

# Rethinking Agency: A Phenomenological Approach to Embodiment and Agentic Capacities

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Agency has been central to modern conceptions of politics but it is a complicated and contested idea that seems to have fallen into both theoretical and historical crisis. I explore the underlying ideas that have grounded it, as well as some recent historical and theoretical challenges. I respond by advocating an ontological agnosticism regarding who or what exercises agency and suggest a spectrum of agentic capacities instead. Commending a phenomenological approach, I then suggest that agentic capacities emerge and interact across this spectrum. At one pole I envisage pre-personal, corporeal processes and at the other, a transpersonal, intersubjective interworld that requires a novel social ontology. I locate individual or collective agents in the middle of the spectrum where they emerge as contingent singularities. My aim here is to retain agency as a necessary ingredient of politics while eliminating the Cartesian presuppositions that have, for example, rendered the agency-structure debate irresolvable and supported a subjectivist account of agents that is no longer tenable. I show how all three dimensions of the spectrum have political significance and discuss examples to illustrate this.

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Agency has been central to modern conceptions of politics since it is agents that are accredited with the power to bring about effective change in collective life. Both domestic and international relations have been conventionally understood in this way. Yet because the concept of agency has been inseparable from notions of subjectivity and individuality, and entwined with ideas about responsibility, autonomy, rationality and freedom, it has remained a complex and contested term that provokes fundamental ontological as well as social and normative questions. These have resurfaced within recent political debates where they have been accompanied by widespread claims that agency, and by implication politics, is in crisis. On the one hand, agency's theoretical foundations look increasingly vulnerable to deconstructionist zeal; on the other, it has become notoriously difficult to locate and identify political agents within the configurations of late (or post) modern power relations. The demise of robustly critical individuals has been lamented since Mill and Tocqueville worried about the despotism of custom in mass societies, while the collective agents in which progressive thinkers once put their faith now evince little of the solidarity or shared identity that was the supposed secret of their potency. Paradoxically, it is those who most desire the political work of radical agents who have also tended to be the most relentless theoretically and sociologically in cataloguing their demise.

In this article I respond to some of these problems by developing a novel theory of agency. Central to my argument will be a focus on *agentic capacities* (or properties) and an insistence that these are only contingently, not ontologically, identi-

fied with rational, individual *agents*. Their unwarranted conflation occurs, I suggest, because of presuppositions anchored in modernity's ontological homage to a Cartesian dualism that separates minds from bodies and spiritual from material substances, with its corollaries of epistemological scepticism and methodological individualism. These foundations and models have of course been widely contested by communitarians, feminists and poststructuralists. Yet if agency is thrown out altogether it becomes impossible to sustain any but the most conservative or aleatory sense of political life. Because politics is about power and authority in the collective domain, it is surely necessary to preserve a sense of capacities long associated with agency here. But in light of recent criticisms this is perhaps best served by avoiding presuppositions regarding their bearers.

The attributes of agency I retain as the *sine qua non* of politics are those suggesting some active force with both enough *potency* to bring about effects and sufficient *reflexivity* to yield concern about the nature of those effects, hence a degree of *motivation* and *freedom*. I continue to use these conventional markers of agency as an analytical index of its operation while denying that such agentic properties entail any specific ontological assumption as to whom or what exercises them. Indeed, the operation of agentic capacities in politics will always exceed the agency exercised by rational subjects, and in the analysis that follows I present a *spectrum* across which agentic capacities appear and interact. What I sketch here is an ontology of agentic processes that can accommodate their diverse, partial and often haphazard manifestations and a phenomenological method appropriate to it. Phenomenology does not begin with an idealist model of agents then seek their facsimile in the real world; rather it reads ambiguous signs of agentic expression as they emerge within a shared lifeworld.

## Context and Problematic

Because diverse discourses intersect in defining agency it has many dimensions, each with its own genealogy and controversies. All such discourses tend nonetheless to gravitate towards a stubborn opposition – where agents will either be free or they will be constituted or determined by external forces – and a resilient presupposition: that agents will be individuals. Such elements are, for example, apparent within cognitive psychology and the philosophy of mind, which are both implicated in questions of agency through their enquiries into the nature of consciousness and its related phenomena (perception, memory, repression, knowledge, reasoning and so on) and their susceptibility to materialist, genetic or evolutionary determinism. Theological questions about the nature of free will or conscience versus divine determination, meanwhile, find their secular analogue in the concerns of social scientists regarding the relative potency of free agency versus structural determinism or social constructivism. In political philosophy, such debates are inflected through and further complicated by concerns about power. Metaphysical questions about the constraints on free individuals become entangled here with normative and practical issues. In circling around the question of freedom versus determinacy, all such discourses go to the heart of modern conceptions of and anxieties about agency, where they are vulnerable to the alternatives of unrealistic voluntarism or paralysing fatalism. The reason for this is their

residual adherence to a philosophy that associates agentic properties with an ontology of rational agents whose freedom and responsibility are related intimately to their interiority. Such agency is already implicitly opposed to the external world, where bodies and material structures are seen as limits or threats to freedom because they are governed by a causality that is antithetical to free, rational agency and ontologically devoid of its qualities.

The phenomenological approach I commend begins instead with a chiaroscuro of agentic capacities as these emerge imperfectly within an intercorporeal lifeworld. It is agnostic regarding the form or degree of their appearing. Now, it is true that critical modernists have already travelled some distance along this path by rendering the emergence of agents an intersubjective and historical occurrence. But arguably they have lacked the ontological resources for thinking from the perspective of collective or intersubjective life as such and they therefore tend to retain a residual individualism. Habermas, for example, explicitly rejects the philosophy of the subject in favour of an intersubjectivity grounded in communicative action, so one would expect to find a correspondingly radicalised account of agency here and indeed selfhood is generated for him, albeit to an ambiguous degree (Cook, 2003, p. 284), through intersubjective relationships. Yet not only is rationality still the primary ingredient attributed to agents; it is still individuals who bear the weight of the communicative task, and out of whose locutions intersubjectivity is forged. Thus Habermas defines the 'intersubjective process of reaching understanding' in terms of 'a "real" process of argumentation in which the individuals concerned cooperate' (Habermas, 1987, p. 295f; 1990, p. 67).

Once subjectivity is understood as an intersubjective process, it must nonetheless follow that individuals will acquire differential agentic capacities depending upon their situation. So the agency-subject bond is loosened here because individuals will not necessarily become (full or exemplary) agents. But inversely, must agents be individuals? The bond is not sufficiently loosened from my perspective because the focus remains too much on emerging subjective, rather than agentic, capacities. Critical theorists retain a fairly conventional sense of agency here. While, moreover, they acknowledge that its conditions have been realised only relatively recently – as a contingent product of early bourgeois life – it also follows that such agents remain vulnerable to extinction as conditions change. The public sphere that Habermas presents as a precondition of democratic deliberation is, for example, menaced by late modern forces of civic privatism and colonisation by non-communicative forces. Because the theory of agency embraced here combines relatively unreconstructed ontological assumptions about the nature of agency with an historical observation that rational individuals have emerged to exemplify them, the latter's historical eclipse throws radical politics into crisis since there are no criteria for seeking agentic signs elsewhere.

The increasingly pervasive and global forms of power associated with postmodernity exacerbate this dilemma (Hardt and Negri, 2000). But more damaging still is the way typical postmodern claims – that subjects are too unstable or fragmented in their identities, too opaque in their self-knowledge and too nonrational in their thinking to sustain personal commitments or collective identifications; that there is no essential inner self, repository of freedom, will, identity or autonomy; that

subjectivity is merely an effect of power or performative iteration; that history has no overall meaning or direction – have made it extremely difficult to envisage what kind of political agency could even in principle materialise and what its motivations or ambitions might be. This has indeed been the gist of widespread concerns among postmodernism's opponents and has puzzled even friendly critics of post-structuralists like Butler or Foucault (for example, Hanssen, 2000; McNay, 1992, 2000; Weberman, 2000; Lovell, 2003). For when the latter famously wrote that the 'individual is no doubt the fictitious atom of an "ideological" representation of society, but he is also a reality fabricated by this specific technology of power that I have called "discipline"' (Foucault, 1977, p. 194), he called the distinguishing marks of agency itself into question by redefining subjectification as synonymous with subjection. Foucault's critics have consistently accused him on the one hand of eliminating agency, especially during his middle period when disciplinary power looked so all-pervasive, and on the other of reintroducing agency, but in an implausibly individualistic, voluntaristic mould, in his later work on the ethics of the self. In other words, he is charged with oscillating between the determinism and voluntarism that I earlier identified as the fate of even radical attempts at rethinking agency.

This then is where the theoretical and historical elements of agency's crisis come together, inviting a fundamental reappraisal of this troubled concept and its exemplars. But the danger is that agency will either reappear in its old individualist and voluntaristic clothes or it will be so eviscerated and unrecognisable that politics will become trivial, stultified or replaced by ethical exhortations lacking transformative means. This is why the historical crisis of radical politics requires a novel conception of agency that preserves qualities associated with it as criteria for its discernment within contemporary situations, without presuming in advance the form they will take.

### **A Phenomenological Approach to Agency: As a Spectrum of Agentic Capacities**

Fundamental to my rethinking of agency is the phenomenological contention that it is irremediably embodied. Foregrounding the body means recognising the corporeality of thinkers and hence their situatedness. This observation affects the phenomenologist's primary task, which is, as Husserl put it, to return to the things themselves. In his later work he identified the latter with the historical, corporeal and intersubjective lifeworld (Husserl, 1970; Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, 1964b). This has significant implications not only for definitions of agency but also for the methodology that is used to detect and participate in its mode of appearing. It is important to understand the critical nature of this phenomenological task. For the purpose of return is not accurately to represent immediate experience but to defamiliarise and interrogate all those commonsense or ontological presuppositions (such as those concerning agency or the subject) that occlude the dynamic appearing of existence. While the phenomenologist does indeed struggle to bring pre-cognitive experience to expression (and because she is an embodied existent it is not wholly alien to her), no thinker can coincide with the lived and so the mediated, hermeneutical aspects of this ongoing process of return must be

acknowledged. This is accomplished by engaging in an enquiry that Merleau-Ponty, for example, called hyper-dialectics and Bourdieu, a reflexive sociology. It means engaging critically in a constant back-and-forth between (first person) lived experience and (third person) objective accounts of it, while also experimenting with concepts that emerge from the changing world they describe. This approach has the advantage of avoiding the logical contradiction inherent in philosophies that both deny and practise critical agency, without taking agency for granted as an ontological given. Instead, it tracks and emulates the hazardous appearing of agency in genesis: in Merleau-Ponty's elegant phrase, it 'steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. xiii).

A phenomenological perspective suggests that modern ideas of agency have elided a series of phenomenal processes – such as consciousness, meaning-generation, interiority, reflexivity, will, reasoning – that are then unified in the figure of the ontological individual or transcendental subject. Beginning instead with the perceptual, corporeal lifeworld allows the phenomenologist to suspend any presupposition that these processes must be located in discrete, reflective selves. In proposing a spectrum of such qualities I am suggesting breaking down the notion of agency into a series of contingent phenomena in order to describe their provisional emergence, as well as to reflect upon the agentic propensities of a variety of processes at different levels of (co-)existence. At one pole I envisage pre-personal, non-cognitive bodily processes; at the other, transpersonal, intersubjective processes that instantiate an interworld. Between them are singularities: phenomena with a relatively individual or collective identity whose provisional forms and activities come closer to modernity's sense of agency without coinciding with it. But while these latter moments of agency are not negated, neither are they ontologically privileged since agentic properties emerge and interact across the agentic spectrum. In fact, this middle region is in some ways the most existentially unstable since it constantly leaks into and depends upon the pre-subjective and trans-subjective ends of the spectrum. It is now then necessary to put some flesh on this rather abstract design and to ask about its significance for politics.

## Agency and Corporeality

It is important in using the analytical strategy of an agentic spectrum to avoid any suggestion of development from one end to the other. All points on the spectrum co-exist and interact. The incarnate agentic properties forming one pole are not then a primordial or inferior mode of agency that is subsequently transcended. The political relationships that mark collective life always operate in this pre-cognitive, somatic dimension. It is an irony that while this has remained largely invisible to political scientists it is the most visible register of co-existence since it is where bodies act and suffer; where power is etched onto the body and communication takes place through a mute yet eloquent corporeal syntax.

During its existence the body responds to practical tasks: perception rather than reason is primary. Phenomenological investigations show that the body is never merely a passive transmitter of messages but plays an active role in the generation of perceptual meaning. Somatic needs motivate it to cast an intentional arc, so that

what is perceived is not an inert objective world but a meaningful milieu patterned in response to questions posed. In this carnal act of composition a rudimentary consciousness is discernable as pre-cognitive structuring. Merleau-Ponty writes that each perception is an interpretation that 're-enacts on its own account the birth of intelligence and has some element of creative genius about it' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, pp. 37, 43). The perceiving body is condemned to meaning since even the 'smallest sensory datum is never presented in any other way than integrated into a configuration and already "patterned"' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 159). The dualisms that ground agency's traditional senses are thus avoided because significance is already immanent in the perceptual world that 'has fissures and gaps into which subjectivities slip and lodge themselves, or rather which are the subjectivities themselves' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 30).

Various agentic qualities are thus identifiable at this corporeal level. First and foremost, there is *bodily knowing*: a *practical reasoning* whereby disparate elements are gathered into existentially meaningful forms (or *Gestalten*), which Merleau-Ponty refers to as 'intelligibility in the nascent state' (Merleau-Ponty, 1965, p. 206f). So the body is *active* in composing structures and thus *efficacious* in changing its world: it does not require a 'mind' subsequently to impose form. As a consequence, the phenomenal body enjoys, secondly, a limited *freedom* for stylistic improvisation in its compositions. It is, thirdly, *intentional* and *motivated* in its relationship with its environment, which it might therefore be said to 'choose'. Although its choices and innovations will be circumscribed by the accumulated structures and sedimented habits that lodge within its lifeworld, there is scope for an *extemporisation* that brings *change*, while the logic of questioning and response suggests at least the possibility of *progress* as a 'crossing out' of non-sequiturs; as integration and enrichment. An *interrogative* stance emerges here as the primary and appropriate orientation of the body and this also suggests an agentic, even an *ethical*, quality (*qua* openness to the other). Finally, there is an inter-corporeal *communication* where meaning is conveyed via gestures and styles of comportment that carve out architectural and emotive spaces of engagement.

In sum, somatic agentic properties are evident as an active forging of (pre-cognitive) meaning, a lived rationality; as a practical intentionality and motivation that grant direction to such acts; as a limited freedom and creativity, an interrogative orientation and a communicative competence (see Nietzsche, 1961, pp. 61–2). This account is also supported by recent neuroscience. Of course this is not responsible agency as political thinkers conventionally understand it. But these agentic processes remain sufficiently pervasive in collective life to warrant inclusion in any research agenda or transformative ambition for politics.

It is also necessary to emphasise the sheer fact of agents' embodiment and its political significance here. The body situates them in space and time and thus underlines the particular, passionate and perspectival nature of all claims. It also entails exteriority: having an outside whose intersubjective significance eludes conscious control while locating actors within a field of forces where intentions achieve efficacy through action and acts feed into the unintended consequences of collective life. It is bodies, finally, that remind agents of their own and others' frailty; their vulnerability to suffering and pain; the high stakes of political conflict. For the body

situates them firmly within material and affective worlds, where economic and emotional structures mediate the satisfaction of somatic needs and violence assaults the flesh with raw immediacy. It reminds all actors of their mortality.

This somatic agency evinces political significance in multifarious ways. These yield the scene of a corporeal politics; a field of visceral force relations where carnal signs and power relations weave their own topography (De Beauvoir, 1953, p. 68). Recent criticism of discursive democrats' emphasis on rational communication to the neglect of rhetorical elements offers an example of this sensitivity to the way speakers' intentions are both over-determined by carnal-affective phenomena and drenched with bodily meanings that exceed explicit speech acts (Dryzek, 2000, pp. 62–74; Young, 2000, ch. 2). Iris Young has described a symphony of corporeal gestures that convey repulsion or aversion, where messages of prejudice and exclusion might be contrary to more tolerant, inclusive beliefs speakers consciously espouse. Voice tone, eye contact, styles of behaviour, facial expression, gestures, are all at work in this silent yet lucid communicative field, where they have far-reaching effects in the treatment of those diverse persons collectively labelled 'other' (Young, 1990).

Linda Martín Alcoff similarly deploys phenomenological analysis to describe how racial oppression and identity are lived in the body. She accuses macro-level accounts of being inattentive to the micro-interactions where exclusions are reproduced and re-signified at the level of experience. This, Alcoff insists, is where the formation and management of subjectivities first occurs, through myriad small, everyday exchanges operative beneath the level of consciousness and thus relatively immune to rational criticism or contestation. Citing Merleau-Ponty's habitual body she notes that in the default position it adopts to handle common experiences, its corporeal responses can defy mutual recognition (Alcoff, 1999, p. 18). In this sense the body manifests conservative agency by perpetuating embodied rituals that act as a reservoir of sedimented memories to lend a practical continuity to (hierarchical) social life. Reflecting on the effects of hate speech, Judith Butler invokes Bourdieu's related notion of *habitus* to describe how symbolic acts of name-calling acquire lived embodiment; 'how the words enter the limbs, craft the gesture, bend the spine. One need only consider how racial or gendered slurs live and thrive in and as the flesh of the addressee' (Butler, 1997, p. 141). Butler goes on to condemn the conservatism of this habitual body and in her own work she grants the body a more resistant role through transgressive performances.

But the point is surely that like other vehicles of agentic capacity, the body's political reactions are not naturally either conservative or transgressive. They vary according to its situation, while its communicative capacities allow for relationships predicated on an unspoken recognition and solidarity, as well as on exclusion. It is therefore important not to ascribe any specific political orientation to the body *a priori*. It is equally important to avoid reifying or simply modelling the body on a traditional sense of agency (as a unified, intentional, active source of freedom or dissent). For the body's capacities remain diffuse and bound up with passions or sensations that are not readily decoded, much less controlled (Asad, 2003, p. 70

n. 7). In short, an insistence on corporeal capacities and their political significance entails the opening of a field of inquiry and recognition of immanent, contingent emergence. Social or experimental realism (Archer, 2000; Lakoff, 1987) as well as discourse analysis; first person hermeneutics as well as careful observation; anthropology, neuroscience and psychoanalysis as well as literature can all assist the phenomenologist in tracking emergent agentic capacities, singularities and strategies on a visceral level.

The phenomenologist might for example begin by exploring how problems that motivate political agents originate in somatic experience, where a carnal resistance perhaps initiates transformative acts. In pursuing perceptual equilibrium, we know that the body strives to overcome blockages and dysfunctions of which it has existential knowledge. If political radicalism might similarly originate in bodily experiences of suffering or need (hunger, cold, pain), why should resistance not also emerge on this carnal level (as aesthetic revulsion, abjection, nausea) to render corporeal refusal a prelude to action? (Marcuse, 1969, p. 43) A tightening of the chest, a constricting of the throat, a stiffening of the shoulders, a knotting in the stomach, might all suggest a negative visceral response to a situation, while a quickening of the heart, a rapidity of breaths, a clenching of the fists, an adrenalin rush, a blush, a frown, might indicate a preparation for resistance that is inscribed in the exteriority of the flesh and communicates to others a silent call to common action. Recall, for example, Orwell's fictional character Winston in *Nineteen Eighty Four*, reflecting that a twitch, a spasm, a quiver could give one away as an uncontrollable expression of dissent, where 'your own nervous system' was your worst enemy and rebellion 'meant a look in the eyes, an inflection of the voice' (Orwell, 1954, pp. 59, 64). The only evidence Winston gleans that things were once better is a mute protest in his bones, an instinctive sense that conditions are intolerable; a visceral revulsion against the ugliness of life (Orwell, 1954, p. 67).

For the phenomenologist, however, such corporeal reactions cannot simply be designated instinctual. They are lived ways of responding to experience, and therefore include a contingent cultural element. Simon Charlesworth exemplifies the requisite analysis when he reconstructs the experiences of workers in Northern England out of the carnal suffering they struggle to express. Drawing on theoretical work by Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu, he notes the fatalism that arises from the physical demands of an everyday life that has congealed into a pre-reflective way of being-in-the world, a *habitus*. 'If we consider the body as a network of lived-through meanings,' he observes, then we must listen to workers' own voices. 'These people's being is reduced to being a tool, an instrument, a being that must hump and shift materials as the condition of its own existence and this way of comportment reveals the world in determinate sensuous-affective ways' (Charlesworth, 2000, p. 230).

A phenomenological approach asks, in conclusion, how agentic properties emerge and endure within corporeal experience. It describes a dimension of power whose medium is bodily effects/affects: one that is both the site of a body politics in its own right and one that incites or inhibits the emergence of individual or collective political actors as bearers of agentic properties.



## Agency and Singularity

Moving to the mid-regions of the spectrum, my aim is to allow for the appearance of the sort of individual or collective agents that political thinkers privilege but without grounding them in an ontology of individual subjects or a teleological philosophy of history. Instead, I suggest a contingent appearing of such agents as *singularities*: agentic constellations where agentic capacities manifest a provisional concentration and integrity. If phenomena associated with agency emerge through corporeal processes, the fact of embodiment precludes agents from fully entering the symbolic domain. Phenomenology does not then require the elimination of agency, but it does insist on its provisional appearing (and disappearing) within an existential process. This applies equally to the genesis of agency *per se* and to the historical appearing of particular political agents. In the former case the phenomenologist must trace the disparate emergence of constituent capacities that have typically been conflated under the title of agency (or subjectivity): individuality, freedom, reflexivity, interiority. In the latter, s/he must undertake a careful reading of events and trajectories to elicit opportunities for agentic input and to interpret the ambiguous signs of its political appearing (Coole, 2003). In this section I will indicate both levels of analysis.

In trying to grasp how individual agency emerges it will be helpful to begin with the reflexivity that Husserl and Merleau-Ponty attribute to the phenomenal body. 'The body catches itself from the outside engaged in a cognitive process; it tries to touch itself while being touched, and initiates "a kind of reflection" which is sufficient to distinguish it from objects' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 93). It is this carnal reflexivity, where the flesh folds back over itself, that sustains ontological interiority or negativity (Coole, 2000a). Yet the body never achieves perfect reversibility because there remains a difference or non-coincidence between touching and being touched. This negativity is the humus of agentic capacity, which flourishes in the interval or spacing (*écart*) that opens.

Nietzsche's account of emergent subjectivity is helpful in explaining how this general ontological capacity assumes more specifically agentic form. Nietzsche, designated by Merleau-Ponty a phenomenologist *avant la lettre* (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. viii), describes how life forces were turned back on themselves to yield the '*internalization* of man', where the 'whole inner world, originally stretched thinly as though between two layers of skin, was expanded and extended itself' (Nietzsche, 1994, p. 61). Within this bloated space agentic qualities like memory, conscience, responsibility, guilt, promising, willing, reasoning, calculating and reflecting proliferate, the outcome of a long, complex history of ascetic mastery and bodily sacrifice. It is instructive to compare Nietzsche's genealogy of the ability to make promises with Hobbes' mere assumption of individual capacity here. But Nietzsche also describes internalisation as a sickness like a pregnancy: a fecund engendering of exceptional powers of agency, the 'true womb of ideal and imaginative events' (Nietzsche, 1994, p. 64). Reflexivity, interiority, emerge then where the body folds back on itself. For Merleau-Ponty this process is enhanced immeasurably by the development of language (rather than punishment) and it is here that he claims to pass to 'the "interior" man' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 169) since it is in language that the interiority associated with reflexivity acquires altogether greater powers

of symbolic variation, communication and freedom. It allows singularities to turn back upon themselves more eloquently; to articulate and problematise the values and commitments that originated in experiences from which they now acquire more critical distance. But language does not constitute agents or interiority, nor is it a transparent medium for communicating an inner self. It remains saturated with existential significance, while its symbolic meanings rely on an unstable play of signifiers. Linguistic expression does nonetheless facilitate a considerable enhancement of agentic capacity.

It is instructive to compare this phenomenological sketch of interiority with Butler's advice to deconstructionists. Rather than asking how identity becomes internalised, she argues, the correct question is: 'From what strategic position in public discourse and for what reasons has the trope of interiority and the disjunctive binary of inner/outer taken hold? In what language is "inner space" figured?' (Butler, 1990, p. 134). Having reduced interiority to a discursive effect, she succeeds in deconstructing the ontology of rational selves, but her politics is bereft of crucial agentic qualities (McNay, 2000, p. 9). A phenomenology of agentic capacities manages to challenge the ontology while recognising the pre-discursive stuff of agency in embodied experience. It thus accommodates a contingent reflexivity, and hence agency, without presuming an essential inner domain of freedom and will.

Political analyses of agency, however, require more than this. They also call for the recognition of particular actors, so the next consideration is whether phenomenology can account for their emergence. I use the term *singularities* here because it can cover both individual and collective agents, recognising their uniqueness as virtual forms; as potential assemblages in genesis (Deleuze, 1994). Now, corporeality already accommodates a certain *individuation* of agentic qualities. Experiences of suffering affect relatively discrete nervous systems: 'The fact remains that I am the one by whom they are experienced' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 358). It is moreover the pre-reflective unity of the body that brings a certain continuity to experiences that would otherwise dissipate over time. And because embodiment situates us, each enjoys a relatively unique perspective and hence potential originality.

To understand how such relatively discrete individuals might acquire a sense of selfhood or singularity, it is necessary to recall the reflexivity considered above and helpful to invoke Merleau-Ponty's sense of form (*Gestalt*). As with perceptual unities, parts here are immanently combined into meaningful but open wholes that are more than the sum of their parts, where those parts are associated by virtue of a contingent existential affinity. Singularities are from this perspective provisional forms evincing stylistic integrity that is more aesthetic than causal. Nietzsche seemed to have something like this in mind when he wrote that: 'One thing is needful. – To "give style" to one's character – a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan' (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 232). Foucault advocates something similar in his later work but its agentic provenance is unclear. For Merleau-Ponty this process of self-stylisation originates in the potential for expressive improvisation inherent in perception, so its agentic properties have a practical, realist basis. Singularity is constituted by the stylisation of a particular way of being-in-the-world, a particular manner of weaving together the perceptual and cultural fields.

It may remain on the level of experience or achieve linguistic reflexivity – this will depend in large part upon the cultural resources and political exigencies it encounters – and its appearance can be collective as well as individual, but it is irreducible to a discursive or power effect.

Having established the phenomenology of agents (*qua* singularities) in the middle regions of the agentic spectrum, it is important nonetheless to insist on their limits, since they emerge provisionally within a spectrum where they interact with, and leak into, pre- and trans-personal processes. Interiority remains irreducibly interwoven with exteriority; individuality with sociability; subjectivity with intersubjectivity. It is through lived, practical relations with the world and with others that singularities appear and find sustenance, so they always rely upon and incorporate alterity. A self in particular remains a provisional form appearing at ‘the intersection of many lines of behaviour’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, pp. 398, 404). Its reflexivity never achieves self-coincidence: there is always slippage and invention where time, power, language and liberty enter between lived singularity and a sense of self, such that identity is incessantly dissipated and constituted by exterior forces even as it is recreated by its own expressions. Agency, in short, remains in process, where there is only an ‘open and indefinite unity of subjectivity’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 406f). From this perspective phenomenology can acknowledge individual political actors without concluding that individuals make history. But, in concluding with a brief illustration of how it understands the emergence of historical singularities, I will focus on an example of collective agency, since this has traditionally posed a more difficult challenge for political thinkers.

In *Woman’s Estate* Juliet Mitchell described the genesis of a gendered collective, tracing the internal phenomenology of its coming to theoretical and political expression. What she commended during the late 1960s was a twofold approach: a critical interrogation of everyday experiences by their participants plus an objective account of broader structures of oppression, where the second emerges from but contextualises the first. Women’s common ‘understanding of their situation comes from their own analysis’, Mitchell explained, developing through ‘collective work’. She spoke of a ‘new movement forging new theory’ out of diverse elements and strategies, while noting how that movement had originated ‘with a series of complaints’ and citing ‘the release of anger, anxiety, the struggle of proclaiming the painful and transforming it into the political’ (Mitchell, 1971, pp. 44, 54, 61). Women were entering from ‘the unspecified frustration of their own private lives’ then discovering through ‘shared awareness’ that their apparently personal dilemmas were a ‘social predicament’ and hence a ‘political problem’ (Mitchell, 1971, p. 61).

Women (and much less, ‘Woman’) did not then pre-exist as a collective agent but some were incited to political agency via visceral, emotional and symbolic suffering, where shared meanings were engendered on pre-reflective as well as communicative levels, within a particular situation (Coole, 2000b). This account of the immanent engendering of political agency avoids grand narrative history or false universals. It is reminiscent of the way some phenomenologists describe the contingent appearing (and demise) of a politically radical working class (Thompson,

1968; Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 444). But it might equally be used to track the less coherent political agency of, for example, a public sphere, ethno-cultural singularities, or even the British schoolchildren whose recent anti-war demonstrations were such an unexpected event. For a focus on agentic qualities allows phenomenologists to seek scattered signs of evanescent political agency even where emergent singularities lack the visibility of the women's or workers' movements, while it frees them from ontological or teleological preconceptions regarding their form. If some of the political actors identified will resemble those in traditional histories, what is new here is the perspective from which that identification takes place and its potential to discern more diffuse, less visible capacities at work.

Two theoretical points need emphasising in conclusion. First, the phenomenology of political agents has the same internal logic as that of agency *per se* – that is, they emerge as provisional concentrations of agentic capacities that acquire more or less coherence and duration, depending upon their context. But second, the appearing of these singularities can only be grasped as moments within the whole spectrum of agentic properties. For on the one hand political agents emerge from, and are motivated by, diffuse experiences that are lived and communicated by the body and on the other, they emerge within and into a field of forces that incites, shapes and constrains their development while subjecting them to a transpersonal logic of collective action.

### Structural Logics: The Agentic Properties of the Transpersonal

In the context of modernity's conventional focus on agents, the relationship between this far end of my agentic spectrum and its middle regions has been widely played out in terms of the agency-versus-structure debate. Social scientists often proclaim their antipathy towards both the voluntarism that arises from privileging agents as free individuals and the determinism that arises from undue emphasis on impersonal structures. An interactive model that recognises agents as efficacious but constrained and structures as relatively open but constraining has often been invoked as a consequence (for example by Giddens, Habermas, Hindess, Layder, Sibeon). This more dialectical approach seems to me both theoretically and intuitively compelling, at least within the parameters set by the debate. While, however, an insistence on agency-structure reciprocity might radicalise approaches to agency, the terms of the debate still remain transfixed by concerns about the freedom or limits of agents. Protagonists make an important contribution to the spectrum's middle-region concern about emergent singularities and the conditions that constrain them. But what I want to advocate here is a more resolutely non-Cartesian social ontology that would be adequate to the *transpersonal* domain.

Despite their dialectical commitments, it has actually been difficult for these more dialectical thinkers to explain and sustain the relationship between agents and structures; exponents remain vulnerable to charges of unwitting reductionism and structural dualism – see for example Layder's critique of Giddens (Layder, 1997, p. 247). This is a legacy of the dualistic formula in which the controversy is typically presented. Once agents and structures are theoretically dichotomised, the

challenge is to discover what links them. But this is an impossible and misconceived task because it is still implicitly structured by Cartesian presuppositions that locate agency on one side and deny it to the other. There are numerous examples of the difficulties that follow but two will suffice.

In a recent edition of *Politics*, Lewis took up the challenge presented by Sibeon of reflecting on the ontological commitments that underpin key theories (Lewis, 2002; Sibeon, 1999). The theory in question was the agency-structure debate and their disagreement concerned the kind of efficacy structures possess. Lewis identifies an ambiguity in his predecessor's work inasmuch as it seems both to attribute influence to structures and to deny them causality, which is reserved for agents. Wondering how else they could function, he offers a distinction – drawn from Aristotle via critical realism – between an efficient causality ascribed to agents and a material causality attributed to structures. But if critical realism offers a richer sense of the links between agents and structures, it does so by reinforcing the difference between them in distinguishing their respective causalities. It is provocative from my perspective because Lewis acknowledges that “agency” does not exhaust all the varieties of causality in the social world’ (Lewis, 2002, p. 21; see Archer, 1995). Might agentic efficacy not then proliferate across agents and structures in a way that is ontologically continuous across a spectrum, rather than dichotomised? But this possibility is quickly staunched by the protagonists’ agreement that decision-making is the crucial criterion of agency and the index of its efficient causality. Even if structures do evince a different sort of causality, they cannot possess agentic capacity for these authors who both accept agency’s traditional equation with rational subjects *qua* decision-makers. They ignore the corporeal and transpersonal dimensions that render decision-making only ambiguously agentic in their own terms (despite Sibeon’s provocative introduction of chance).

My second example concerns Pierre Bourdieu, who is especially interesting in this context, since he has been described as Merleau-Ponty’s ‘sociological heir’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 20) and explicitly shares his anti-Cartesianism. Bourdieu’s stated aim, moreover, is to

escape from under the philosophy of the subject without doing away with the agent, as well as from under the philosophy of the structure but without forgetting to take into account the effects it wields upon and through the agent’. (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 121f)

To this end, he minimises references to agents and structures, preferring the more relational terms *habitus* and field. With *habitus*, the objective relations of the social field are internalised as pre-reflective, open dispositions that take the form of mental and somatic schemata guiding perception, affectivity and action. Objective relations anchored in structures of power, existing independently of consciousness or will, but comprising a historical formation developed by an accumulation of conflicts internal to it, constitute the field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, pp. 97, 124, 128). Although this field ‘conditions’ *habitus* and remains primary, Bourdieu insists that it remains an open network of shifting power relations. ‘The principle of the dynamics of a field lies in the form of its structure and, in particular, in the distance, the gaps, the asymmetries between the various specific forces that

confront one another' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 101). This internal negativity, one might say, grants the field its own generativity despite its being 'devoid of an inventor', as well as the porosity that opens it to interventions by singularities as 'a space of potential and active forces' (Bordieu and Wacquant, p. 101). Most crucially, the open configurations of both *habitus* and field permit reversible, co-constitutive relations between them. The process does not then envisage agents who act on a field from outside: they emerge within it (my singularities), and even resistant strategies are shaped by the logic of a field they may nonetheless transform.

Despite the relationality of Bourdieu's careful dialectics and his deference to phenomenological emphases on embodiment, I am not, however, convinced that the distinction between *habitus* and field manages to avoid the dualism inherent in the agency-vs-structure (subjective-vs-objective) formula. This is why Bourdieu is obliged to hypothesise plausible links between them by introducing terms such as 'correspondence', 'internalisation' and 'conditioning' (which have incited charges of structural determinism), where Sibeon and Lewis invoked causality. In fairness to all these authors, they agree that the relative strength of agents or structures is historically variable, so their respective efficacies require empirical investigation and not a static equation. This is again helpful in exploring the emergence of singularities with agentic capacity, yet it still operates within a conventional either/or schema. Furthermore, such investigations will never actually glimpse agents or structures at work. While on one level it may be analytically useful to separate them (a move advocated for example by Margaret Archer's distinction between 'analytical dualism' and 'duality of structure' (Archer, 1995 ch. 6; 2000, pp. 1, 6, 172; Layder, 1997, p. 246), from the perspective of my third dimension it obscures this other register of the agentic field. Here situations do appear as dense, inter-subjective configurations whose generative properties and ambiguous meanings are irreducible to agents or structures (or even to an identification of their exchanges), but whose proliferation might, I am arguing, be described in its own right as a dimension with its own distinctive ontology. This is where history is made.

It is helpful from this perspective to note my divergence from Archer's social realist approach. Much of Archer's work is congruent with the agentic spectrum and she indeed remarks on the compatibility of realism and phenomenology, where she draws on Merleau-Ponty's account of the body to insist that agents emerge through the primacy of practice. But this congruence again pertains to mid-spectrum regions and where I diverge from her is where she criticises Giddens, Bourdieu *et al.* for committing what she calls 'central conflation' (Archer, 1996, pp. 73–80; 2000, pp. 6f, 151ff). Archer defines this as a mode of mutual constitutionalism that is so extreme, it elides subject and object within a totality too intimate to identify the variable contributions and interplay of agents and structures within specific situations (hence her commitment to analytical dualism). This is important for her because she aims to recover agency from what she sees as a 'full frontal assault' by postmodern constructionists and 'linguistic terrorism' (Archer, 2000, pp. 1, 44) but also, because she fears that without the distinction researchers will be 'confronted with amalgams of "practices" which oscillate wildly between voluntarism and determinism' (Archer, 2000, p. 6).

Without underestimating these caveats in the context of the agency-structure debate, I am, however, suggesting that something like ‘central conflationism’ might convey a glimpse of the transpersonal dimension: which has its own distinctive and irreducible agentic capacity and generativity that are indiscernible if one insists on focusing on agents (and/or structures). This is precisely where Bourdieu is more intriguing: where his formula suggests one interactive upsurge wherein different kinds of relationship and agentic expression are interwoven (‘chiasmic’ in Merleau-Ponty’s terminology). This has similarities with Foucault’s account of power as an agonistic field of forces that requires freedom and entails resistance (I believe both owe a significant debt to Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the visible and invisible here) (Foucault, 1978, p. 92f). It is indicative of Archer’s approach that she interprets the later Foucault as readmitting the ‘autonomous human subject’ (Archer, 2000, pp. 19, 33). But a better solution to the ‘Foucault paradox’ (Weberman, 2000) may lie in resisting temptations to seek an agent as responsible for subjective or political effects. Instead, Foucault would have been trying to describe variable agentic capacities that emerge (or not) within a field that is in principle complex, porous, productive and open (although vulnerable to closure through domination). I do not think this need necessarily means a ‘flattening out’ or denial of the sort of multiple ‘social domains’ described by Layder (1997, pp. 4, 12ff, ch. 4), provided researchers attend to a careful genealogy of the field itself. Bourdieu’s version indeed shows the advantage of a more phenomenological perspective, where *habitus* allows him to take seriously the lived experience of players whose agency is constituted by, but also necessary for and sometimes incompatible with, the objective field. His reflexive sociology entails a back-and-forth between first and third person accounts whose methodology echoes the strategy Mitchell commended to the fledgling women’s movement. Agency is neither a mere effect of power here, nor its cause, but is a capacity immanent to the social field. It is only indeed possible to enter a field, Bourdieu contends, if an appropriate configuration of agentic properties (‘active properties’, ‘efficient characteristics’, ‘specific capital’) exists; properties the field incites but also requires, since without them it could not endure.

In sum: in addition to a focus on corporeal agentic capacities and the phenomenology of singularities, the agentic spectrum summons a novel social ontology consonant with the mode of becoming of an intersubjective field. Conceptualising this region of the spectrum is especially important for the political, since this is where collective life unfolds. I prefer the term *transpersonal* to structural here because it is crucial to avoid the sort of reification or reductionism that is often implicit in references to structure. This was after all the problem that its critics identified in the Structuralist Movement, whose anti-humanism initiated the attack on modern theories of subjectivity in which accounts of agency had been grounded. Structures here seemed both to eliminate agency by explaining its appearances as determined *and* to exhibit a peculiar agency of their own inasmuch as they are responsible for historical effects and wield constitutive potency. There are three unfortunate corollaries: transpersonal generativity is mystified; the theorist courts performative contradiction by implicitly assuming the status of a rational agent who explains but avoids structural determination, and the logic of determinism or voluntarism (now favouring the former) reasserts itself.

Despite such dangers, structuralist and post-structuralist approaches remain important for my argument because they do imply a novel mode of non-subjectivist political efficacy. The first criterion of agency I specified earlier was its being an active force with sufficient potency to engender effects and anti-humanist proponents have envisaged an *immanent generativity* here: change that is *sui generis*, and hence dependent on no external agent. Spinoza, Hegel, Marx, Althusser, Foucault and Deleuze have all been associated with such immanence, but an especially influential manner of conceiving it has been the one derived from structural linguistics. According to Saussure, every positive sign (or, by extension, phenomenon or singularity) is the unstable effect of a play of differences and it is difference in this sense (with language as its paradigm) that has been widely used to attribute the negativity, contingency and productivity that are needed for this impersonal and transpersonal realm to transform itself and to generate effects that are neither the work of consciousness nor modelled upon a subjectivist anthropology or causal ontology. Difference, in short, has substituted for agency in these anti-humanist approaches, sustaining certain agentic qualities (notably generativity) in the absence of agents. Butler, for example, explains the productivity of power as ‘inadvertently generative’ due to the ‘functions of differential relations’ (Butler, 1990, p. 12). Because differences support but menace every positive form, they readily translate into the more political trope of a field of forces, whose inherent openness accommodates the resistances by as well as the constitution of singularities from the middle regions of the spectrum. The idea of a force field is a promising way of conceptualising the transpersonal.

It is important, nonetheless, to avoid reifying difference as if it enjoyed transcendental power (Derrida 1982, p. 21f). Regarding the political, it is especially crucial to remember that whatever the choreography of self-generative structures, they remain transpersonal expressions of *collective action*. If they limit agents’ freedom it is because they have an anonymity and inertia that is intrinsic to their provenance and an outcome of the limited freedom and ambiguous interiority that embodied singularities express when they interact – materially and discursively – to reproduce this collective exteriority. This interstitial space acquires a logic of its own that is irreducible to an aggregate of individual acts. But if in concluding an exploration of the agentic spectrum it is necessary to evoke this realm of the between, it is also important to note the difficulty of doing so, since for modern thinkers it remains profoundly counter-intuitive. The challenge is to conceptualise the flesh of the political as an interworld; to grasp its distinctive choreography and the phenomenology of its appearing: not as a relationship between *subjects*, but as an *intersubjective field*.

In his early work, Merleau-Ponty defined the phenomenological world as ‘the sense which is revealed where the paths of my various experiences intersect, and also where my own and other people’s intersect and engage each other like gears’. It is not, he insisted, a ‘plurality of subjects, but an intersubjectivity’, where the totality of actions blend (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. xx; Merleau-Ponty, 1969, p. 110; Bourdieu, 1980, p. 291). Later he tried to adumbrate an ontology consonant with this world and experimented with the term ‘flesh’ [*chair*], which generalised the agentic properties of the perceiving body to non-anthropological ‘Being’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). In describing how the body exhibits pre-personal capacities for



agency he wrote: 'I ought to say that *one* perceives in me, and not that I perceive. Every sensation carries within it a germ of ... depersonalization' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 215). But if the body's agentic acts are practically intentional yet without self-consciousness, they surely entail a generality and anonymity that could equally be classified as pre-personal *or* transpersonal: which is implied by describing individuals as 'organs of one single intercorporeity' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, p. 168). The agentic qualities of the body (its reflexivity, interiority, practical intentionality and reasoning, etc.) would then be able to be generalised as transpersonal qualities of the flesh. Its generative immanence would be impersonal and general because it is both corporeal and part of a force field where collective life spins unintended consequences.

Yet this interworld is the one experienced by singularities, so it is meaningful rather than alien or opaque. It is where acts and desires congeal, as traces and residues that ensure it a complex temporality and historicity. Its history is not necessarily bereft of direction (*sens*), either, because just as we saw earlier that the body strives practically to eliminate dysfunctions, so this negative logic operates within the trajectories of the interworld, too, where suffering or need incite agentic responses of resistance or refusal. This contingent process promises no positive solutions, much less a grand narrative. It will often remain too diffuse to yield any recognisable *sens*, or its *sens* might proliferate only on an experiential level. But sometimes (as in the example of the Women's Movement) it can yield more clearly agentic singularities and a heightened collective reflexivity that achieves recognisable effects. It is this uneven history, as a contingency that is collectively engendered, not the assumption or death of particular meanings or agents in narrative history, that the ontology of the interworld supports and whose interpretation is an ongoing task.

A final, if speculative, checklist of agentic qualities operative at this transpersonal, structural end of the agentic spectrum can now be drawn up. It has *transformative efficacy* because it exhibits an immanent generativity that is intercorporeal, intersubjective and differential. It sometimes engenders and is changed by mid-spectrum singularities (individual and collective agents), but it also evinces its own distinctive, transpersonal logic. This interworld does not have *motivation* or *purpose* as such, but it may have a contingent *sens* because it is an intersubjective domain where desires and refusals meld and congeal. While it is important to avoid ascribing *will* or *causality* to the structures that proliferate here, the conceit of a force field suggests some indeterminacy and thus a limited *freedom* for the singularities that improvise on the given to transform it (although only a careful interpretation of the situation can suggest how far particular organisations of power will tolerate such lassitude). While it would then be a category error to describe structures as free, their structurally open form does accommodate – indeed require – a limited freedom, which originates in the body and is galvanised by political exigencies but has its condition of possibility in the ontology of the field. Finally, the transpersonal manifests a negativity that yields a certain *reflexivity* and *interiority*, where collective life turns back on itself and subjective reason is replaced by the lived *rationality* of an intercorporeal and intersubjective flesh. If one seeks its political expression, this perhaps lies in the ideal of democracy as a self-reflexive, immanent generativity of the people. But in this form democracy remains only an empty normative ideal and the people, a dangerous and abstract fiction (Lefort, 1986,

pp. 279ff). Practising democracy means engaging with all the dimensions of the agentic spectrum and with its irreducible opacity, ambiguity, contingency, density and inertia.

In conclusion, the transpersonal does exhibit some agentic capacities that are specific to it, but it also borrows agentic momentum from singularities defined by other parts of the spectrum and it is always interactive with them (it is constituted as well as constituting). In analysing a political situation the phenomenologist must take all these dimensions into account, observing the emergence of different forms and degrees of agentic capacity across the spectrum of the corporeal, the singular and the intersubjective. In this way, critical modernists can remain open-minded regarding the future appearance of political agents, while taking heart from the limited power they might themselves exert as constellations of agentic capacities that can help to change the world through interpretive intervention.

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