

Short Article

## **Beyond Dualist Ontology: A Note of Caution on the use of the Concept of 'Agency'**

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### **Introduction**

In the context of a radical break with the thoughts that preoccupied social scientists under the once hailed 'linguistic turn' and, in particular, constructivist forms of social analysis, the concept of agency is being increasingly conscripted as part of a renewed characterisation of the material world.<sup>1</sup> In our day-to-day lives, we often, usually without thinking too hard about it, ascribe agency to non-human beings – our pets, for example. This is simply a part of the way most of us make sense of animal behaviour. However, one does not need to be particularly familiar with the relevant philosophical canons to know that *literal* ascriptions of agency to non-humans – and *especially* to inorganic entities – are controversial insofar as modernist ontology and metaphysics is concerned. Thus it is that, when I ascribe agency to my budgie, or to the malevolent looking cloud that appears to be coming my way as I step out the house in shorts and a T-shirt, the modernist worldview would diagnose my attributions as intended somewhat metaphorically. Nonetheless, in many social sciences, including sociology, media studies, political science – and my own academic background, social anthropology – we are beginning to rethink our basic assumptions about the purportedly non-agential nature of the material world and humans' place in relation to it.

In this paper, I explore the thinking behind this way of conceptualising the material world, and to appraise the move towards what I think of as the concurrent re-humanisation of matter and the re-materialism of humanity. But my primary aim as we enter a new age of 'post-humanistic' social science is to urge a measure of caution with throwing these words and concepts around too haphazardly. In particular, to equate too closely the sense of agency which has historically been attributed to humans, and the ones which we are beginning to attribute more and more to the many other constituents of the material world.

### **The Legacy of Descartes**

A particularly enduring legacy left to us by Descartes – one with which we are probably all familiar – is a radical ontological divide between human consciousness and, well, everything else. Where the latter is free to do what minds do unconstrained by the corporeal environment from which it is transcendent, the former, an inert world of 'brute fact', is trapped in the indiscriminate grip of an inviolable determinism. One of the primary aims of the philosophical enterprise, given this dualistic ontology: to attain, from this disconnected perspective, an epistemological tether ("I *know* that the world exists and is not just an illusion") to the world from which we have been divorced. Latour recounts at quite considerable length, and with quite some

disdain, the trials and tribulations of the numerous philosophers who have tried, but ultimately failed, to forge that tether and to reconnect us with the lost world.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Latour in doing so encourages us to see the absurdity of the whole endeavour: to have radically disconnected ourselves from the material universe as a point of departure (the classic ‘brain in a vat’ scenario), only to subsequently spend centuries of philosophising from the depths of armchairs (or vats) on how to put us back in touch with that same world!<sup>3</sup> But he argues that there *is* in fact a guiding rationality behind the project, one which can at least explain the philosopher’s obsession with trying to reconnect with the world from the inside out<sup>4</sup>: a fear of falling prey to the rule of the “mob”. As Latour puts it,

To avoid the threat of a mob rule that would make everything lowly, monstrous, and inhuman, we have to depend on something that has no human origin, no trace of humanity, something that is purely, blindly, and coldly outside the City...*only inhumanity will quash inhumanity.*<sup>5</sup>

The philosophic enterprise thus has high stakes: the quest is for the philosopher’s – well, epistemologist’s – stone, ‘truth’, a source of power which is envisioned to grant the holder power over the ‘mob’ that threatens to throw humanity into disarray. As was the case for the more common referent of the term, however, the stone has never actually been retrieved, and probably never will be. Nonetheless, Latour argues that one of the definitive properties of modernity is the production and maintenance of a purported absolute separation of nature and culture, wherein the moderns have, unlike other ‘cultures’, escaped the shackles of culture and found in science an exclusive connection with and means of manipulating the long lost connection with the world in all its inhuman nakedness.<sup>6</sup>

### **Beyond Dualist Ontology**

Of course, social scientists have long contested the modernist claim that natural science is able to speak on behalf of that which lies outside the “city”. One of the most powerful lines of response to the modernist worldview – radical constructivism – was to argue that the apparent achievement of “Science” to have reconnected us with “the real” is nothing over and above an illusion, for we are and always will be interminably trapped within our own conceptual frameworks; an unmediated perspective on the world is, quite literally, inconceivable.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the apparent, even commonsensical, intuition to the contrary is the product of complex, power-laden socio-cultural processes. However, Latour argues that this purported victory over modernism yields its own problems, for now the human mind has been rendered even *further* removed from the material world, and is now denied even the barest shred of hope of catching a glimpse of anything outside the “city”.<sup>8</sup> It should thus come as little surprise that, just as the popular 20<sup>th</sup> century worldview of discrete, bounded cultural entities began to crumble in the wake of globalisation, the contemporary world is beginning to throw into relief the inadequacies of constructivist epistemology. Indeed, today’s global political economy, preoccupied as it is with the advent of a new age of bio-politics in a world full of Donna Haraway’s “cyborgs”<sup>9</sup> – not to mention such heavily contested issues as global warming –

has rendered the conceptual toolbox bequeathed to many social sciences under the linguistic turn in serious need of a makeover.

More specifically, what is needed is an ontology that acknowledges and appreciates, rather than denies and scorns, humans' intractability from their immediate material environments. As Latour argues, we, unlike philosophers of old, are not interested in absolute certainty, and indeed are prepared to grant the "mob" the credit that it was denied under the modernist worldview. Thus, we are not forced, as the philosophers of old thought they were, to assume as a point of departure a radical separation between mind and world. It is as easy as plugging ourselves back in!<sup>10</sup> But where exactly to go from here? What of our conceptual toolbox? To be sure, the forebears for just such a move have been available to us for centuries – as far back as the hailed materialist philosophies of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud.<sup>11</sup> In addition, spearheaded by Latour, Actor-Network Theory has enjoyed considerable influence from the 1980s to the present day, advocating a radical ontological equality between humans, non-humans and the networks they form together (I shall return to ANT in more detail later). However, what I would like to draw attention to first and foremost in this paper is a contemporary volume edited by political theorists Diana Coole and Samantha Frost entitled *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics*, in the introduction to which they outline just such a framework within which we can understand ourselves as being a part of, and ontologically equivalent to, the nonhuman and even inorganic world.<sup>12</sup> I draw attention to this particular endeavour because although it demonstrates some influence by ANT (although scant reference is made to it), unlike the latter it appropriates the concept of agency too fast too uncritically, and in such a way that I think warrants a note of caution as we enter a new and important age of 'post-humanistic' social science.

### **Ascriptions of Agency**

One of the major challenges that one faces in pursuing such a conceptual project is to foster the sought after ontological equality between humans and the other constituents of the material world in such a way that human beings are not simply rendered mere passive, inert, prisoners of the same inviolable determinism that has constrained the latter since the days of Descartes. Although that would decentre humanity from the centre of the cosmos, it would do so at the expense of some quite deeply set beliefs and intuitions about the nature of human consciousness. The most intuitive means of confronting this challenge is thus, perhaps unsurprisingly, to find in the non-human world attributes that have, in the reign of dualist ontology, been used exclusively to characterise humans (to re-humanise matter, that is). For, if what is desired is a source of concepts which affirm matter's affinity with 'us', that is surely where to start looking.

To this end, Coole and Frost take the reader on a journey through the history of science, from the Descartes-inspired classical mechanics from which the concept of 'inert matter' was derived, to the surprising and exciting findings of the contemporary sciences<sup>13</sup> Among the most important of these findings for the re-humanisation of matter is that matter, far from being inert, passive subjects of determinism, is in essence completely *indeterminate*, and thus cannot be beaten

into submission by the transcendent, rational prowess of the thinking scientist. Indeed, these claims – which have been, perhaps a little ironically, developed and defended by scientists themselves – allow the authors to conclude that matter is not:

a massive, opaque plenitude, but is recognised instead as indeterminate, constantly forming and reforming in unexpected ways. One could conclude, accordingly, that “matter becomes” rather than “matter is”.<sup>14</sup>

While the kind of language they are espousing here is beginning to sound reminiscent of that usually associated with human beings, Coole and Frost take what is arguably a further step along the path of re-humanising the material world. They argue that, given matter’s indeterminacy and “imminent vitality”, as they so eloquently put it, we are now finally in a position to “consider anew the location and nature of capacities for *agency*”.<sup>15</sup> They state:

Conceiving matter as...no longer simply passive and inert disturbs the conventional sense that agents are exclusively humans who possess the cognitive abilities, intentionality, and freedom to make autonomous decisions...<sup>16</sup>

True to the title of the volume, the authors on several occasions reaffirm their commitment to the legitimacy of ascribing agency to the non-human constituents of the material world (e.g. “material forces themselves manifest certain agentic capacities”; “ascribing agency to inorganic phenomena”; “all bodies...evince certain capacities for agency”). This is, as I have already discussed above, an understandably appealing move: given that agency, under Descartes, was one of the definitive attributes that set human consciousness apart from (inert) matter, to redistribute it more evenly among the rest of the material world marks an important step along the route to the reunion of mind and world and, in particular, the establishment of a truly ‘post-humanistic’ conceptual playing field upon which contemporary concerns can be seen to unfold.<sup>17</sup> Speaking on behalf of the other contributors of the volume – such as Jane Bennett, Elizabeth Grosz, William E. Connolly, and Sarah Ahmed – Coole and Frost hail the advent of what they call the “new materialisms”, a decisive turn in the social sciences which commits wholeheartedly to the agential character of the material world.<sup>18</sup> Although it is perhaps too early to determine the extent to which their conception of agency is currently being appropriated, it is pretty clear that the authors expect future social scientific research to proceed in its stead.

### **A Note of Caution**

Yet, it is with precisely this – granted, well-motivated – move that I can sense a danger approaching, one which I think all social scientists with an interest in post-humanistic research should consider carefully. What Coole and Frost *have* managed to accomplish – with the support of the history of science – is to demonstrate that matter is not as it was once thought to be, and should thus not be thought of as the inert and passive subject of humans’ categorisations and interventions. It is probably uncontroversial to say that this legitimises

attributions of “imminent vitality” – as well as *some* of the various other similar properties they conscript – to matter. However, I am far from sure that they have done the necessary theoretical labour to have convincingly imported such a loaded concept as agency into their “new materialist” framework. The reason that I think they have been too fast is that, although the concept of agency was forged in opposition to that of determinacy by Descartes (to the point that it was, granted, a contingent fact that that anything that was not subject to the laws of cause and effect possessed the capacity for agency), indeterminacy does not necessarily *imply* agency.

At least, it doesn't imply agency in the sense that was reserved for humans under the legacy of Descartes, which Coole and Frost would see redistributed among the many other constituents of the material world. Let us just explore *that* kind of agency for a moment. One of the important action-oriented questions that contemporary philosophers have been grappling with is how to distinguish movements (e.g. blinks) from actions (winks). Unsurprisingly, their answers have involved far more than an appeal to the indeterminacy of actions as opposed to movements insofar as the purported laws of physics are concerned. Davidson, for one, famously argues that an action is something done by an agent which is distinctly “intentional under some description”.<sup>19</sup> There is, granted, a sense in which the movements of animals are goal-directed in a similar kind of sense; for instance, a dog moves its legs *in order to* get the cat that is quickly getting away from it. However, as Wilson argues, it is widely held that:

a great deal of human action has a richer psychological structure than this. An agent performs an activity that is directed at a goal, and commonly it is a goal the agent has adopted on the basis of an overall practical assessment of his options and opportunities. Moreover, it is immediately available to the agent's awareness both that he is performing the activity in question and that the activity is aimed by him at such-and-such a chosen end.<sup>20</sup>

Although Wilson, if anything, and much like many philosophers, *overestimates* the degree of freedom of will possessed by the agent (neglecting such factors as an agent's ‘habitus’, for instance,<sup>21</sup> the sense of agency associated with humans is clearly related – inseparably, arguably – to the intentional concepts (in the world-directed, representational sense) of ‘belief’ and ‘desire’. For it is only within the context of a particular system of such intentional states that an action can be understood as such. Similarly, Buss<sup>22</sup> argues that an action is the kind of thing for which reasons sufficient for the performing of that action could be offered (where the reason(s) cited will invariably involve some combination of beliefs and desires). Given that the ability to situate one's actions within a framework of beliefs and desires involves the faculty of *understanding* (in this case, one's action), to be an actor or agent in this particular sense (*cf.* the above quote by Coole and Frost) is a thoroughly *cognitive*, and thus distinctly *human* affair.

In light of this picture of agency, Coole and Frost's repeated use of the phrases such as "*certain agentic capacities*",<sup>23</sup> and the like, begin to sound rather vague, and one is left begging a more satisfactory specification as to which capacities they refer. At this point it might be useful to explore ANT briefly in order to contrast its treatment of the status of non-human and non-organic constituents of the material world with that offered by Coole and Frost. Latour and other AN-theorists are concerned precisely with incorporating the "missing masses" – technology, buildings, animals, germs, and all other kinds of non-human entity – in to the purview of social analysis.<sup>24</sup>

Like Coole and Frost's contention that matter is not the massive opaque plenitude, AN-theorists think social analyses are significantly deprived if one assumes the passivity and thus irrelevance of these "masses". Latour's argument is that the production of scientific facts, for instance, is far more complex than correspondence theories of truth would have it. They can be produced and retain their status as 'true' only through the enlisting of a multitude of things – people, institutions, artefacts etc. – into stable networks of activity.<sup>25</sup> In tracking these networks, not just in scientific contexts but in many other domains of social life as well, AN-theorists necessarily extend agency over non-human and even inorganic elements of networks. However, because they understand action as a property of networks, they do not locate agency *in* particular material bodies, human or non-human, but rather in the heterogeneous associations of humans, non-humans and inorganic bodies. That is, in the relations *between* elements in a network.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, as AN-theorists have stressed, their conception of agency significantly differs from what Descartes had 'in mind'. I am inclined to agree with them.

ANT's appropriation of agency is far from uncontroversial, and has been critiqued over the years in a number of contexts (particularly in Science, Technology and Society [STS] and in Sociology). However, the reason I find Coole and Frost's approach particularly problematic is that in attempting to re-humanise the material world they have imported the historically loaded concept of agency (with its roots in Descartes), failed to critically interrogate what they *mean* by agency and its cognates, and then located it *in* non-human and non-organic entities (cf. ANT). As a result, and without further critical thought, their concept of non-human agency remains dangerously similar to that commonly associated with humans (as outlined above). One might ask: well, so what? To my mind come two undesirable consequences.

Firstly, we in the social sciences *do* want to be able to build a repertoire of matter-affirming concepts which can be put to use in the global political sphere to engage contemporary concerns. But if we fail to critically engage and differentiate the concepts we are appropriating to this end, the tools in our conceptual toolbox won't be nearly as sharp and thus as useful as they could be. Secondly, and this perhaps applies not only to Coole and Frost but also ANT as well, in deliberately blurring the boundaries between humans and non-humans, we are beginning to lose sight of that which *does* set humans apart from non-humans: intentionality. Intentionality is, granted, notoriously difficult to

reconcile with the world of cause and effect. But if we simply sweep it under the rug or leave it for someone else to take care of, we are arguably not much better than those under the ‘linguistic turn’ who thought that the answer to the arrogance of science was to embrace human consciousness’ radical removal from the material world.

### Conclusion

I do not wish to offer a definitive solution in this essay to the challenge of conceptually reuniting human beings and the imminently vital, indeterminate material world to which scientific developments proclaim us to belong. Actually, in spite of the criticisms I have offered, I think Coole and Frost are on the right track by looking within matter for characteristics which are shared by humans and other material bodies alike. Nonetheless, given the arguments made in this essay, I would like to pose the following question. Do we really *need* to invoke the concept of agency in the conceptual project of re-uniting humans and the material world? Will our efforts to crumble around us without it? Personally I am not entirely convinced that the answer to these questions is yes. I think that it is possible, for instance, that the commitment to redistributing agency to non-humans reflects the desire for symbolic victory over Descartes as much as anything else. How he would turn in his grave! Many will of course still hold that in order to move forward in the social sciences we really *should* “consider anew the location and nature of capacities for agency”. But if this is indeed the case we need, firstly, to think critically as we arrive at this conclusion, and to be especially careful when we appropriate a concept with such a loaded history. AN-theorists have been fairly sensitive in this regard; but as Coole and Frost demonstrate, it is easy to think too fast and to get carried away. Secondly, it is imperative that if we really are committed to reuniting humans and the material world, we do not neglect intentionality’s place in materiality. Given that we still (perhaps grudgingly) operate from within the *humanities*, we need to keep it in the purview.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> D. Coole and S. Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms”, in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics*, edited by D. Coole and S. Frost, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> B. Latour, “Do You Believe in Reality?”, in *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Latour, “Do You Believe in Reality?”, p. 13

<sup>4</sup> Latour, “Do You Believe in Reality?”, p. 4

<sup>5</sup> IbLatour, “Do You Believe in Reality?”, p. 5

<sup>6</sup> B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, translated by Catherine Porter, Brighton UK: Harvester 1991.

<sup>7</sup> Coole and Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms”, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Latour, “Do You Believe in Reality?”, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> D. Haraway, “When Species Meet”, in *When Species Meet*, University of Minnesota Press 2008, pp. 3-42.

<sup>10</sup> Latour, “Do You Believe in Reality?”, p. 15

<sup>11</sup> Coole and Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms”, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Coole and Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms”, pp. 1-43.

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- <sup>13</sup> Coole and Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms", p. 10-19.
- <sup>14</sup> Coole and Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms", p. 10.
- <sup>15</sup> Coole and Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms", p. 9. *My emphasis.*
- <sup>16</sup> Coole and Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms", p. 10.
- <sup>17</sup> Coole and Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms", p. 20.
- <sup>18</sup> Coole and Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms", p. 2.
- <sup>19</sup> D. Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p.46.
- <sup>20</sup> G. Wilson, "Action", *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* 2007 [Online] Available at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/action/>.
- <sup>21</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1977.
- <sup>22</sup> S. Buss, "What Practical Reasoning Must Be If We Act for Our Own Reasons", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 77, 1999, pp. 399-421.
- <sup>23</sup> Coole and Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms", p. 20.
- <sup>24</sup> B. Latour, "Where are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artefacts", in *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*, edited by W. Bijker and J. Law, Cambridge Mass: MIT Press 1992, pp. 225-259.
- <sup>25</sup> B. Latour and S. Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts*, Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1979.
- <sup>26</sup> B. Latour, "Third Source of Uncertainty: Objects too Have Agency", in *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005, pp. 63-86.