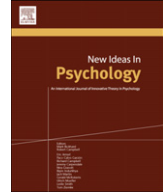




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# Agency and the Other: On the intersubjective roots of self-identity

Hans-Herbert Kögler

Department of Philosophy, University of North Florida, USA

### A B S T R A C T

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The essay argues that a systematic reconstruction of the intersubjective grounds of self-consciousness and self-identity will yield a complex non-reductive notion of agency. Core features of human agency include intentional causality, conscious understanding thereof, as well as the capacity to distinguish self-caused from externally caused phenomena. By analyzing how self-consciousness emerges from intersubjective perspective-taking and dialogue, a socially embedded and symbolically mediated notion of self-identity—one which is able to preserve the core features of human agency—becomes viable. G.H. Mead's work serves as heuristic framework to articulate the extent to which *the Other's irreducible agency is constitutive of the self's capacity to establish an identity*, now understood as a socially situated narrative self-interpreting process. Self-identity reveals to be an essential open yet not fragmented dynamic, a socially situated yet agent-driven phenomenon, and ethically indebted to the Other as providing the essential gift of selfhood.

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At stake is a viable theory of human agency. My claim is that such a theory must entail the reconstruction of the intersubjective grounds of agency. In particular, this project involves two sub-claims that delineate the scope of the subsequent analysis. On the one hand, I hold that reconstructing the intersubjective conditions of human agency will enable the defense of a robust conception of agency, one which involves the agent's reflexive capacity to intentionally affect change in the world. As will later be briefly explained, I not only believe such a conception to be in line with phenomenological and psychological findings, but furthermore suggest that it represents a core presupposition of social

E-mail address: [hkoegler@unf.edu](mailto:hkoegler@unf.edu).

and political theory. On the other hand, I also believe that an inter-subjectivist grounding of agency can help overcome some of the misunderstandings generally associated with the concept of reflexive agency. In particular, by showing how the agent's capacity for a reflexive self-relation and self-directed action emerges from a dialogical process of perspective-taking, we are put in a position to combat the following misconceptions: 1) that self-consciousness involves a self-defeating paradox of objectification, 2) that a social analysis of agency leaves no space for an emphatic notion of reflexivity; and, 3) that the notion of reflexive agency necessarily aligns with an atomistic model of individual subjects.

Against this backdrop, I would first like to indicate those aspects of our intuitive understanding of reflexive human agency that seem indispensable. First, a subject with agency has to have *the capacity to affect real change in the world*. Concretely, this means that a self which is situated in an objective order must have at its disposal the means to transform the status quo of its existent context, regardless of whether this context is conceived in terms of holistic discursive relations, social–institutional arrangements and practices, or natural or biological preconditions for existence. Were such a capacity lacking, say in a pure mind deprived of any causal powers, or in an epistemologically conceived observer's attitude without any connection toward the observed context, talk about agency would fail to make sense.

Second, we require the capacity of a subject *to understand its own effects vis-à-vis the world*. This condition brings out a basic pre-assumption about agency as applied to human agents. Assume for a moment that the first condition of an agent capable of affecting change would be present, but be combined with a lack of conscious understanding by the affecting agent. The result would be the problematic disconnect between the change-affecting action and the human agent. All changes could then in principle be traced to trans-subjective structures, events, or conditions, i.e. no change would actually have to be caused by a human agent. However, the concept of human agency requires that acts are *knowingly caused*, i.e. that humans *know* that they are the *cause* of effects. We thus have to preserve an internal connection between the acts and their understanding as caused by human subjects.<sup>1</sup>

Third, the concept of agency furthermore entails that the *agent is capable of differentiating between his or her own causal powers, i.e. the particular acts and intentions that are undertaken to make a difference in the world, and those conditions and contexts that independently of the self affect change, including those that have affected the constitution of the self's intentional powers as such*. This amounts to the condition of a realistic understanding of one's own place, i.e. that one has to be able to distinguish which actions or events are caused by oneself and which ones are not, i.e. which ones are instead attributable to external causes beyond one's influence. This capacity also includes the understanding of forces that have shaped the agent's own intentions.<sup>2</sup>

Now, I do know well that these features, defined as essential ingredients of a viable theory of agency, are far from being uncontroversial. However, as I will show, there is a path to reconstruct the inter-subjective roots of self-identity such that these features can be preserved, and more so, that will show how this ground helps enhance and improve our understanding of reflexivity and self-identity. In a first step, this will involve showing that the transformation of a basic intersubjective understanding from a pre-linguistic level to a 'conversation of significant symbols' (Mead) holds the key to understanding how the self can become its own object without objectifying itself such that its active and intentional subjectivity is lost. In an analysis inspired and guided by Mead's early path-breaking thoughts, I reconstruct the dialogical sources of self-consciousness to show that this grounding allows for a non-reifying conscious self-relation that preserves what is unique about human selves. In a second step, I expand the present neo-Meadian account of self-consciousness to introduce a full-fledged account of social self-identity. I integrate the formerly developed model of dialogical self-understanding into

<sup>1</sup> In order to be an intentionally caused effect that is the outcome of agency, the event has to be attributable to the effecting agent. And to make this stick as a real intentional causation, this attribution has to be one that can *in principle* be understood by the affecting agent itself. While we are thus interested in the developmental reconstruction of the emergence of the reflexive stance, we do not rule out pre-reflective forms of agency, nor do we deny that intentional action can be executed without an accompanying conscious intention (as when we shift gears). Compare critically Hyman (2007), and positively Searle (1982).

<sup>2</sup> If we assume that a self is generally deceived about which effects really emerge from its own agency and which stem from larger trans-subjective forces, the attribution of agency—as understood as a consciously intentional event—would lack application.

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