

Agency

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'Agency' is a term which has recently become ubiquitous in academic writing. But I have never heard an explanation of what this term actually means, far less a unit of analysis which could bring discussion of agency down from clouds and allow us to understand what it is and how it develops. Closer inspection shows that 'agency' covers a range of distinct phenomena, and different units are required for an analysis of the whole field.

The domains of self-determination

Hegel wrote on the concept of the will. He said that the will is free according to its concept, that is, an unfree will is a contradiction in terms. But abstracted from their culture and upbringing, a human being has a 'natural will', shared in common with the entire animal kingdom, which is not free at all. We become free only in the course of the lifetime of an individual and centuries of social and cultural development of the states in which we live. Hegel's examination of the development of the will is found in the *Philosophy of Right* (1821), but there is little in Hegel's psychology to explain how the will of the adult human being differs from that of a new-born child. Indeed, the psychological research did not exist in Hegel's day to solve this problem.

The concept of the will unites both *what* a subject desires and the *resources* it mobilises in pursuit of that motive. In this light, it is clear that the freedom of the will cannot be seen just as an attribute of the person's psychology, but is equally a feature of the subject's social situation. The conceptual conundrums entailed in the idea of a will which *becomes free* can be untangled by looking to Hegel's essay on free will in the Introduction to the *Philosophy of Right*.

It was Vygotsky (1934) who explained to us how the will, which in the new-born is like that of a lower animal, is shaped through a series of stages in interaction with its supporting environment, to grow up to become the will of an adult citizen. Vygotsky (1931) further explained how *self-control* is developed throughout life by the appropriation of cultural artefacts and (1934a) pointed to further development of the will through *perezhivaniya*. The will is an abstraction from the entire personality. Nonetheless, the will is a central theme of the development of the personality, and Vygotsky's theory allows us to trace its development throughout the course of an individual's life.

On the other hand, Hegel's exposition of the development of Freedom in the *Philosophy of Right* is at a high level of generality, and for an analysis to be useful it is necessary to move to a finer grain of analysis, particularly in relation to voluntary association, which is the essence of modern life. This is possible only by a logical-historical analysis of collective decision making, which is applicable to the wide variety of settings in which people develop their will by collaborating with others in projects to which they are committed. For this we must turn to my own work in *The Origins of Collective Decision Making* (2016).

There are important psychological aspects to the process of forming and pursuing commitments and dealing with crises which arise in the world with the projects to which one is committed. It is Fedor Vasilyuk's *Psychology of Perezhivanie* (1984) and A.N. Leontyev's (1978) theory of personality which are most useful here.

The psychology entailed in participating in collective decision making has been widely studied by contemporary writers in activity theory, psychology and other related disciplines. However, there is already a vast literature on collective decision making which is addressed to the real world participants as subjects, without the need for a teacher, facilitator or change consultant to manage

their activity. Psychological studies of collective decision making invariably miss the point that collective decisions are morally binding on participants and the formation of a collective will is inextricably tied up with moral convictions with a long cultural history. The development of collective will is missed if we only study it in either managed or artificial forums.

I think that at an abstract level all these processes could be theorised as the development of something called 'agency', but a glance at the above field makes it clear that a single unit of analysis cannot grasp the whole development. The objection to lumping all these distinct phenomena together as 'agency', can be compared to Vygotsky's objection to the lumping together of tools and signs under the concept of 'artefact':

The basis for this identification is ignoring the essence of both forms of activity and the differences in their historical role and nature. Tools as devices of work, devices for mastering the processes of nature, and language as a device for social contact and communication, dissolve in the general concept of artefacts or artificial devices.

1931b, p. 61

Vygotsky objected to this conflation because it obscured the qualitative differences between tool and sign and in particular "the real connection of their development in phylo- and ontogenesis" (*op. cit.*). For the same reasons, I conclude that 'agency' is a bad concept, an abstraction, and the word suffices only as a general heading. What we have is a number of distinct, qualitatively different but developmentally interconnected processes which together can take us from the helpless new-born babe to the adult citizen of a democratic socialist society.

Consequently, to use the concept of double stimulation, which Vygotsky used to theorise culturally acquired self-control, to theorise the formation of life-commitments, collective decision making and the constitution of a democratic republic, is nonsense. We need to identify a number of distinct units/germ cells to anchor our understanding of the distinct processes at work in each domain, and how they interact with one another. Although there are many theories relevant to this broad field of research, I will look only to writers within the same tradition from Hegel to Marx to Vygotsky and the Activity Theorists to review the variety of phenomena entailed in the conception of 'agency'.

1. Free will

Hegel draws our attention to the fact that the will is free by definition, so that a will which is not free is a contradiction in terms. Nonetheless, it makes sense to see that the blind striving of a simple organism to find food and avoid threats expresses an *embryonic* will, while more developed forms of life have successively overcome the limitations on the will, and become more and more free.

The first limitation on the will is external nature, but human communities more and more transcend the limitations of nature by appropriating the laws of nature for their own ends, ultimately able to fly in aeroplanes, produce food from mineral products and painlessly cure illnesses. In the process of overcoming (*aufheben*) nature, human beings have created a 'second nature', that is, an artificial environment. But this proves to be as much a threat to the welfare of human beings as nature itself.

The greatest threat to the flourishing of any person, however, can be other people. Consequently, the creation of *rights* meant that an individual did not live in constant fear of attack from another person and could pursue their own ends however they wished, while respecting the rights of others. The establishment of rights and a settled system of law and custom allows for the

development of a collective will in which people can pursue their own ends through collaboration with others.

However – and this is the real crunch! – any organism, from the single cell up to the modern state, pursues its own end; this is after all what was meant by a free will, but precisely in this they are prisoners of their own desires, their *internal* nature. We can be free of hunger but we cannot be free of the need for food. Further, the person who knows no desire beyond having enough to eat, cannot be said to be free just because they have plenty of food. The consumer who wants just what the advertisers tell them is not free just because they can shop. Hegel concludes that in order to be free, the will must be turned on itself, so that a subject decides what they want to do with their lives, rather than being a slave to their given needs and those who would manipulate them.

However, the will of every person is now tied up with that of every other person in the state in which they live. To achieve anything, you need to mobilise others to pursue the same goal. It is not enough to devote yourself to the good life, we must also see to it that everyone else does so as well. Consequently, the pursuit of freedom of the will entails the continuous struggle to raise the level of the whole political culture so that everyone is collaborating towards the good life for all. Free will thus turns out to be a problem of the democratic perfection of the state.

For the moment, the point is to see that the contradiction in the very concept of ‘free will’ does not invalidate the concept, but rather, extends the problem out from one of personality to one of the formation of a good state, in which human flourishing is possible.

2. The natural will

When we are talking about human beings, ‘natural will’ means the will abstracted from all cultural development. This is obviously an abstraction because the human will develops in the medium of culture from birth till death. Nonetheless, a human animal raised outside of human culture is a plausible analytical abstraction which allows us to distinguish the role of culture in the formation of the human will when a person is raised within the ‘second nature’ provided by human activity.

This issue bears only tangentially on our topic so I will sketch an outline of the formation of the human will by supplementing Hegel’s speculative genesis of the will in the Subjective Spirit (1830) with A.N. Leontyev’s (1978) systematic, experimental investigation of the evolution of consciousness.

At the very base of what could be called the psyche we have just *feelings*. Feelings do not have any object, they are just feelings. A living organism will respond in some stereotyped fashion to this feeling, maybe shouting if angry or withdrawing into itself if ashamed, and so on.

Next, certain feelings are associated with certain situations and so the organism will take the feeling as caused by some object in the environment. Such a feeling is called a *sensation* which orients the organism’s activity at the object so as to restore equanimity. This is an important, though extremely primitive, step forward in the formation of the will.

At the next level, the organism recognises the sensation as a sign pointing to something else, as *meaning*, which allows for the development of practical intellect and planned activity. This is as far as the ‘natural will’ can go.

This is a line of development of the relation of the subject to its environment as outlined by Hegel. It creates the conditions of possibility for the development of the free will. At the same time, the organism must develop control over its own organs in order to act on the object. Here I draw on Leontyev’s three-step development of the will.

When an organism does something, it uses one element of its environment to act on another. Hegel, Marx, Vygotsky and Leontyev all agreed on this. That element could be a tool, their own hand or, if they are acting on a mind, a sign of some kind. This unit is the *artefact-mediated action*, or

simply 'action', the basic unit of activity. As the only means by which the will can manifest itself, it is the basic unit of the will. The action is oriented by the subject's goal, and actions like this can be done by all the higher animals up to and including human beings. Human beings differ from animals in their propensity to use artificial rather than natural means.

More complex actions aimed at achieving relatively remote goals, such as walking to the letter box, can be achieved like this: the organism masters some simple action, such as taking a step, so that it can be done without conscious awareness, adapting to conditions. For example, once having mastered taking a step, the organism learns to angle the foot and shift the weight slightly forward and so on, all without conscious control. This elementary action is called an *operation* and is controlled by conditions. If something goes wrong, if the person slips or momentarily loses balance, the operation springs back into conscious awareness and is consciously controlled.

Once complex actions can be accomplished without paying attention to the component operations, it is possible to achieve more remote aims by a series of actions, each with their own goal, ultimately achieving some motive. With this level of self-control it becomes possible to share the actions out to be completed by different individuals in a collaborative division of labour. Having walked to the letter box, the actions of a hundred other people are then mobilised to deliver the letter to some far away destination according to the address written on the envelope.

In this way, we can see how the free will can achieve quite marvellous objects when the self-control which the human organism is able to exercise on its own organs is supplemented by a social division of labour. With material culture adapted to the achievement of human motives, an individual's control of their own mind and that of others by means of signs, and a readymade division of labour which an individual can mobilise, a person can attain otherwise remote goals.

This shows us all the elements needed for the fulfilment of free will, from the organism gaining control of its own organs, so long as it can count on the collaboration of the rest of the community. The units of analysis are artefact-mediated actions and activities (a.k.a. practices or projects).

Actions are not a suitable unit for the analysis of social processes. It is this 'molar unit' – activities or practices or projects – which are the units that can be used for analysis of social formations, the arena on which free will is ultimately realised. But none of the activity theorists were able to develop an adequate theory in this domain. They stopped short at the point of a bureaucratically planned economy. On the other hand, Hegel's theory took for granted the complex evolution of the will as the new-born child develops under the umbrella of the family and other social institutions to the point where they can take their place in adult society. For this we must turn to Vygotsky's theory of child development.

3. The development of the will in childhood

Vygotsky (1934b) built his theory of child development on a unit of analysis called the *social situation of development*. This refers to the situation of a child in its relation to its parents or other system of support, which is conceived of as a 'predicament': the child has certain needs and is subject to certain expectations represented as a concept – new-born, toddler, primary school kid, teenager and young adult (or some culturally specific variation of these concepts) – and their will more or less matches the expectations and benefits of the conception which those around them have of them. However, as the child develops it becomes aware of other forms of activity which had hitherto been 'over the horizon' for them. They develop *new* needs and rebel against their situation, ultimately overthrow it in a crisis phase, and establish a new situation, a new place in the household, with new expectations and possibilities open to them as they enter a new period of development. It is during these crisis phases in their development that their will is fashioned. These are often *difficult* periods in the

relation between adult and child as the child engages in disruptive behaviour. This disruptive activity is transient, and passes away once the development of the will has been accomplished. It may return, however, in the event of a breakdown in the new situation.

The human will thus develops through a definite series of stages which will be different in different communities where expectations on a child may be different. Also, depending on how the child's disruptive activity is handled by those around them, the will develops differently, and the child learns to handle the world around them differently according to these experiences.

The stages of development of the will are as follows.

The act of birth, escaping from the safety of the mother's body, is of course the child's dramatic and physically dangerous first step to self-determination, freeing itself from total physical dependence on the mother.

Around the age of 12 months, the child becomes a 'toddler' and begins to exert its own will for the first time in interaction with adults, marking itself out as a distinct personality rather than simply reacting to stimuli provided by others. They are no longer satisfied with having food put into their mouth and might push it away, and try to actively control their eating, establishing their biological independence from their mother.

The child is still controlled by the mother *psychologically* however, easily manipulated by rewards, punishments and distraction. Around the age of 36 months the toddler learns to separate their behaviour from their immediate desires, and so to be able to resist their mother's attempts to control them, saying "No!" to do things they positively dislike rather than give in to maternal control. This kind of defiant behaviour fades away once the child has established psychological independence.

Developing within the bosom of the family the preschooler does not differentiate their internal life from their behaviour. They are an open book. If they are to develop their own relations to people outside the immediate circle of the home, they must learn to act strategically. This is a new development in their self-determination and is also an intellectual achievement as it means that the child can now solve problems by the self-conscious use of mental technique.

The next crisis comes as the child becomes a teenager and begins to feel the need to enter the adult world. They cannot, however, because they have become aware that they are governed by the opinions, values and skills of the social position into which they have been born, and they need to establish their own opinions, tastes, values, etc., but they do not yet have the social experience to do so. This is the period of teenage rebellion, when the youth belittles everything they have been raised to revere. Once they have established their social independence, usually with the aid of peers, they will return to the parents, but now on an equal footing.

Thus the journey from the womb to young adulthood is marked by a series of periods of gradual step-by-step adjustment, separated by phases of crisis in which the personality makes not a step but a leap. These leaps are marked by qualitative transformations of the *will*, manifesting itself on successively wider planes.

But the mastery of one's own activity is not merely the passage through stereotypical stages, and nor is it completed when the child reaches young adulthood. Vygotsky gave us two units to understand respectively the minutiae of development of self-control and the dramatic transformations of agency achieved in key episodes in a person's life.

4. Self-control

Vygotsky showed (1931) how a person learns to control their own activity by appropriating signs, technical tools and psychological tools from the surrounding culture and using these artefacts to

control their own attention, perception and sensorimotor activity. This idea was first formulated by Hegel and expressed in his maxim: "There is nothing in heaven, earth or anywhere else which is not both immediate and mediated" (1831). The elementary form of self-control achieved by means of *sign-mediation actions* is *selection*, focusing attention on one aspect of the field of perception and selecting it from its background.

Signs are material objects, products of social labour, and present in the cultural environment, which people incorporate into actions, through their collaboration with others. Vygotsky showed that words, which are initially used by adults to control the child's activity, can be appropriated by the child to control their own behaviour. This is part of the development of the will in childhood. Initially, the child actually commands themselves aloud, but this private speech is gradually abbreviated, internalised in the form of inner speech, and ultimately integrated into the psyche, allowing the child to carry out complex procedures, without even conscious awareness. But this self-control has its genesis in the appropriation of cultural tools, including spoken words and gestures.

This capacity to appropriate cultural signs and psychological tools in the course of mastering one's own activity is not something confined to childhood, but continues throughout life. Here the development of the will is generally limited, nonetheless, to mastery of the existing culture. Having mastered the use of signs to control one's own behaviour, the child learns to control the behaviour of other people by use of the same signs in communicative activity.

"Agency" in Educational Theory

Educationalists use the term "agency" to describe the successful achievement of mastery of the array of cultural means available in a relevant domain. Here the unit of analysis is the selection of a means by the subject, autonomously, that is, without prompting by the researcher or teacher, applying a new means to the solution of a problem. Agency here is greater or lesser according to the breadth of the domain mastered in this way, and the fluency with which the subject can select suitable means. The term "epistemic agency" is used to describe the capacity of a teacher or student to select and use a suitable means for a learning task.

On the other hand, some child development theorists reserve the idea of agency for *doing things* in the world, as opposed to self-control. Thus the intrapsychological functions of language are deemed "non-agentive" and the communicative functions of language as "agentive." Others use the term agency to refer to a teacher taking the initiative in designing lessons, resisting or re-negotiating directions, rather than in simply following the direction of senior staff, while others simply take the role of a teacher as *ipso facto* that of an agent. On the other hand, some researchers reserve "agency" to indicate students making a commitment to social change, while some go so far as to require that students acquire the capacity to take a critical stance with respect to societal norms before the term "agency" is appropriate.

Acquisition of ideals

There is more to the appropriation of signs than the incorporation of signs and tools in actions. In the course of acquiring the *meaning* of the various words and artefacts while participating in the broader circle of social life – work, politics, social life generally – a person grasps the various *concepts* which are orienting the practices or activities (referred to above in the synopsis of Leontyev's work) in which they participate or with which they interact. A concept is not merely a neutral representation of a form of activity but represents some motive. In acquiring the concept, through participation at some level in the relevant practice, the person makes a commitment. To acquire a concept is to determine the will. That commitment may be marginal or it may be life-defining. Leontyev (1978) shows how the personality includes a hierarchy or structure of such commitments.

This idea is central to the conception of free will and self-determination. It is in the course of making these commitments that a person *shapes their own motivation* and at the same time, by engaging with others who share that commitment at one level or another, the person is able to *realise* that motive.

Further, in the course of pursuing its aim, the project to which a person is committed comes up against difficulties and conflicts. In the course of the resulting crises two things can happen: (1) the project enters into relations with other projects, be they supportive or opposing, deepening and broadening the conception of its motive, and (2) the individual is faced with personal crises (impossible situations) which have to be overcome. The units of analysis for these aspects of the development of the will is the *collaborative project* and the commitment of the person to a project.

Number (1) is dealt with in my introduction to *Collaborative Projects: An Interdisciplinary Study* (2014) and I will defer discussion of this till later. Number (2) was dealt with by Leontyev in his theory of the personality, but more satisfactorily in my view by Fedor Vasilyuk (1984), and I will now turn to his contribution.

5. *Perezhivaniya*

The appropriation of cultural artefacts characterises how a person acquires ends and means from material provided by the wider culture. Broadly, this is what it means to get an education. However, in the course of life, people do more than absorb the culture into which they are born. People have *perezhivaniya* (experiences) – tragedies, unexpected and traumatic experiences, affairs, daring career moves, and so on. And things don't just *happen* to people. People meet challenges and overcome them, or at least survive. It is in the course of these crises that the will of the adult human shapes itself, just as it is in those periods of critical development that the child's will is shaped.

In general, these experiences are possible only because people had already formed commitments as described above. But things may unfold which place them in 'impossible situations', and Fedor Vasilyuk (1984) elaborated four types of crisis:

(1) The *infantile* crisis, in the 'easy-simple' world. Here the subject's will meets no resistance and faces no conflicts, as the subject is ruled by the pleasure principle; the smallest difficulty creates stress, and is usually met with denial of reality. This seeming non-crisis is widespread in the modern world.

(2) The *fanatic's* crisis, in the 'difficult-simple' world. The subject's project is blocked; they do not deny reality, and believe the problem can be resolved. Going on demands realism, and the subject either overcomes the crisis with patient determination, or abandons the project and adopts an alternative pursuit.

(3) The *moral* crisis, in the 'easy-complex' world. Although none of their projects face significant resistance, the subject finds that two of their commitments have come into conflict with one another. The subject either discredits one of their projects or finds some way of reconciling them in their mind, restructuring their value-system.

(4) The *creative* crisis, in the 'difficult-complex' world. The subject must reconstruct their entire personality to process this crisis. They might transfer the threatened value to a different object, decide that their former life was based on false commitments, or creatively abandon egoism and pursue a higher goal which is proof against disappointment and validates sacrifice.

This broad classificatory scheme represents the range of crises which a person confronts when they develop their personality by participating in the pursuit of collaborative projects. It takes as given that life is never smooth, and the realisation of the subject's ideals requires the development of the personality, ultimately moving to the plane that Aristotle recommended to us when he said that

“the good life for a human being is the pursuit of the good life for humanity’. A.N. Leontyev (1978) came to similar conclusions in his analysis of personality development.

“Agency” in social theory

This is as far as I will go in terms of the development of the personality as an element of ‘agency’. The remaining problems take us to the problems of the legal and political structures of the state and the ethics of voluntary association. Nonetheless, it remains the case that the dominant use of ‘agency’ in Sociology refers to the capacity of an individual to realise their desires, without critical reflection on the source of a person’s desires. More reflective currents of Sociology confine use of the term ‘agency’ to social processes which act as agents of change, as mediators, specifically in contrast to being the source or cause of social change; i.e., some sociologists see “agency” either as being an agent in the sense in which an employee is the agent of their employer or in the sense in which a virus is the agent for a disease. Functionalist and Structuralist sociologists deny ‘agency’ to individuals, but as Anthony Giddens points out, “there is no such entity as a distinctive type of ‘structural explanation’ in the social sciences; all explanations will involve at least implicit references both to the purposive, reasoning behaviour of agents and to its intersection with constraining and enabling features of the social and material contexts.” For Giddens, an individual knows well how to play the game, but in general they do not set the rules of the game they are obliged to play.

Among Marxists there has long been a debate about whether the Party or the class - an impersonal social process - is the ‘historical agent’. At the same time, it is widely recognised that the outcome of the action of *any* social agent is always the resultant of the action of very many social agents and consequently always differs from the intention of any collective agent. Where does this leave the idea of ‘historical agency’?

6. Freedom and the state

In his *Philosophy of Right* (1821), Hegel set out his social theory in the form of a theory of ethics. The subject is taken to be a nation state. As is the case in all Hegel’s systematic works, the philosophy of right is expounded through a series of interconnected units, the ‘concrete simple somethings’ which make the beginning for the understanding of each domain. The subject matter of the book is variously described as the unfolding of the will, or the realisation of freedom, the expressions being synonymous in that it outlines how the will becomes truly free.

The first phase of Right Hegel calls ‘abstract right’ and its germ cell is private property. A person can only be free to the extent that they can put their will into some external object, be that their own body, a plot of land to call home or the tools of their trade. Without these it is nonsense to call someone free or to say that they have ‘agency’. Private property, the right to own something, is the *sine qua non* of freedom. (Need I say that there is nothing inconsistent with Socialism in this principle. Hegel never envisaged the tools of your trade being *someone else’s* private property).

On the basis of a community of households, each of which enjoys the right to private property, the next necessary phase of Right is morality. The ‘germ cell’ of morality is a purpose, and Hegel outlines a theory of *morality* which has a startling parallel to A.N. Leontyev’s theory of *activity*. Hegel traces the forms of consciousness necessary for the achievement of an individual’s purposes. He shows that in order to realise their own purpose each person must have regard to the customs and laws of their community, using only such intermediate goals as are consistent with the law, and ultimately merge their conception of their own welfare with the general good. Remarkably, this is the same conclusion that Leontyev and Vasilyuk arrived at by means of a psychology of the

personality. This suggests that morality, in Hegel's view, corresponds to the psychology of a person who rationally pursues their own welfare in a good state.

The third phase of Right is *Sittlichkeit*, usually translated as 'ethical life'. Ethical life goes from the (nuclear, patriarchal) family to the (monarchical) state. Initially, the state and family are more or less identical as land is held entirely through familial relations. But as family and state differentiate, they are mediated by *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* (usually translated as 'civil society'). Altogether, ethical life encompasses all the norms and laws of a society, inclusive of the means of their determination and enforcement. Hegel claims that although the state is *born* of violence, its *concept* is freedom, and freedom can only be realised by living in a good state. Hegel believed that this meant a constitutional monarchy, in which civil society is more or less self-governing, under the supervision of an altruistic, meritocratic civil service and protected by the monarch as chief of the armed forces in the event of war. Aspects of this view are obviously outdated today.

The philosophy of ethical life is expounded from a variety of units – Family, Market, Public Authorities, Corporations (i.e., voluntary associations) – each of which is essential for the development of a modern society, in Hegel's view. Each of these units is a quite distinct concept, and I think the argument is fairly made that a theory of the free will cannot dispense with these relatively concrete units, even though Hegel's theory is 200 years old and inevitably antiquated. No theory of 'agency' can dispense with dealing with the relation between the market and the public authorities, between voluntary associations and the state, etc.

Nonetheless, while problems with the family, the state, the market and regulatory authorities remain, it is my view that the path to the solution of the problems of self-determination today, at this critical moment in modern history, lies in the development of voluntary association.

7. Voluntary association

Political life, or voluntary association, is essentially collective decision making, and the unit for political life is therefore a group of people *making a decision* which will be binding upon them all. This unit is indeed commonly studied by CHAT writers, but it is invariably assumed that the collective is bound together by nothing more than the situation given to them by the researcher, and makes its decision in isolation from any tradition of collective decision making. Indeed, researchers aim to isolate subjects from such traditions for the purpose of psychological research. Centuries of the culture of voluntary association are dispensed with and the problem is approached as if the subjects were human atoms. The central principle of Cultural Psychology however is to 'put culture in the middle'. Psychological research carried out in isolation from culture is meaningless.

My historical investigation found that there are essentially three paradigms of collective decision making: Counsel, Majority and Consensus (leaving aside the practice of making decisions by drawing lots). Collective decision making is distinct from projects making agreements without sacrificing their autonomy. Such external relations may be Colonisation (or philanthropy), Negotiation (or bargaining), Solidarity and Collaboration, and are dealt with below under the heading of Alliance Politics. But let us focus first of all on how voluntary associations make decisions.

(1) The most ubiquitous and ancient paradigm of collective decision making is what I call Counsel – the participants are not social atoms, but have a social structure in which there is one person who bears moral responsibility for the decision – the Chief, the paterfamilias, the CEO or whatever, but before announcing the decision, the Chief must listen to the views of all members of the group. This paradigm was codified by St. Benedict in the fourth century AD, is used in traditional societies in Africa, for example, and in modern businesses and public service departments. Counsel relies chiefly on the moral qualities of the Chief.

(2) With the emergence of commerce and the first towns, merchants and tradespeople created voluntary associations which were based on the principles of equality, tolerance and solidarity, and since the tenth century, used the principle of Majority voting. Combinations of Counsel and Majority were practiced inside the early Christian Church.

(3) Beginning in the US in 1960, voluntary associations began to use Consensus, though this paradigm had been used by the Quakers since 1666. Consensus is based on the principles of inclusion and respect for difference reflected in a preference for the *status quo ante* over making a decision which does not enjoy near-unanimous support; failing the achievement of consensus, participants prefer to go their own way and the group breaks up.

It is by participating in making collective decisions that individuals and groups achieve their ends and acquire the relevant virtues – recognition, equality, respect for difference, tolerance, solidarity, inclusion – necessary for the pursuit of personal and collective purposes.

8. Alliance politics

The first fact of fulfilling a purpose is that you can only succeed with the collaboration of others, that is, by means of a collaborative project. The second fact, which is most important in our times, is that only a minority of people will join you in your project and that achievement of your purpose will entail overcoming or forming alliances with other projects. The anatomy of relations between projects depends on the way in which one project *assists* another project, and there are four paradigms for this as follows.

(1) *Colonisation* is the first relation in which one project assists another. This may take the form of philanthropy in which the other is discounted and extinguished by the first, even while its participants are ‘rescued’. Colonisation means ‘taking over’ and invading another project’s territory, extinguishing it, and this is usually done with the best of intentions. This was the dominant mode in ancient times.

(2) *Exchange*, or bargaining or negotiation, is where (perhaps through delegates) two projects each retain their distinct identity and continue to pursue their own motives, but make some exchange for mutual benefit. This is the norm in the market place. It demands honesty, mutual respect and equality in mutual relations, but builds no lasting bonds, using others merely instrumentally. Alliance politics, which is dominant in the current period, is chiefly based on this mode of cooperation where alliances and ‘treaties’ are for a given purpose, pro tem, agreeing where and when to meet for what end, thereafter each going their own way.

(3) *Solidarity* is where one project comes to the aid of another by placing itself under the direction of the other, while retaining its own identity and goals. This relation builds new ties and fosters trust and mutual understanding. This is the mode of collaboration which promotes Socialism.

(4) *Collaboration as such* means that the two projects merge their separate identities altogether in making common cause, ceasing to deal with each other through delegates, entering fully into joint decision making.

Conclusion

In the above I have outlined the development of ‘agency’ across eight domains. An entire book at least would be needed to elaborate the analysis of Cultural Psychology in each of these domains, and I have dealt with each in about 600 words. But what is more important is that *a different unit of analysis is needed in each domain* because each phenomenon is a different subject matter grasped with a different concept.

Doubtless all represent components in the development of human freedom. However, the lumping together of distinct processes under a heading like ‘agency’ merely serves to obscure the differences and genetic connections between them, preventing the establishment of clear concepts each with their own unit of analysis. The ability of the toddler to feed themselves cannot usefully be theorised in the same way as an adult learning a second language or a feminist getting a sexist law changed or a nation managing to build earthquake-proof buildings. A general conception of ‘agency’ or ‘freedom’ of which all these are but examples can form the subject matter of a fascinating after-dinner talk, but even when Hegel wrote the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, although he brought a single unifying method to bear on the encyclopaedic subject matter, he used numerous units of analysis for numerous distinct concepts.

Rather than using the term ‘agency’ it would be preferable to use a term specific to a relevant domain of phenomena and a unit of analysis appropriate to that domain. A concept is not a true, concrete concept unless (1) it is the unity of two concepts which generate a unique internal contradiction, and (2) it can be represented in a “concrete simple something” (Blunden, 2019a), a “unit of analysis.” Otherwise, the concept is a “mere abstraction,” lacking in real content.

Why Now?

This raises the question: what is the meaning of the current interest in “agency,” and the evident insistence on agency being a purely psychological concept (the sociological meanings are all to be found in the past; the current fad is exclusively in Psychology and related disciplines). It seems to me that this fascination indicates both the terror of researchers feeling increasing foreboding about the growing social crisis and in particular the conviction that there is nothing which can be done about it. This crisis is surely expressed in the decline of effective forms of collective action. People feel as if their lives are dominated by processes beyond their control.

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