands each of us instrumental agents as having too many ends, in that we have more desires than we might ever hope to attain (given our finite time on this earth, and the finite means at our disposal). And so a key question arises: how do we decide which desire we want to act upon, or which end we hope to achieve? To which final end, or at least more distal end, should our intermediate ends be oriented? Such a question presumes that we are not just instrumental agents, who have some flexibility in regard to our means and ends, but that we are also selecting and/or economizing agents. That is, not only is there more than one way to skin a cat, but there are more ways to spend our time than skinning cats; and so we need to choose not just *how* to do things, but *what* things to do. And so the question of evaluating agents arises: agents who not only act instrumentally, but also evaluate instrumental acts in reference to values and, in particular, in reference to values that could be otherwise.

Such values are often understood to constitute some kind of relatively shared standard that allows us to order means and ends according to their relative desirability (Taylor 1989). Such standards help us determine which course of action is more just, honorable, or efficient—and hence which course of action we should pursue if we are to be a just, honorable, or efficient actor. Such a process is also recursive: one kind of agent may be relatively flexible in regard to the means and ends it has at its disposal; another

kind of agent, a kind of meta-agent, may be relatively flexible in regard to the standards of values it has at its disposal (to decide which means and ends are best); and so on. That is, just as one can order desires relative to a standard, one can order standards relative to a meta-standard (and so on, recursively). In such a situation, the question is not so much *Which route through life should I take*, but rather *Which map should I use to assess which routes there are, how should these routes be weighted, and what constitutes the terrain in the first place?*

Such agents are often an held accountable to a large degree: not only can they account for their own values (in the sense of being able to thematize, characterize, and reason about them), but they can also be held accountable for upholding certain values (in the sense of being praised or punished as a function of whether or not they follow them). Indeed, quite crucially, they can often be praised for pursuing the "correct" end, or punished for pursuing the "incorrect" end, even if they fail to achieve it. And many such agents often hold themselves reflexively accountable in precisely these ways, feeling pride or shame (if not "indebtedness" or "guilt") as a function of whether or not they did, or at least tried to do, the right thing. For these reasons, agents that can internalize standards, and/or the character judgments such standards license, are often understood to be particularly agentive kinds of agents. Conversely, and somewhat pessimistically, many such agents are understood to have less agency than they might otherwise have. In a critical tradition most forcibly articulated by Marx, while such agents may freely choose among a range of possibilities (or relative to a standard), they did not get to choose the range of possibilities (nor the standard). To return to our notion of the unconscious, we often seem to have little agency over the wellsprings of our agency.

Crucially, just like Aristotelian agents, many such evaluative agents are inherently distributed: while it may be a single human actor who undertakes an action, the choice of which action to undertake, and the reasoning underlying why that's the best choice, is usually done in interaction with others (you and me in this conversation), by reference to shared values (we in this community, with some shared history), and more or less implicitly or unconsciously. Such values and, in particular, disputes over such values, often lead to collective actions in which a collective "we" not only determines what to do, and why it should be done, but also actually does it (however hierarchical, and often unfair, the distributed divisioning of this determination). And so, at issue are not just collective behaviors like working and playing, communing and communicating, but also wars and revolutions, invasions and insurgencies.

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TELEONOMIC AND TELEOMATIC AGENCIES

The foregoing tradition tends to focus on a certain class of final causes: those that turn on the relatively self-conscious strivings of intentional agents, and hence teleological processes of a stereotypic sort. Just as interesting are what philosophers like Mayr (1992) calls teleonomic agents: instincts, traits, organs, and automata. For present purposes, teleonomic agents are adaptive agents: they not only exhibit means-ends behaviors (or characteristics), but they were also selected, and thus shaped, for the sake of those behaviors. Such agents that are selected (but cannot themselves select, or "choose," in the strong sense just described) are also considered derivative agents—insofar as their key characteristics are understood as having been imposed by another agent (and not just seemingly intentional agents such as artists and engineers, but also seemingly unintentional agents like natural selection). Mayr thought that such teleonomic processes were guided by an internal program (such as DNA, an algorithm, or some kind of intricate engineering mechanism). And he characterized such programs as being more or less "open" insofar as they were more or less sensitive to contextual inputs. In this tradition, universal Turing machines are radically open (in that they can run any program you give them); and members of the species *homo sapiens* are radically open (in that they have the capacity to inhabit any culture they inherit, with each such culture having distinctive suites of means and ends, distinctive modes of knowledge and power, and distinctive causal capacities and evaluative rationalities). The relative "openness" of such agents is, of course, yet another way of imagining their relative agentiveness. And again, such an agentiveness is not necessarily agentive in any stereotypic sense insofar as it might have been "programmed" by an external agent—your parents or teachers, your culture or society, a particular religion or ideology, and so forth. (Recall the admonishments of Marx.)

This sense of agency usefully points to another sense of accountability. All of the products of natural selection can be held accountable in the first sense: we can account, if only partially, for their coming to be. The world itself, in the sense of an "environment," can hold organisms accountable for their adaptations—selecting the most fit from the least fit, and thereby changing the adaptiveness of a population of organisms over time. And a few such organisms, which like to think of themselves as being on the top of a ladder, are uniquely accountable in the moral sense (or so they tell themselves, in their self-accounts). Of course, many try to offer evolutionary accounts (and, perhaps more often, non-evolutionary accounts, often by reference to some kind of god, qua meta-meta-agent) of the origins of

that seemingly unique kind of moral accountability. But, that said, many will argue that teleological processes (that undergird moral accountability) are themselves the products of teleomatic processes (which are distinctly non-intentional), which are themselves the products of non-telic processes of various kinds (such as sieving and serendipity). In other words, it is not clear, once various forms of selection have been properly understood (from selecting among different values, qua choice, to natural selection of different variants, qua evolution), that all agents are not derivative agents somehow—so far as their own agency is causally distributed in such ways. There seems to be an enormous contingency underlying the complex, non-intentional causalities that lead to reflexively-instrumental, meta-evaluational, and self-accounting modes of agency.

AGENCY ENCLOSED

Given all these different ways of framing agency, and thereby figuring different kinds of agents, we may ask why human agents are so prone to frame and figure in particular ways. Why do they ascribe agency along specific dimensions—the causal, the flexible, the reflexive, the evaluative, the teleological, the moral? Why do they order (along such dimensions) by reference to particular degrees—more or less causal, flexible, reflexive, evaluative, teleological, moral, and so forth? Why is it so easy to excerpt agentive figures from multi-causal backgrounds? Look, there is an agent, qua figure (all else becoming background, and so of "no account"). Why do they excerpt and enclose particular units—drawing figures within particular boundaries: skin, self, team, society, and so forth?

Different collectivities, with different histories and cultures, frame and figure in different ways; and, indeed, are framed and figured in different ways by themselves and others. To some degree, a large chunk of politics turns on who gets to determine the relevant dimensions and degrees of agency, what causes and capacities are considered important, what orderings are appropriate, what units can be excerpted, where to draw boundaries between figures and grounds. In some sense, the most consequential forms of agency reside in who or what determines what counts as agency, and thus who or what should be held accountable as an agent.

When we stress these kinds of inherently reflexive, political, and genealogical concerns alongside the foregoing and more canonical kinds of questions and commitments regarding teleonomic processes, and their conditions and consequences, we are opening up inquiry into what might best be called "teleognomic agency," or simply *gnomic agency*.

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