



Hermeneutic Suspicion in Action: Agency Beyond Causality

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Abstract

In this article, I argue for the use of the *hermeneutics of suspicion* in the investigation of the conditions of our actions. I claim that by staying suspicious of immediate answers as well as manifest conditions, and remaining curious of other conditions that may influence us, we can come closer to an understanding of our actions and what structures them. By investigating the broad question of why we do what we do, I critically examine the concept of agency and its role in answering this question. I distinguish between two fundamentally different approaches to the understanding of our actions that relate to the concept of agency: On the one hand, is the *agentic view* that focuses on reasons and asserts that our agency is the basis of our actions. On the other hand, is the *non-agentic view* that focuses on causes and asserts that our actions are causally determined. To overcome this sharp distinction, I argue for a reconceptualisation concerning our understandings of why we act and of the human psyche itself. This reconceptualisation is twofold. Firstly, it consists of abandoning a simple causality in favour of the notion of *catalysis*. Secondly, it consists of viewing the psyche as an *open system* rather than a *closed system*. In linking the concept of catalysis with the hermeneutics of suspicion, I bring together the ontological and epistemological dimensions of my thinking. The concept of catalysis underlines the ontological complexity and multiplicity of the conditions of our actions and of the human psyche, while the introduction of the hermeneutics of suspicion tells us how we must face this epistemologically.

Keywords Agency · Hermeneutics of suspicion · Catalysis · Causality · Intentionality

How do we come to understand and uncover the conditions of our actions? What can we come to know about why we do what we do? How do we attain this knowledge?

As I will argue throughout this paper, innumerable factors influence us, and we rarely, if ever, grasp all the reasons that we have for acting in a certain way, nor all the causes that impact us to act that way. However, while it is unlikely that we will ever gain complete insight, this should not discourage us. We may gain some insight into the conditions of our actions, and I firmly believe this is to be done by returning to Freud—yet in a novel way.

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Throughout this paper, I use the term ‘we’ and us in multiple senses and without a singular meaning. ‘We’ can be researchers attempting to understand the conditions of actions; it can be therapists attempting to do the same in order to help their patients understand themselves or change their actions; or it can be any human being who tries to understand some action they might have done (or repeatedly do). Naturally, the purposes, the process, and the result will differ markedly depending on the type of we; but the underlying method remains.

Hermeneutics of Suspicion

By using the technique that according to Paul Ricœur was practised by ‘*the three masters of suspicion*’, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud (Ricœur, 1970, p. 32f)—the *hermeneutics of suspicion*—we may be able to uncover (at least some of) the conditions of our actions, and thereby come closer to understanding why we do what we do.

In applying the hermeneutics of suspicion, one treats ‘the text’ with scepticism, searching for latent meanings; and in Freud’s hermeneutics of suspicion, the text is the psyche and its (conscious and unconscious) contents. The approach is central to Freud’s work, and one of the many places where it is to be found is his concept of dream analysis. Outlining his approach to dream analysis, Freud (1949/2010) writes:

‘We can find our way towards understanding (or interpreting) dreams, if we assume that what we recollect as the dream after we have woken up is not the true dream-process, but only a façade behind which that process lies concealed’ (p. 26f).

What Freud states here in relation to dreams can also be applied to the study of human activity as well as the related causes and reasons. We can understand (or interpret) the actions of human beings by treating the apparent reasons and causes as a façade behind which ‘something more’ lies concealed. I must stress that I am not arguing that the manifest (the apparent reasons and causes) is false while the latent (what lies concealed, the unknown reasons and causes) is true—this is too simplistic. As I will stress throughout this paper, we cannot view single factors in isolation, and we cannot have one without the other. The latent cannot be true and the manifest false *per se* because they do not exist independently. The latent content exists only in relation to (and due to the existence of) the manifest content—and vice versa. Each part only has the effect it has due to its relationship with the other.

Remaining Suspicious

This means that we must apply an attitude of suspicion or scepticism toward the reasons and causes that show themselves to us (or that we gradually uncover)—always believing that there is more to be uncovered. When confronted with certain reasons or causes, we cannot be naïve and think ‘*This is it*’. But neither should we think: ‘*No, this cannot be it*’—rather we must think ‘*No this cannot be all*’. We must continue our search not only for the *true* factor(s) but for the *other* factors that make up the conditions of our actions as well.

As Freud (1949/2010) states ‘(...) the problem can be satisfactorily solved, but only with the assistance of the dreamer himself to the elements of the manifest material’ (Freud, 1949/2010, p. 31), and thus, the conditions of our actions can only be studied by also ‘bringing in the subject’ to ask about the reasons—while not accepting the immediate and apparent reasons as the first and final answer. While ‘bringing in the subject’ (taking ‘the

view from within'), we must return to the external factors (taking 'the view from without') and with a sort of oscillation between the two (shifting between the biological and environmental factors, and reasons, intentionality and goal-directedness—the subjective, intrapsychic factors), a deeper and more adequate understanding of our actions is made possible. In studying one part, we become able to 'dive deeper', when returning to the other, in such a manner that we gradually encompass more and more of the factors that are at the foundation of a given action.

For example, we may initially understand a person's drug use as an action that happens due to the person's intention of wanting to use a drug. From here, we may change the perspective and focus on how this desire is supported or made possible by a release of dopamine in the *nucleus accumbens*. Then, we may shift perspective once again, questioning why it is exactly this drug (and even a drug at all) and not another 'dopamine releaser' that is wanted. We may focus on the reasons given—perhaps the drug provides a specific feeling that the user experiences as especially pleasurable, or perhaps the user has prior experiences that this drug soothes some psychological distress. Then, we may dive deeper into the understanding of what this specific pleasure or distress that helps provoke the use in the first place—and this process may be continued further, uncovering more and more. Lastly (or rather concurrently with the process of uncovering), one can put together all the parts into a whole that leads to a fuller understanding of the phenomenon.

Agency Defined

When dealing with the question of why we do what we do, the concept of agency cannot be avoided. As will be shown later, agency (or rather the agent) is often treated as the central 'initiating force'—as that which makes an action happen.

When I use the term agency, I talk of the ability of a person (rather than a brain, soul, will and so on) to act as an active (not a passive) force (Smith, 2014, p. 3f). The agent (the being that can express agency) is not merely being moved by external forces but is a mover themselves. Their actions are not simply caused but they themselves cause (or at least attribute to causing) their actions. For agency to be present, there must be at least a degree of freedom present; a freedom not just from external but also internal impediments (Feldman, 2017, p. 2). A lack of external impediments (e.g. positive and negative political freedom) is necessary but not sufficient.¹ There must also be a corresponding internal freedom as well (pertaining to one's desires, motives, character/personality, and so forth, that one has the ability to determine as well).²

A closely related and perhaps more popular concept is that of *will*—especially in the appealing notion of *free will*. Both concepts express the idea that human beings have (some

¹ On a related note: preceding the very existence of political freedom, and the civil and/or human rights one is granted, is the recognition of the person as a person (or in the case of nation-states: as a citizen). With a lack of recognition of this sort (be it legally, politically or 'simply' socially), agency is significantly constrained.

² A crucial point, which I will not be able to dive deeper into here, is the role that communal/interpersonal aspects play with regard to agency, and the related question of whether agency merely pertains to the individual. The most popular examples of 'communal agency' might be found in communities like Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, where the addict recognises their lack of agency regarding their drug use, and thus surrenders to the community in the hope that the agency might be regained; they 'deposit' their agency in the community and by doing so they regain it.

degree of) control of their actions—that whether an action is done or not is ultimately dependent on whether the person uses their ability (i.e. agency or free will) to realise this action. At times they are used interchangeably, treated as being largely synonymous. At other times, agency is understood as a superordinate term of which free will is a subdimension (e.g. Feldman, 2017).³

Terminological Explanation

Throughout this paper, I will be using the term agency rather than free will for two primary reasons. Firstly, the concept of free will is mainly a philosophical term (O'Connor & Franklin, 2022), while the concept of agency has had more of a presence within psychology (Smith, 2014, p. 4f).⁴ Secondly, while both concepts aim to address the same issue, they do so from different starting points. Free will presupposes freedom and starts from the assumption of man as primarily free (Feldman, 2017, p. 1ff). Agency starts at the other end, presupposing a degree of constraint while assuming some degree of freedom within those constraints. As psychology has historically unveiled ways in which we are shaped by factors we cannot/did not choose (be it by our genetics, our environment, or the interaction between the two), agency is perhaps more fitting.

Agentic and Non-agentic Explanatory Models

Broadly speaking, there are two fundamentally different approaches to answering the question of why people do what they do that sharply contrast each other—approaches that are generally treated as contradictory. The first is based on the belief that people do what they do because they want to—because they have reasons for doing so; there is a certain rationale (and rationality) behind their actions. The second is based on the belief that people do what they do because they cannot do any different—because their actions are causally determined; they are driven by something larger than themselves that they are not free to control or change.⁵

These two fundamentally different ways of viewing humans and human activity, and of answering the question of why people do what they do, depend largely on the position that one takes regarding agency. This 'divide' is not just to be found within common sense (folk psychological) understandings of the human psyche, but also within psychology as an academic and scientific field (see Harré, 2010; Moghaddam, 2006)—and it has been present (implicitly or explicitly) in psychology largely since its conception (e.g. in James, 1884).

In referring to these two ways of understanding what leads us to act in the ways we do, I will use the terms *agentic* and *non-agentic explanatory models* or *perspectives*. Simply explained, the fundamental difference between these two ways of understanding and explaining human behaviour as well as action boils down to whether humans are directed by a causal chain, or they transcend it—whether agency is asserted or denied.

³ For readers interested in the (philosophical) debate regarding free will, see Watson's *Free Will* (2003) which is a collection of influential contributions to the topic of free will.

⁴ In psychology, the concept of free will has perhaps been most present in neuropsychology with the (in) famous Libet experiments (Libet, 1985; Libet et al., 1983).

⁵ A like distinction has also been mentioned by Harré (2002) who distinguishes between *the agentic picture* and *the causal picture* (p. 63f).

The non-agentic explanatory models put the central focus on the causes behind our actions—*what* makes us act. Here the view is causal rather than teleological or functional (e.g. the *serotonin theory of depression* where depression is viewed as *caused* by a neurochemical imbalance).⁶ Reasons are viewed as less important, if not wholly unimportant. From this perspective, it is unnecessary to ask why a given patient is depressed (what reason they have for being depressed). What is of importance is what has caused this person's depression (be it a neurochemical imbalance, environmental stressors and so forth).

Contrary to the non-agentic explanatory models, the agentic explanatory models have reasons as the primary focus with causes being seen as less central. What is of interest here is not simply *what* caused a certain action, but *why* a certain action was done. Actions, and psychological processes in general, are seen as something a person does rather than something that happens (see Harré, 2012, p. 393; Brinkmann, 2010, p. 1). And thus, causes alone are insufficient to explain anything, and reasons come to the forefront. For example, if a person cuts me off in traffic, I immediately think *why* (what *reason(s)* does he have for doing so?).⁷ Perhaps he is late for work, and he does not want to be late (meaning his reason for cutting me off is to make up time so that he does not arrive late). Or maybe there is something urgent that he needs to attend to. In any case, the attempt to understand his action results in a question of why he acted like he did, rather than of *what* caused him to act that way.

Within psychology, the non-agentic view has famously been avowed (and asserted in its purest form) by the behaviourists. As Skinner (1971) asserted, science must be concerned with the causes of behaviour. Thus, Skinner rejects any talk of intentions, purposes, aims, and goals; they are not needed, as '(...) they are by-products and not to be mistaken for causes' (Skinner, 1971, p. 21). While the behaviouristic stimulus–response model has long been rejected, it can be argued that it has survived, albeit in a different form. As Costall (2006) puts it '(...) cognitivism has remained, in many fundamental respects, an extension of the traditional behaviourist framework it claims to have undermined' (p. 637). Where the behaviourists remained agnostic about the 'black box', the cognitivists decided to peer inside it by adding a mediating link between stimulus and response. With the 'mind as computer' metaphor, stimulus was repackaged as input, response as output—and whatever happens in the mind became. In this way, the 'processing'. In this way, the human being remained as much a passive recipient of stimuli in the cognitivist picture, as it was in the behaviourist picture that preceded it; and the room for subjective experience and concepts like intentionality and agency remained as limited as before. behaviourist picture that preceded⁸

An example of the agentic view can be found with Bandura (1989), who rejected that humans are merely '(...) mechanical conveyors of animating environmental influences' (p. 1175). He asserted that humans '(...) are agents of experiences, not just undergoers of

⁶ When mentioning the serotonin theory of depression, I aim not (necessarily) at the theory itself, but rather the way it is often presented and (mis)interpreted. It is generally recognised that depression is multifactorial; serotonin deficiency does not *cause* depression *in itself* (Albert et al., 2012; Jauhar et al., 2023). However, as Moncrief et al. (2023) point out, the serotonin theory is still widely (mis)understood as a claim that depression is *caused* by a serotonin deficiency.

⁷ Or perhaps more commonly, we (are asked to) explain our own conduct (or ask others to explain theirs). So it might be more likely that I would simply have exclaimed 'what the hell are you doing?'—thus, implicitly demanding an explanation for a given action.

⁸ A critique of the cognitivist revolution and how it became by and large a repackaging of behaviourism can also be found in Bruner (1990).

experience' (Bandura, 2006, p. 169)—and '[a]ny account of the determinants of human action must, therefore, include self-generated influences as a contributing factor' (Bandura, 1989, p. 1175).

Beyond the Agentic/Non-agentic Divide

With the presence of this divide, the obvious question becomes which way we ought to take when it comes to understanding the conditions of our actions. Ought psychology have its focus on causes (as is commonly seen, e.g. in behaviourist, cognitivist, and neuroscientific and biopsychological perspectives)? Or ought the focus be on reasons (as can be seen, e.g. in the psychoanalytic tradition(s) and in humanistic psychology)?

Perhaps this very way of framing the question is a part of the problem rather than the beginning of a solution. As Bandura (1989) states, '[i]deational and neural terminology are simply different ways of representing the same cerebral processes' (p. 1181). If we follow this line of thinking, we ought not to accept this sharp distinction between causes and reasons, and we ought not to view them as fundamentally different, nor mutually exclusive. On the contrary, we may need to view them as complementary and mutually dependent—meaning that neither 'linguistic representation' can stand alone: any description using only one of these is incomplete and only when using both representations simultaneously does it become even remotely possible to get the full picture.

One attempt to transcend the agentic divide can be found in the hybrid psychology of Harré (2002). Without diving deep into how Harré argues this should be done, he asserts that agency is central to human activity. Briefly explained, Harré believes that while material conditions are indispensable for all activity, actions cannot be reduced to these material conditions (for more see Harré, 2012, 2016). Persons are active agents rather than '(...) passive media of extrinsic and intrinsic forces' (Harré, 2002, p. 63); their actions are intentional—and as such we treat them as '(...) originating sources of activity' (Harré, 2002, p. 148).

Beyond Reasons

If it is true that reasons and our ability to act intentionally are the dynamic that turns human beings into active agents, I claim that one of two fundamental assumptions must be true.

The first assumption is that we as humans freely create the reasons that we act upon. If one grants reasons a special ontological status, where they are treated as 'uncaused causes' of our actions, the existence of human agency naturally follows. However, another way of understanding the place of reasons in relation to our actions is to view them as caused themselves (despite us not necessarily knowing what led to the appearance of, nor the strength or convincingness of a given reason)—rather than placing them outside the 'realm of causality'. In such a view, reasons are not created through agency. Instead, they are seen as epiphenomenal; they are a (bi)product of a complex interaction between internal and external stimuli (although we may not be able to gain a full insight into these).

To give an example, I may change my diet because I want to lose weight—and I believe that that action (changing my diet) will help me fulfil my goal (losing weight). However, stating that I decide to change my diet because I wish to lose weight, and I believe that doing that action will help me achieve that goal, simply adds another link to the

‘explanatory chain’—that is, why do I wish to achieve that goal? I will perhaps be able to answer this with a new reason, to which I can ask ‘*why?*’ once again—and so I can continue ad infinitum, expanding the chain of explanations in perpetuity (as is most commonly seen in the typical childish inquiry of asking ‘*why?*’ questions until the point comes where the parent is forced to admit that they do not possess any ultimate answers).⁹

Admittedly, this does not show that reasons are caused. What it does show, however, is that the role that reasons play is not as simple as it may seem at first glance. This leads to the other assumption: that, even if we do not create our reasons, we choose which reasons to act upon; we use our rationality to pick between reasons and employ our intentionality in acting upon the chosen reason(s).¹⁰

A fundamental lesson—admittedly a controversial one—to be derived from psychoanalysis is that ‘the ego is not master in its own house’ (Freud, 1955, p. 143). However, it is not just the oft-critiqued psychoanalysts who have been sceptical of the degree to which our rationality is the basis of our actions and our decision-making. Tversky and Kahneman (1974) have popularly demonstrated that we are not as rational as we would often like to think—which has birthed a field of study largely dedicated to showing our susceptibility to a broad range of ‘cognitive biases’ (Korteling & Toet, 2022).

Even more striking are the findings of Haidt et al. (2000) and their concept of *moral dumbfounding* (the maintenance of moral judgements despite a lack of reasons for this maintenance). According to Haidt et al. (2000), our moral judgements are based not on our reasons, but rather it is our moral intuitions that guide our judgements—and reasons are only ‘created’ post hoc (when they are demanded). When people form a moral judgement, they intuitively feel that a certain action is wrong, then they reflexively make a moral judgement, and only after that do they rationalise their moral judgement (Haidt et al., 2000, p. 9f).¹¹

While the participants in the study of Haidt, Björklund and Murphy had reasons for their moral judgements, ultimately these reasons were not ‘truly’ the reasons why they held their judgements—because as the reasons withered away, the moral judgements remained. Perhaps it is not wholly unlikely that this may apply to our actions too, meaning that while we may believe that we do something for a certain reason, we may do it for completely different reasons—even reasons that we might not be fully conscious of.

In short, while reasons may have a central place in relation to (or at the very least our relating to) our actions, this does not necessarily entail the existence of agency.

Reason—The Slave of the Passions

As James (1897) argues in his essay, *The Will to Believe*, while we may say that we believe something, we are not free to believe it or not (p. 5). We cannot simply choose to believe something that we do not believe, nor choose not to believe something that we do believe. To take things even further, James (1897) claims that ‘(...) we find ourselves believing, [but] we hardly know how or why’ (James, 1897, p. 9), and ‘our reason is quite satisfied,

⁹ Naturally, the same problem is present for causal explanations: *x* may have caused me to change my diet, but what caused *x*.

¹⁰ An issue that can be raised here is that we must have a reason to choose between reasons—which only pushes the problem further down the line.

¹¹ And as the concept of moral dumbfounding itself entails, the participants maintained their moral judgements even when they were unable to provide any arguments to back up their judgements (Haidt et al., 2000, p. 9).

in nine hundred and ninety-nine cases out of every thousand of us, if it can find a few arguments that will do to recite in case our credulity is criticised by some one else' (James, 1897, p. 9).

What James argues here is in line with what Haidt et al. (2000) believe to have found more than a hundred years later. Both underline the idea that our reasons for something may not be the driving force for our belief—nor, I would add, our actions.¹² As Pascal poetically put it, 'que la raison ne connait pas'¹³ (Pascal, 1669, cited in James, 1897, p. 21). And to continue in the poetic language of Pascal, it is the reasons of the heart, and not the reasons of the mind, that are the driving force. The reasons of the heart are unarticulated—perhaps even inarticulable. It is an intuition, a (gut) feeling. The reasons of the mind can be articulated; they are the (seemingly) logical reasons for doing or believing something—reason(s) in the rationalist sense. However, while the rationalists gave precedence to reason, it seems that the reasons of the mind are secondary to 'the reasons of the heart'. As Hume (1739/2019) famously put it, 'reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend any other office than to serve and obey them' (Hume, 1739/2019, p. 296). How does this play out in practice? A demonstration can be found in Capezza (2003) as well as in Valsiner (2003). In a 'shooting simulation' (aiming a play gun at a screen), participants were asked to shoot or not to shoot as certain images that were projected, while being observed by the experimenters. Concurrently, they described the thoughts and feelings they experienced, finally deciding whether to shoot or not. The study was conducted with an array of different images and with two sets of participants (students from the USA and students from Estonia).

For the present purpose, the most interesting scenarios from the study were when students from the USA were presented with pictures of a person wearing a KKK mask. Below are the reasoning processes of two different participants:

'[W]hat is going through my mind right now is that person probably deserves to be shot, but I probably, but I don't really agree with that. It is just sort of a moment of anger. Umm... but I wouldn't kill somebody like that. Or umm... support anybody killing that person (...) but there was a sort of ambivalence saying yeah why not shoot but then that is not very humane thing to do.' (Valsiner, 2003, p. 7.11)

'[M]y first thought was maybe I should shoot that person, but in my immediate thought was why should I shoot that person, it's another person (...) there is no reason why so I don't feel like shooting either.' (Valsiner, 2003, p. 7.11)

On the face of it, this may be interpreted as contrary to the findings of the study of Haidt et al. (2000). Both participants express their immediate moral intuition, which may be summed up as something along the lines of 'evil people deserve to die', and this intuition drives them toward the decision to shoot. However, they are then able to overcome the immediate moral intuition by using their moral reasoning, and this brings them to the decision not to shoot. But truly there is not much reasoning going on—only on a surface level. What is happening is perhaps more aptly construed as a tug of war between two conflicting moral intuitions where the strongest, most deeply engrained (culturally dominant) intuition wins out: in this case, that of the sanctity of human life—grounded in the imperative '*thou shalt not kill*'.

¹² With that being said, it might be worthwhile to keep in mind the distinction between *practical reasons* and *epistemic reasons*; reasons for doing and reasons for believing.

¹³ The heart has its reasons which the mind does not understand.

Nevertheless, neither the decision to shoot, nor the decision not to shoot, is made purely upon rational grounds or through mere volition. In both cases, a moral intuition is the driving force—and the moral intuition is not actively chosen. And therefore, it is not volition or reasoning that determines whether one shoots or not; rather it is a sort of ‘leap of faith’. The decision—or the belief/intuition upon which the decision is made—presupposes itself. Neither of the two participants reasoned themselves into their final decision. They had one intuition which was overridden by another intuition; but why one intuition won over the other is not clear. And if pressed further, I believe the subjects would not know either: they would likely make up reasons post hoc, and if those reasons were contested as well, they would ultimately be dumbfounded (having no effable reasons for their decision but sticking to it anyway)—exactly as Haidt et al. (2000) would predict.

Catalysis: Beyond Simple Causality

More than anything, the former sections have brought forth what may be a fundamental issue of the common way of thinking concerning the sources of our actions in general (across the agentic and the non-agentic perspectives)—that is the causal reasoning so common to our way of thinking (at least since Aristotle).

In his *Physics*, Aristotle (ca. 350 BCE/1996) famously distinguishes between four types of causes: *formal*, *material*, *efficient* and *final* (p. 38f; also cp. Hocutt, 1974). However, generally, when we talk of a cause, we often have a specific type of cause in mind (that is *the efficient cause*), while the other types of causes get less (if any) attention (Cabell & Valsiner, 2013, p. 6). In Aristotle’s own words, the efficient cause is ‘the original source of change or rest’ (Aristotle, ca. 350 BCE/1996, p. 39). In that instance, what is meant by a cause is the occurrence that leads a thing to become something else or to remain the way it is—or a being to do something or not do something. It is a force that produces a certain outcome or effect. And it is exactly in this way that the concept of agency often gets applied. Whether we explain the actions of a murderer by referring to, e.g. some damage in the prefrontal cortex resulting in an inability to inhibit a homicidal impulse or the murderer’s psychopathic personality; or by referring to, e.g. their wish to revenge themselves on a person who wronged them or their wish to prevent some harm that the murdered would otherwise have inflicted on someone—in both instances we are employing a causal thinking, implying that A leads to B—that B is the result of A.

Thus, while the agentic perspective is often treated as based on a way of thinking that is fundamentally different from the common causal thinking (see, e.g. Harré, 2002, p. 63f), in actuality, agency merely becomes another type of ‘cause’ when applied. In the agentic view, the human being (through the expression of agency) is ‘the original source of change or rest’ (Aristotle, ca. 350 BCE/1996, p. 39)—the efficient cause. And whether we give precedence to reasons or causes, both become a sort of placeholder for ‘that which initiated the action/made the action happen’.

A possible remedy to this issue is the introduction of the notion of catalysis. This notion shifts the perspective from how *a* leads to or causes *b* to happen and focuses instead on how *a* sets up the conditions for *b* happening (Cabell & Valsiner, 2011, p. 7; Valsiner, 2019, p. 133ff). Catalysts *are necessary but not sufficient* for producing certain outcomes (Cabell & Valsiner, 2011, p. 2f).

Thinking in catalytic terms, it is nonsensical to ask whether a certain reason or a certain cause was the thing that made an action happen. While one may recognise that a given

reason or cause played a role in an action happening—it may have been a necessary condition for the action—, no singular reason or cause made it happen. In fact, there may be innumerable reasons (both conscious and unconscious) and causes (known and unknown) leading to a certain action—and while it is true that all of these make our actions possible, neither of them is *the one* that singlehandedly causes the action.

To put it concretely, I may walk past a bakery and notice a smell coming from it, which might ‘nudge’ me toward entering the bakery and buying something. Of course, the smell alone does not *cause* me to enter the bakery. A plethora of other factors play a role in my entering the bakery. For example, I may be hungry; I may be in a particularly good mood, wishing to treat myself; I may have been on a diet and want to reward myself for the progress I have made. None of these factors, in and of themselves, *causes* me to enter the bakery—and there may be several other factors, many of which I may not even be aware of—, but they all *contribute* to my entering the bakery.¹⁴

Naturally, this raises the following question: if innumerable factors enable certain actions or contribute to certain actions happening, but none of the specific factors causes an action to happen *in and of themselves*, what then initiates an action?

One possible interpretation is that I as an agent act as a ‘consolidating force’ that brings all these factors together—and thus, the agent is what initiates any action (which is a return to the simple causality, with the agent *always* being the efficient cause). Another interpretation is that it is exactly all the specific factors as a whole that initiate an action—there is no singular cause. It is evident that there are instances where the whole makes up more than its parts (as the Gestalt psychologists famously showed (von Ehrenfels, 1890/1988)). A melody cannot be reduced to the notes that constitute it. A sentence cannot be reduced to the words that form it. And I believe that the same is true of the human psyche and that which structures human activity. Perhaps this ‘surplus’ (that which cannot be reduced to all the individual factors together) *is* what we denote with the term ‘the agent’. And then, when we speak of agency, we simply speak of ‘that which cannot be reduced to any of the specific factors that contribute to a given action happening’—and not a ‘meta-causal’ force.

The Psyche as an Open System

A theoretical foundation for the use of catalysis as a concept in relation to the human psyche and human activity can be found in the systemic theory of von Bertalanffy (1968).

Von Bertalanffy (1968) distinguishes between *open* and *closed systems*. A closed system is a system where no material leaves or enters (p. 121), while an open system has ‘(...) a continuous inflow and outflow, a building up and breaking down of components (...)’ (p. 39).

Causality may be applied to closed systems, while open systems are too complex for the use hereof. For closed systems, an outcome can always be determined by the initial states (as can be seen in chemical reactions, sodium chloride is always caused by (a reaction between) the initial states of sodium and chloride). However, this is not the case in

¹⁴ Evidently, the factors mentioned above are far from exhaustive. Other factors that might be considered are as follows: cultural ideas with regard to beauty that might have influenced me to consider dieting in the first place; dieting itself as a cultural practice, the existence of which allows me to do so; dieting fads or other common sense ideas of what is and what is not healthy that makes me construe some foods as ‘to be consumed’ and others as ‘not to be consumed’; and of course, the existence of bakeries.

open systems where the principle of *equipfinality* applies, meaning that the same outcome may be achieved by different starting points (von Bertalanffy, 1968, p. 40).

Concretely, this means that we cannot ‘peer backward’ from a certain action that has happened, unveil the causes and reasons, and then conclude that an action like this one always is the result of these causes and reasons—that the initial conditions that led to this action *always* lead to this action and all actions like this one *always* result from these initial conditions.

Firstly, and rather obviously, the ‘same’ action may happen again but be the product of completely different initial conditions: At one point in time, I may boil some water because I want to have some tea. Another time I may boil some water because I know my mother is visiting, and I know that *she* would like to have some tea.¹⁵

Secondly, as open systems are, by definition, changing (in flux), it is not possible to achieve time and context-independent ‘laws’. The psyche changes over time and this means that factors that influence it at one time may influence it differently at another time. For example, the presence of a drug may contribute to a drug addict giving in to his urges and relapsing at one point in time, while he may be able to withstand the urge at another time—or rather something else may contribute to (or have changed) his ability to withstand the urge.

A forgivable question pertains to the origin of such a change: Does it come from within or from without? Did the person (and his psyche) change or did the factors surrounding the person (and his psyche) change? Importantly, and building upon what I have already argued, it is impossible to separate the two completely; they are tightly intertwined, and neither viewed in isolation allows for a sufficient understanding.

To continue with the former example, the presence of the drug may have contributed to a relapse, as it coincided with some inner turmoil, while no relapse happens at a later point in time when no inner turmoil is experienced. Here it is neither the inner turmoil, nor the presence of the drug, that causes the relapse. Furthermore, it is not necessarily even the inner turmoil and the presence of the drug together; there may be another time when both the inner turmoil and the presence of the drug coincide, but another enabling condition may be lacking—or a ‘disabling condition’ (a factor which ‘insulates’ the person against the urge—an anti-catalyst) may be present.

While the discernible change may have been the ‘disappearance’ of the inner turmoil, this change is not simply something that happens within the person in a vacuum. Something outside must have changed (and contributed to the dismantling of the inner turmoil) as well—and a continued reciprocal interaction between the internal and external factors—not the internal, nor the external factors in themselves—result in this dismantling.

Taking only ‘the view from without’ (as the behaviourists did), we lose sight of the ways in which outside factors influence the person (from) within, and how the person influences (or ‘morphs’) the factors. We lose phenomenology and any talk of intentionality. Taking only ‘the view from within’, we rescue the phenomenology of the subject and intentionality with it; alas, we lose sight of how external factors structure the phenomena that occur within the subject—and thus, we may falsely conclude that the subject simply creates everything that happens within *ex nihilo*. All this leads back to the proposition, as was also asserted by both Bandura and Harré, that only when combining both do we get the full picture—and furthermore, when brought together they show themselves to be larger than their parts.

¹⁵ Truly, the very same action never happens twice, as Heraclitus famously noted (Heraclitus, 2003, p. 27).

Agency and Human Activity

No matter the position that one takes on agency, we must incorporate the notion of intentionality and goal-directedness—and we must also be conscious of the biological and environmental factors that play a constituting role in the former.

Whether the existence of agency ought to be affirmed or denied largely depends on what is meant by agency—and what it is that has agency (what is signified by the word ‘the agent’). If agency merely entails the existence of intentionality and goal-directedness—if it is the positing of the existence of an internal world of the subject that has some impact on our actions—, it must be affirmed. However, if this ‘internal world of the subject’ must be unconstrained, then agency must be denied. To bastardise an oft-cited quote of Marx (1852/1943), ‘men make their own actions, but they do not make them as they please’ (p. 23)—and if agency means that they must be able to make them as they please, agency does not exist.

However, agency does not necessarily have to lie in viewing the person as the sole, free creator of his actions. It may be fruitful to distinguish between what we can call *metaphysical* (or *ontological*) *agency* and *experiential* (or *phenomenological*) *agency*—where the former denotes ‘things as they are’, and the latter ‘things as they appear to us’. With this distinction, cutting the connection between the two, we may claim that the existence of metaphysical agency does not necessarily need to have any bearing on our experiential agency.

Undoubtedly, there are vast differences in the agency we experience ourselves as having in certain situations; experientially one can find oneself (more or less) alienated from one’s actions and their consequences—one can be more or less aligned with them.¹⁶ And the degree to which one is aligned with or alienated from one’s actions may be increased by employing the hermeneutics of suspicion in relation to oneself and the conditions of one’s actions. While it may not make us free in the metaphysical sense, the gradual uncovering of (more of) the reasons and causes behind our actions can increase our experience of how free we are.

Importantly, I am not naively claiming that once we become conscious of the factors, we come to master them, and therefore, they no longer have any influence over us. I do not think that we merely need to make the unconscious conscious and then we become the masters in our own houses. Rather, in this gradual uncovering, ‘one first finds himself a slave, he [then] understands his slavery, [and finally] he rediscovers himself free within understood necessity’ (Spinoza according to Ricœur, 1970, p. 35).

As may be apparent, the approach outlined above gives the concept of catalysis an ontological position that underlines the complexity and multiplicity of the conditions of our action. That there are no singular causes but rather innumerable factors that enable certain actions or contribute to them happening—while none of the factors, *in and of themselves*, makes an action happen—is an ontological stance. And this application of catalysis as an ontological concept is the basis for my introduction of the hermeneutics of suspicion. In other words, I employ the concept of catalysis to get at the reality that underlies our being and on which everything we do depends, while I apply the hermeneutics of suspicion in order to understand how we might position ourselves in relation to this reality; how we can unveil the conditions of our actions, to what degree,

¹⁶ For example, the addict who uses a drug despite not wanting to experiences themselves as lacking agency, while the drug addict who uses a drug because they want to use it experiences themselves as having agency.

and by what methods. Thus, the linking of the two concepts creates a framework for understanding both the ontological conditions of action and our epistemological stance in relation to them.

Importantly, I view the concepts as interdependent and as such, the distinction I just made may be partly wrong-headed. The catalytic view and the hermeneutics of suspicion cannot be sharply distinguished, as our relating (through the hermeneutics of suspicion) to the conditions of our actions (made comprehensible by the concept of catalysis) entails a mutual morphing of both. We may believe that we are already in possession of the truth (all the reasons and causes upon which an action is based), that we have exhausted the possibilities, and thus accessed the ontology of our actions. However, psychologically, as our knowledge changes the world changes. No ontology of the mind is independent of the epistemology hereof, as our psychology is constitutive of the former. In this sense, I am using ontology as a psychological concept rather than a purely metaphysical one; what is important in relation to the psyche is not the world *as it is*, but the world as we relate to it, *as we think it is*—and as such, when our knowledge or our beliefs about the world change, the world we find ourselves in changes.

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