Agency (philosophy)

This article is about the philosophical concept. For other uses of the term, see Agency (disambiguation).

In sociology and philosophy, **agency** is the capacity of an entity (a person or other entity, human or any living being in general, or soul-consciousness in religion) to act in any given environment. The capacity to act does not at first imply a specific moral dimension to the ability to make the choice to act, and moral agency is therefore a distinct concept. In sociology, an agent is an individual engaging with the social structure. Notably, though, the primacy of social structure vs. individual capacity with regard to persons' actions is debated within sociology. This debate concerns, at least partly, the level of reflexivity an agent may possess.

Agency may either be classified as unconscious, involuntary behavior, or purposeful, goal directed activity (intentional action). An agent typically has some sort of immediate awareness of their physical activity and the goals that the activity is aimed at realizing. In 'goal directed action' an agent implements a kind of direct control or guidance over their own behavior.[1]

1 Human agency

See also: Action (philosophy)

Human agency is the capacity for human beings to make choices. It is normally contrasted to natural forces, which are causes involving only unthinking deterministic processes. In this respect, agency is subtly distinct from the concept of free will, the philosophical doctrine that our choices are not the product of causal chains, but are significantly free or undetermined. Human agency entails the claim that humans do in fact make decisions and enact them on the world. *How* humans come to make decisions, by free choice or other processes, is another issue.

The capacity of a human to act as an agent is personal to that human, though considerations of the outcomes flowing from particular acts of human agency for us and others can then be thought to invest a moral component into a given situation wherein an agent has acted, and thus to involve moral agency. If a situation is the consequence of human decision making, persons may be under a duty to apply value judgments to the consequences of their decisions, and held to be responsible for those decisions. Human agency entitles the observer to ask *should this*

have occurred? in a way that would be nonsensical in circumstances lacking human decisions-makers, for example, the impact of comet Shoemaker-Levy on Jupiter.

1.1 In philosophy

The philosophical discipline in charge of studying agency is action theory. In certain philosophical traditions (particularly those established by Hegel and Marx), human agency is a collective, historical dynamic, rather than a function arising out of individual behavior. Hegel's Geist and Marx's universal class are idealist and materialist expressions of this idea of humans treated as social beings, organized to act in concert. Also look at the debate, philosophically derived in part from the works of Hume, between determinism and indeterminacy.

1.2 In sociology

See also: Structure and agency and Agency (sociology)

Structure and agency forms an enduring core debate in sociology. Essentially the same as in the Marxist conception, "agency" refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices, whereas "structure" refers to those factors (such as social class, but also religion, gender, ethnicity, subculture, etc.) that seem to limit or influence the opportunities that individuals have.

1.3 In feminism

In the feminist context, agency is used to describe the universal core to feminism and to equality more generally. As both critical and concrete issues of feminism are re-characterized as a struggle for agency, the cause of women and feminism is advanced.[2]

1.3.1 Feminism in criminology

Agency in this discipline refers to the understanding of why women commit crime. Some feminists believe that when a man commits a crime his actions are often regarded as understandable, perhaps even human. However, when a woman commits a crime she is deemed a whore, bad mother, sexually deviant because she has rebelled against her social norm which is her role as a pas-

sive carer and thus should not have the initiative or mind set to commit a crime. Therefore, to challenge this idea, feminists such as Morrissey (2003) argue that the agency behind the woman's crime must be considered in the same way a man's agency is considered when he commits a crime. In other words, women don't just commit crime because they deviate from femininity, there are individual reasons why women commit crime, they have an agency; be it economic, victimisation, vengeance, etc.[3]

2   Non-human agency

There has been some study into whether or not nonphysical social entities (such as states or corporations) are agentive entities. According to one theory, even though such entities cannot directly act in physical ways, they should nevertheless be considered agentive entities because of their ability to act through representative physical agents.[4]

3   See also

- Action theory (philosophy)

- Actor–network theory

- Agency (sociology)

- Collective intentionality

- Corporate personhood

- Intentionality

- Nature and nurture

- Social action

4   References

[1] http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/action/

[2] Owens, Lisa Lucile, Coerced Parenthood as Family Policy: Feminism, the Moral Agency of Women, and Men's 'Right to Choose' (May 20, 2014). Alabama Civil Rights & Civil Liberties Law Review, Vol. 5, p. 1, 2013. Available at SSRN: http://ssrn.com/abstract=2439294

[3] Morrissey, Belinda (2003). *When women kill : questions of agency and subjectivity* (1 ed.). London [u.a.]: Routledge. p. 24. ISBN 0-415-26005-1. Retrieved 7 May 2015.

[4] Robinson, Edward Heath. A Theory of Social Agentivity and its Integration into the Descriptive Ontology for Linguistic and Cognitive Engineering. International Journal on Semantic Web and Information Systems 2011 7(4): pp. 62–86.

5   Further reading

- Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. Annual Review of Psychology, 52, 1-26. The Agency (1956). Describes the form of agency.

- Juarrero, Alicia (1999). Dynamics in Action: Intentional Behavior as a Complex System (MIT Press). Examines agency from the perspective of complexity theory. Reconceptualizes intentional causality in terms of whole-part context-sensitive constraints.

6   External links

- Agency (philosophy) entry in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

- Agency (philosophy) at PhilPapers

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7.1 Text

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