

At the Limits of Agency

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Life is what happens while you are planning something else. . .
– attributed to John Lennon

The word “*agent*”¹ can be defined as a means by which something is done, or as a force, substance or person that causes a change. For most of life’s business, we understand ourselves in just this way – as doers and causes of change, driven by desires and acting with purposes to achieve intended goals. We achieve goals by acting in the world, pushing and pulling things around, into convenient arrangements. Metaphorically, we “manipulate” other people by providing them with motivations – mental pushes and pulls – to do what we want. In this way, the act of hammering a nail can be a paradigm for human activity in general. First, a need is felt, a goal conceived, and a plan developed. Then skills and tools are brought to bear, exerting forces on passive objects until the job is complete. Rational agency, then, is an ability to plan and act according to one’s own true self-interest. Rational agents are what we need to be – and what we need others to be, in order to deal with them effectively. We construe and present ourselves as rational agents to cope with the world and with each other. People whose agency is seriously impaired are taken in charge by the state – put into jails, asylums, or old people’s homes – for society’s protection and their own.

In our liberal, democratic society this concept of agency carries a lot of freight. Free expression of agency in pursuit of personal happiness is our ideal of political liberty. The right of free and competent agents to enter into contractual relationships for their mutual advantage is the basis of our law. Sexual advances to children are treated as criminal because children are not free or competent sexual agents – unable for various reasons to give a valid consent. A marketplace of goods and services produced and purchased by free agents is the basis of our economics. Non-interference with other people’s agency (without due process of law) is the basis of our ethics. A free traffic in ideas and information – a pre-condition of competent agency – is the foundation of our civil rights.

The idea of agency is also linked with that of technology, which exists to render agency as efficient and effective as possible. To think technologically is to think in agential terms: how to accomplish intended purposes with minimum cost and effort. As thousands of how-to manuals attest, no area of life today is

¹ From the French *agir* – to act.

without its own technology, with which at least minimal familiarity is needed for whatever we attempt. We fear to look incompetent at anything, and treat everything we do as an occasion for display (if only to ourselves) of competent, rational agency.

Crucial as it is, however, this idea of agency is often false to our experience. Only rarely can people just simply want something, plan and prepare to get it, and then carry out their plans. My purpose here is to show that purposeful action is not that simple. The agency we take for granted in ourselves and others is merely an abstraction – an idealized approximation. To the extent agency occurs, it is not a native faculty but a considerable achievement; and it may fail, be degraded or be wholly inappropriate, for a variety of reasons.

This point can be made with reference to my essay itself. Like most such efforts, this piece (you can trust me) is less a product of agency than of creative fumbling. For, in this writing, I am not carrying through with a pre-existing intention and plan, but rather exploring on paper a root idea, to see how it develops. There was some initial insight that just “came to me” as we say – that agency is not really a coherent notion. After that, I won’t really know what I’m trying to do until I’ve either done it, or given up the project. Agential authorship – the image of a mind and volition that call a work into being, as God was supposed to have created the world – will be an illusion, after the fact. The finished work is partly fumbling as I have said, and partly a matter of obedience to the imperatives of a root idea, and of the English language.

In fact, there are several reasons why the concept of agency, useful and convenient though it is, should be taken with much caution and a grain of salt. First, a very practical reason: The naive idea of agency gets in the way of *holistic* and *systems* thinking. Faced with a problem, the impulse is to tackle it directly, trying to solve or fix it. But it’s a commonplace by now that such fixes often have side effects as bad or worse than the problem you started with. In complex systems, the causal chains run in loops,² and there is no straight line of agency, from purpose to planned intervention, to desired result. More on this below, in Section 3.

Second, the idea of agency entails a dangerously limited conception of the Self, and a correspondingly simple-minded notion of self-interest. As an agent-and-nothing-but, whatever enhances power is desirable, while any giving up of power is to be avoided. Winning is not the main thing; it’s the only thing. Self-interest is the only interest. The pursuit of self-interest might be constrained by

² Known as feedback loops. For a discussion of their impact on practical decision making, see Dietrich Dörner’s book, *The Logic of Failure*.

prudence, but by nothing else. A pure agent is a sociopath. What else would you call an individual who cares only for the payoff, taking no satisfaction from the game itself, nor the relationships it generates, nor the discoveries it affords.

More generally, the paradoxes of agency suggest an approach to the concept of *personality*; and it's on this that I will focus. We'll find that certain difficulties in the philosophy of agency, not simply in our attempts to present ourselves and function as coherent agents, translate directly into personality issues, which become *traits* when we form habits for resolving them. Sometimes, these are very bad habits – manifesting not just as personality traits, but as serious personality disorders. It turns out that most traits of personality can be seen as propensities to construe ourselves as agents – resolve the conundrums and paradoxes of agency – in some particular way; and that several recognized personality disorders seem to result from erroneous “core beliefs” about the self as agent.

On this issue, we find ourselves between a rock and a hard place: To survive in the world, we have to use ourselves as effective agents – go after our hearts' desires and cope with obstacles in doing so. But the concept of agency is inherently problematical; and the way we conceive ourselves as agents may lead us to pursue our goals (whatever they are) in ways that are rigid, self-defeating, or really dangerous.

1 The Prospects for Agency

Before we look at problems in the concept of agency it will be useful to say a few words about the individual's self-perception as a competent agent, and of his prospects as such.

To begin with, there is a sense, explored by a number of post-modern thinkers, in which we are not autonomous agents but more like fleshly robots, programmed by language, by our history of social interaction, and by culture in general. Or, with an older and slightly different metaphor, we can imagine ourselves actuated by a “world spirit” that lives in us and through us much more than we can be said to influence it. On either view, our experience of free will and consciousness is an illusion. If so, it seems to me an illusion we cannot possibly do without. Somehow, I must accept responsibility for my acts and choices, regardless of how these may have been shaped by history and circumstance. This ego must bear and exercise responsibility as best it can, because nothing else can do it. If the ego cannot see itself and function as a source of intention, choice and meaning, it will find social living impossible. But, at the same time, if it cannot recognize the limits of its power, it will find the burden of responsibility impossibly heavy. For sanity's sake, there's a balance that we have to find here between letting ourselves entirely off the hook of

agential responsibility or keeping ourselves entirely on it. Accordingly, considered in these pages is an idea of agency that is still very real, though circumscribed in ways to be discussed.

Clearly, the prospects for agency change over a lifetime. The infant does not know that he is helpless; relative to his limited world and with responsive caregivers, he may feel omnipotent. The young child quickly learns how helpless he really is in the great world he is just beginning to explore. But even as he begins to learn this painful lesson, his powers are growing. Relative to an ever-expanding “personal world” of reliable environment and relationships,³ he becomes increasingly a competent agent within his own sphere of competence. At the height of his career and powers, that sphere may be very large indeed.

Of course, he does not remain at this peak for ever. Time and happenstance return the grown-up child to helplessness and, finally, to the void from whence he came. But while his journey lasts, he will by all means assert his powers to arrange his world to his liking.

There are problems however. Even if the idea of agency is accepted at face value, the individual’s capabilities as an agent are limited by his native capabilities, by his upbringing and education, and by his place in society – that is to say, by factors beyond the reach of therapeutic intervention. The ideal agent would be a god, as we assuredly are not. Fundamentally, we are creatures of flesh and blood, as finite and vulnerable as any other, who can imagine and desire so very much more than we can have and do.⁴

At least three recognized personality disorders⁵ seem to arise from self-defeating interpretations – of the world we live in and of our prospects therein. In each of these cases, the problem is not with the concept of agency as such, but rather with the possibilities or prerogatives of agency. Dependent and depressive individuals tend to underestimate what their own powers of agency can accomplish. Anti-social persons won’t recognize decent limits on agency that their society insists upon.

As an agent in the world, the dependent personality rates himself weak and helpless. He fears abandonment and wants to be taken care of. He wants someone to make decisions for him, and tell him what to do. The depressive

³ See my essay *Attachment: On the Rationality of Persons-in-Society* on personal systems of support and empowerment.

⁴ For a superb study of this basic tension in the human condition – the mind of an angel in an ape’s body – see Ernest Becker’s *The Denial of Death*.

⁵ These three, and most of the other personality disorders considered below are found in DSM IV. The remainder are from the PTypes Web site: www.geocities.com/ptypes/type_passions.html

rates the world itself as bleak and unpromising. His problem is not directly with own powers of agency, but with the world's responsiveness. He believes that he can cope – that he can do what is required and expected of him. And he does so, in a dogged way. But he does not believe much joy will come of it. He cannot hope for very much. The anti-social personality sees no reason to circumscribe agency for the sake of peace and tranquillity, or because other persons have rights as well as himself. The law for him is what he can get away with. He will not be much troubled when others treat him as ruthlessly as he treats them, but may be confused by their moral condemnation – may find it rather hypocritical. He knows how to make the moral noises that others want hear; but he is not convinced by this rhetoric, and cannot understand why anyone would be.

So here we have three types or tendencies of personality related to the way the individual perceives his own powers of agency against the rest of the world. The first does not trust his powers; the second does not believe his powers can much avail him; the third plans to live by his own powers, for his own satisfaction, and sees nothing wrong in doing so. For these types, the idea of the individual as self-interested desirer, planner and doer is not problematical. Whether or not such tendencies are taken to pathological extremes, they seem based upon the relationship between the individual and his own subjective world, not on the idea of what it means to be an agent. By contrast, for certain other types, the idea of agency itself can a source of difficulty.

2 The Inner Committee

Agency is impaired, for example, because desires and intentions are often conflicted, seldom pure. We try to lose weight, but find ourselves tempted by rich foods. We have work to do, but would prefer to go out with a friend, or read a book. In such cases we find that the “agent” is not a single will at all, but an “inner committee” of “introjected” values and patterns. Before effective agency can get started, a whole system of mixed ideals and motives must be reconciled or compromised in some coherent course of action.

Quite commonly we find ourselves in the paradoxical situation of acting either “against our wishes,” or “against our better judgment.” As I write this, I find myself torn between an ambitious, self-actualizing desire to get these words down for posterity, and a competing, self-indulgent desire to surf the Internet – never mind, for what. What I would call the *paradox of alienation* is just this possibility of being estranged from a supposedly more authentic self – of being divided against one's self, and “of two minds” about something. The corresponding personality issue was well posed by Aesop in his fable about the grasshopper and the ant: As effective agents we must pursue either our

impulses or our longer-term interests, or we must learn to compromise these in some viable way. When we call someone a “playboy” or (on the other hand) a “grind,” we point at traits by which this issue is resolved. This issue does not seem to figure in DSM IV as a source of personality disorder but is certainly one way that personalities are classified.

The paradox of alienation can even lead to such bizarre syndromes as “possession” or multiple personality disorder, where the individual is not merely “of two minds” about something – as we all are, much of the time – but has developed two or more distinct personalities to express some internal conflict. Well short of this pathology, more than a few people experience themselves as two or more distinct and incommensurable identities, perhaps quite comfortable with one another, adapted to sharply different situations in which their shared body finds itself.

A related issue is that of *closure*. Faced with competing goals or lines of action, effective agency requires me to embrace one goal and renounce the others. The parable of Balaam’s ass, who died of starvation between two equally attractive piles of hay, warns us that agency requires some decisiveness: the ability to make a choice and live with it, regarding the matter as closed. But choices do not come easily for some people.

There are two ways to get into trouble. Faced with a difficult decision, some people dither between alternatives like Balaam’s poor donkey, while others jump at the first plausible option that presents itself. Thus the Russian writer Turgenev divided mankind into reflective Hamlets who think without acting, and precipitous Don Quixotes who act without thinking. In contrast with the ability to make a timely choice and live with it, both tendencies can be dangerous.

It’s worth emphasizing here that the possibility of alienation – estrangement from the self – does not arise from the need to make difficult choices, but from the double-mindedness and value-conflict that make some choices difficult. An agent may have to decide between alternative means to his purpose – and is no less an agent on that account. Agency is impaired, however, in so-called *existential* choices where irreconcilable values are at stake. When the goals themselves hang on your decision, the choice you make will make you one kind of person rather than another, a different agent altogether; and at the moment of making such a choice, you are not an agent at all.

Problems of alienation and closure can be difficult enough, but a mistaken idea of agency makes them more painful than they need be. The man who expects himself at all times to be decisive and focussed may feel disturbed when he is quite legitimately torn. The man who demands that others be “efficient and effective” at all times puts an outrageous burden upon them. Probably, there are a lot of people in this society who are looked up to as if – or expect of

themselves – that they should always know exactly what to do. But such insistence on competent agency at all times cuts off all serious reflection, and condemns us to shallowness in our thoughts and feelings and judgments. Denying one's self the right to feel confused and uncertain is a form of insanity in itself. If you don't feel confused in today's world, you don't begin to understand it. In fact, you haven't yet allowed yourself to think about it.

Finally, we should note that phenomena of double-mindedness may be prized and sought for their own sake. Words like "inspiration," and "ecstasy" suggest that there are states of consciousness beyond agency and the every-day ego. It's true that what the Zen masters called "chopping wood and carrying water" must still be the largest part of any man's life. Yet over-insistence on single-minded agency in going about one's daily affairs makes for a dull personality and a dull life.

3 Contingency, Side-Effect and Feedback

Human agency is impaired in quite a different way by the muddling of causality in complex systems. In these cases, you cannot simply decide to effect a certain change, and implement measures to do so. Experience with technology has taught us that, in the long term, our interventions may have consequences quite opposite to what was intended and expected. The breeding of hardier disease strains through the use of antibiotics is a well-known example. Since an agent, by definition, is a person who acts intentionally to produce intended consequences, agency must be impaired when you cannot foresee the results of your actions, nor calculate the actions needed to produce desired results. In a nightmare world where nothing you do makes a predictable difference, the concept of agency loses all meaning. Unfortunately, many children actually live in such a world. So do many adults, for that matter.

Proverbially, hell is paved with good intentions. In the gap between intention and desired result, the concept of agency breaks down. That "the best laid plans" often miscarry is a scandal in the notion of agency, but not really a paradox. But a true paradox does arise when we try to exert agency in complex systems where feedback loops and unexpected side-effects may frustrate our best efforts: The more powerfully we intervene to move the system in some desired direction, the more obvious it becomes that we ourselves are part of that system.

Call this the paradox of Archimedes, who promised to move the Earth, given a lever and a place to stand: Agency often defeats itself because the agent can never really separate himself from the world he seeks to influence. We cannot even observe a system without disturbing it. We cannot lift ourselves with our own bootstraps. Archimedes fails because he has no place to stand apart from the world he seeks to influence. Indeed, he has no truly

external perspective from which to observe. This “Uncertainty Principle” permeates particle physics, anthropology, ecological stewardship, the raising of children and psychotherapy; and it is lethal to any absolute conception of agency. For some purposes, we can safely ignore those second-order effects that lead to unpredictable consequences in systems we seek to influence. For other purposes, we can’t. At best, we can achieve a tolerable approximation to competent agency, some of the time.

It’s not hard to see how a person who has been held accountable and punished for circumstances over which he had little control would develop habitual defences against anxiety. Hence the pattern known as *obsessive-compulsive* personality disorder. At its root is a basic misunderstanding of the limits of responsibility. We all have to operate beyond our level of incompetence.⁶ And shit will happen – happen sometimes even when you do everything right. But just maybe, if you pay attention to all the details, or perform certain rituals exactly right you can get it not to happen. Or make sure the blame goes elsewhere since, after all, you did your best.

4 Will and Willfulness

A related paradox arises from the fact that the shortest path to a goal is not necessarily the most direct path. Often, to achieve our goal, we do better to choose an indirect, or roundabout route than a straightforward one. More often than not, effective agency demands some compromise with circumstance. When a man proceeds resolutely against dangers and obstacles, we say he has a powerful will; but when a man smashes through the wall when a door is just two steps away, we say rather that he is willful. We know that willpower, courage, endurance and all the other heroic virtues can be self-defeating. Only the finest judgment separates tenacity from stubbornness. Call this the paradox of persistence. The Chinese monkey-trap uses this principle in a wonderfully insidious way:

In a hollow sphere you cut a hole on one side just a little smaller than a monkey’s clenched fist. On the opposite side you drill two much smaller holes, so that a rope can be threaded in and out, and tied around a tree. Now you put a piece of meat inside the sphere, take your bow, and sit down to wait. Soon a monkey comes along, smells the meat and sticks a hand inside the sphere to get it. He can just get his hand in; but, holding the meat, he cannot pull it out. So he is caught by his own intention, and you can stand up and shoot him at your leisure. The cause of suffering is desire, as the Buddhists teach.

⁶ For a discussion of this phenomenon in bureaucratic organizations, see *The Peter Principle*, by Laurence J. Peter and Raymond Hull.

In time we learn (if we survive that long) that most efforts require not just a strong, clear purpose but also a sensitive awareness, a flexibility – an *obedience*, we might say – to the situation in which the purpose is pursued. Skiing or handling a sailboat are good examples. Even driving a car requires some allowance for the traffic, the road conditions, and the machine's response to its controls. But sailing requires as well that you bend your purpose to the active forces of wind and current. To reach your landfall, you may have to steer for some different point, or tack upwind in zig zags. Mere persistence and effort will not get you home. You have to negotiate your course with the forces that push your boat and might tip it over. You must be yielding as well as firm in your purpose.

The same principle can be observed in human relationships – in raising children, managing employees, dealing with suppliers and customers. It is pre-eminently true in the art of government. You cannot just compel people to do what you want. As much as possible, you must rely on their own inclinations to achieve the desired results. This is where Soviet agricultural policy went wrong.

There are times when *any* attempt at conscious control is self-defeating. In the act of love as in Zen archery,⁷ purpose will take care of itself. The problem rather is to contain and channel tension – allowing it to work on you and through you, letting it control you, rather than the other way round. The less the planning ego interferes, the better the result will be! For the most part, however, effective agency requires a softening of agency without its complete surrender. Life is a tension between reality and desire, between the world as I find it, and as I'd wish it to be. Vital, active living depends on a sustained tension and running compromise between these poles. Lose sight of reality and you are apt to get hurt. At any rate, your dreams go nowhere. Give up all desire and hope, and life is scarcely worth the effort of living.

Problems of personality, subclinical perhaps, but problems nonetheless, can be found at both extremes: At one of these is the rigid personality who cannot back down from or bend a commitment, once it has been made. At the other pole is the indecisive type who changes his mind at the slightest setback, or the most recent piece of advice. Such decisions are seldom easy: Hang in there, or cut your losses and get out? The individual markedly typed one way or the other may well find himself more anxious than liberated when he learns in therapy that a real choice is his to make.

5 Interpersonal Context

⁷ See discussion of purposelessness in Eugen Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery*.

The intentions of individuals in groups are constrained by still another effect that we might call the paradox of belonging. Most significant human effort requires the cooperation of others, and must be organized in groups. The human animal on its own is a remarkably helpless creature. With a little teamwork, it's a different story. Groups of humans with quite modest technologies were able to make themselves fairly comfortable in the most hostile environments on Earth. We are not solitary hunters like the cats, but neither are we herd animals like the ruminants, nor pack animals like wolves. As a matter of human biology, we are highly individuated creatures who cannot thrive, still less be fully human, except as members of a tribe and culture.

As Kant put it, the human condition is one of unsocial sociability. We are accustomed to think of ourselves as self-interested, individual agents, but it can be shown in the psychologist's laboratory, and confirmed in the daily newspaper, that our desires and values are strongly influenced by the groups to which we belong. The process of influence is partly peer pressure and group dynamics, partly the spontaneous mimicry and behavioural moulding that we perform, as other creatures change colouring, to blend with our environments. Personal agency is diminished by this phenomenon of "group-think." It is created and shaped, if not wholly controlled, by what we might call "culture-think," the moulding of human cognition by some cultural tradition. The fact is: Apart from cultural features internalized at an early age, a human creature is scarcely human. Not only our concepts, beliefs and skills, but even our feelings, wishes and appetites are artifacts of culture.

Thus, what we think of as competent agency is informed and often distorted by effects of group membership, culture and history. They are, in any case, severely constrained. The putative agent can rarely do exactly what he wants. It is possible (as we've just seen) that he does not authentically want what he thinks he wants. He may want things because he believes he ought to want them, or prevent himself from wanting what he believes he ought not to want. Thus, it is entirely possible for a group of people to convince itself to pursue goals that almost no one authentically desires, and to eschew activities that would be enjoyable and even beneficial. We learn to tailor our desires, not only plans and actions, to the social milieu.

Another paradox of agency then, *contextuality* as we might call it, is that it is enacted amongst other subjectivities and agencies, and must be conformable to these. Many of our desires cannot be satisfied, many things we want to do cannot be accomplished without the endorsement and cooperation of others. When this is not forthcoming, desire must be suppressed, withdrawn, at least held in abeyance for a suitable occasion. When this happens, we experience the affect of shame, an innate response (observable even in infants) of turning away and deflating excitement in the face of inappropriate wishes,

urges, impulses, of whatever kind.

As social creatures then, our agency is limited first by the agency of others, and then – once we have reached an age of some discretion – by our own selves. We cannot simply reach out and go after what we want. We must learn to block our own desires and impulses – must learn **not** to want what we, in fact, want very badly. Evolution has equipped our species (and a few other social mammals) with the physiological device called shame affect for this difficult and painful learning.⁸

This certainly is not the place for a discussion of the ramifications of shame or the disorders of the shame-ridden personality. But it's a fair conjecture that the person with mature understanding of their limits of agency will suffer less from shame affect than one whose expectations of accomplishment and self-control are pitched at an impossible level.

6 Strategic Engagement

The indifference or disapproval of others will be a source of life-constraining shame. Their active opposition will constrain agency in quite a different way, through a heightening spiral of competition and/or conflict often culminating in violence. In these situations one is not a free agent but an embattled *protagonist* – controlled more by the state of the game, and one's opponent's moves than by one's own desires and plans.

In real combat, often, you don't know what you are going to do until after you have done it. You do what you have to do, because your hand is forced. You arm and deploy not for what you believe your opponent *will* do, but for what he *could* do. You make a relatively poorer move because the theoretically best move would be predictable. You set out to make your will prevail, and end by having to surrender all possibility of autonomous will to the exigencies of circumstance and the strategic situation. In the name of security you resort to war – the riskiest and most self-defeating of human ventures. The paradox of conflict is that the most intense assertion of self-interest, purpose and agency leads to a drastic curtailment of freedom and agency. The intrinsic lawlessness of armed violence demands the discipline of the soldier and, behind him, the regimented, militarized society.

On the receiving end of violence, agency is lost completely. You become no more than an object for the agency of others – to the extent that they are agents themselves. Whether or not a conflict comes to violence, its protagonists find themselves engaged with one another in a way that alters and

⁸ See *Shame and Pride: Affect, Sex and the Birth of the Self*, by Donald Nathanson, and my own essay: *Affect Theory, Shame and the Logic of Personality*.

diminishes the agency of each.

The affects that correspond to this loss are *anger-rage* and *fear-terror*. In *anger*, the body gears up for combat and sends out messages of warning and intimidation. In *fear*, the body takes measures for evasion, sends messages of appeasement and submission, and punishes itself for putting itself at risk. Even when manifested appropriately, in proportion to an actual situation, these are unpleasant feelings. When they are chronic and inappropriate, we recognize personality disorder – the *sadistic* and *paranoid* disorders, to oversimplify a bit. The former can be analysed as a need to affirm one's own powers of agency by crushing that of others; the latter as a permanent excess of vigilance in defence of agency. In either case, the individual sacrifices the real autonomy and freedom of healthy inter-personal relationship for a delusory sense of control.

7 Beyond Agency

The ubiquity of the problem of agency in the world's spiritual traditions speaks to its centrality in the human condition: Every infant regards his caregivers as extensions of himself, and believes that good things happen because he wants them to. Every child is trained to cope with challenges as a competent agent. Those who learn the trick get along well in life; those who do not are candidates for therapy. Every adult remains the centre of his personal universe, and the hero of his own life: a competent agent who continually negotiates with other such agents, and adjusts the world to his liking. All this is as it must and should be, but delusional if taken too seriously, because everyone has the same idea, because no one can really make another person do anything, and because the whole notion of agency is misleading or paradoxical in all the ways described. While life lasts we must comport and present ourselves as agents to other agents. Yet, as we've seen, it can be self-defeating and even dangerous to see ourselves too literally as autonomous agents who desire and plan and do things.

The language of agency is convenient and necessary for some purposes, but dangerously misleading for others. In fact, relatively little of what human beings do is done with the purpose and intention that we attribute to ourselves as free and conscious agents. Much of what we do is physiological reflex, grooved skill or habit. Much of it is spontaneous adaptation to the requirements of social living. Some of it is gratuitous self-expression or play. None of these categories fit well under the rubric of agency. In each case, one or more elements of the definition is missing.

The activities most vital to the life of the organism like heartbeat, digestion and eye blink are regulated almost beyond the reach of deliberate agency, except with years of training. Breathing too is largely automatic, though its controls can be over-ridden consciously. Other activities like speech, walking

and most eye-hand coordination are grooved patterns which may be initiated consciously but, in their details, are coordinated beneath awareness. A good deal of social behaviour is likewise automatic: We copy or respond to body language, dress and tone of voice without full awareness of what we're doing.

On the other hand, much of our behaviour is conscious enough, but lacking in the clear purpose that agency requires. When we sing or dance, draw pictures, or make art of any kind, we are not behaving like rational agents, because our activity serves no rational purpose. Whatever we do gratuitously – not for any ulterior motive but just for its own sake, evades the category of agency. However conscious, the play of children – and such play as adults allow themselves – is not agential. It belongs to another domain entirely.

To conclude then: It's a truism of modern psychology that conscious mind is only the tip of the iceberg of mind considered as a whole. Memories are censored; dreams and fantasies percolate below the surface of awareness; whole personalities unknowingly are taken over as one's own. Less attention has been given to the equally indubitable fact that agential action is likewise just the tip of the whole mass of an individual's behaviour. This is not to minimize its importance, but to promote a degree of scepticism about the whole idea. Most of what we do is not done deliberately, and much of it not done personally by us. We say that Wellington beat Napoleon at Waterloo but, of course, he had an army to help him. Thousands of other men did the actual fighting. These two probably did not so much as fire a shot, and those that did were still not pushing the bullets, nor even actively steering them.

In truth, as Voltaire hints, the paradigm of effective agency is more like tending a garden than like driving a nail. To accomplish our most rational purposes (not to speak of the playful ones), we make ourselves part of a process or system, and then attempt to direct the outcome by adding our quantum of effort to the energies at hand. We help and encourage things to happen, or seek to bring about conditions under which they might happen, much more than we actually cause them to happen. Even skilled hammering is more complex than may appear.

For it's not just a question of hitting the nail. Doing just this, in fact, is more likely to bend the nail than to drive it straight. A master carpenter chooses the correct nail for the job at hand, and the correct hammer for that nail and job. He gets kinetic energy from gravity, and makes the hammer an extension of his own arm, working on the centre line of his body and using the natural flex of wrist and elbow for control. He uses muscle as little as possible. He remembers the softness of iron. He is mindful of the grain and dryness of his wood, and pays attention to its knots and cracks. The detailed management of arm and hammer is left to automatic skill. All in all, the less he imagines that

he drives the nail by his own power, the better results he will obtain. The child learning to hammer finds it gratifying to make a loud noise with a lot of force. Gaining skill, he must pay for better results by giving up this satisfaction. At the limit, a Taoist sage would say, the nail goes in by itself, passing cleanly through empty spaces in the wood. At this point, however, the child takes a humbler view of his own (greatly expanded) power.

However different their methods and assumptions, psychotherapy, religion and mind-body disciplines like yoga, zen and the martial arts are alike in aiming to assist the practitioner to a more balanced concept of his agency. Psychotherapy works to replace fantasies of omnipotence, and anxieties of remembered helplessness with a more realistic grasp of our own powers. A religious understanding of accomplishments and sufferings as happening by God's will tends to correct the human sense of agency with a sane recognition of its own limits – at some risk that the human ego may be inflated into seeing itself as God's agent. All those Oriental disciplines share the paradox of practising very hard to do as little as possible – in the hope, eventually, of being able to do a great deal, and exactly the right thing, with next to no effort. In each case, the paradoxical goal is “to become purposeless on purpose,” as Eugen Herrigel complained to his teacher.⁹

If not precisely agents, what are we? It would be more accurate to think of ourselves as hopeful *participants* in developing situations that we seek to understand and influence. We can act in and alter these situations to some extent, but they also act on us. Sometimes things come out as we want; sometimes we have to reconcile ourselves to the way things are. Sometimes agency miscarries, and the outcome is unexpected. The distinction between participation and agency is about living always in one's actual situation, without futile resentment when plans and efforts don't work out as you had hoped.

8 Coda: Political Agency

What is true for inter-personal relationships and ordinary living is still more true in politics and public affairs. Insanity is notoriously the occupational disease of rulers and whole regimes, and there are at least two reasons why this is so. First is the notoriously vexed commerce between truth and power – since Nietzsche, a central theme of post-modern thinking that I hope to write on at some later date. In a nutshell, one reason for madness in high places is that powerful persons have no real friends. Between the flatterers and favour-seekers at court and the enemies and rivals elsewhere, they have a hard time

⁹ Once again, see Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery*.

getting a straight story, and can scarcely be sure when one is given. But the other great cause of craziness in kings is a pervasive misunderstanding of the nature of political agency and power.

Notoriously, the instruments at government's disposal are very blunt. Through direct application of power, a government mostly exploits and damages society. Excluding the suppression of crime, and public works like roads and port facilities, most social benefits must be produced indirectly, through an adroit use of leveraged influence, rather than direct power. The Japanese have a saying that a sword is useful so long as it remains in its scabbard. Men with swords have always found this difficult to remember.

In the last analysis, pure political agency – power-as-such – is just the power to extort, imprison, torture and kill. With the threat of doing so, a great deal of resentful obedience can be extracted. But limits are eventually reached. The most brutal autocrat cannot coerce *everyone*, all the time: A privileged cadre of collaborators and enforcers must be bought and persuaded – influenced rather than directly controlled. A tyrant who relies too heavily on direct power traps himself in a vicious circle of fear, oppression, social and economic stultification, political opposition and deepened fear.

Thus, even political power – the power of governing elites and of governments themselves – is more a matter of influence than of power as such. Certainly, the role of government in society is better described as influential participation than as direct agency.

By the same token, the nation as a whole is not an agency, even when policy flows from a clear consensus, stiffened and asserted by a strong police and military. The motto of the United States – *e pluribus unum* – is a scrap of rhetoric, a political dream. There is not truly such a thing as a “national purpose,” a common interest and will.

Approximations are possible, however; and the whole point of a political system is to produce some viable fiction of a common will. Nations, like individuals and for much the same reasons, maintain facades of competent agency. Serious political thinking begins when we remember the facade is no more than that.

So we should not think of governance as the work of a regime installed and giving orders at the apex of a society, but as something more like a dialogue between the rulers and the ruled. Its role, once again, is better described as presiding participation than as agency. The business of government is to preside over its society's political conversation, sustaining and drawing its mandate from the integrity of that conversation, cushioning society's antagonisms, preventing its competing interest groups from resorting to violence. When government conceives itself as a wise, controlling agency, it

begins to get into trouble.¹⁰

A metaphor suggests itself. If we think in automotive terms, a government is not like the power train of a car but more like the shock absorbers, or the air pillow. Its crucial task is not so much to “do things,” as to come between the rival factions of a society, absorbing the resentment and hostility between these, arriving at viable compromises on their behalf, and spreading residual discontent to keep it harmless. When governments fail to do this, the result is either tyranny or civil war – or civil war shortly followed by tyranny. Thus, it is a great mistake to expect governments to function as effective agents: They can rarely do this well, and it is not their primary role. That role, as Hobbes saw, is to keep the peace; but this is always less a matter of agency than of “masterly inactivity” – or *adroit participation*, to put it differently. “Masterly inactivity” is easy to confuse with muddle-headed lethargy; and, indeed, it is sometimes hard to tell the difference, though they are not the same at all.

¹⁰ This thesis is documented in a useful book called *Seeing Like a State*, by James C. Scott.