

1 / PERSONAL AGENCY

This book is concerned with two major questions. First, what is involved in being an agent or patient of one's career or life? This is a different kind of question than asking what is involved in being an agent when engaged in a clear, definite task such as playing darts, fixing a leaky faucet, or learning to type. Among other things, a definite task involves a specifiable skill, but what skill enables one to be a potent agent in shaping one's course of life? Second, how does a person change from being a patient to being an agent of a life course? To build agency in a practical task, one might instruct and train, cultivate knowledge and skill. To build agency for guiding one's own life, it is not immediately apparent what one should do. Thus, we begin without a clear sense of what agency in life is, or the way in which a person transforms from patiency to agency.

In ordinary language, the concept of agency is reasonably clear. An agent is one who makes things happen and a patient is one to whom things happen. An agent is active while a patient is reactive or passive. A rather lengthy list of distinguishing qualities could be generated easily (decisive, planful, confident, optimistic, etc.), yet such a list would not be expected to apply in every case. Sometimes we emphasize confidence and sometimes we emphasize determination despite a lack of confidence. The concept of agency seems to elude any exact and stable link with a quality such as confidence. Consider, for instance, Rotter's (1966) locus of control of reinforcement. A person with an external locus of control believes

that reinforcements are contingent upon luck, chance, fate, and in general, external forces. A person with an internal locus of control believes that reinforcements are contingent upon one's own effort, competence, or influence. Clearly, a person with a greater sense of agency would have an internal locus of control, yet it is obviously unrealistic. As agency is strengthened by a more absolute belief that one controls reinforcements, that there are no external contingencies or forces worth worrying about, one becomes increasingly unrealistic. For this reason, Rotter (1975) suggested that people who have a strong internal locus of control are apt to be maladjusted, as are those with a strong external locus of control. In ordinary language, overconfident and underconfident people are more prone to maladjustment. Suddenly, the middle range becomes desirable. Now, because a sense of agency is virtually defined in isolation by confidence or locus of control, we are put in the odd position of only wanting so much agency, but not too much, of defining agency in a way that is incompatible with realism. The fault seems to lie in attempting to account for agency by a single isolated "mechanism" rather than searching for a synthesis or configuration of features that mutually check and balance one another.

Another problem is that everyone incorporates agency and patiency in daily life. We both do and undergo, yet the ordinary distinction between agents and patients suggests that agency can be enhanced by a simple matter of increasing doing and decreasing undergoing. Such a prescription is impossible. An agent will undergo as much as a patient. The wrong distinction has been made here, and to untangle the concept of agency, one must examine how doing and undergoing are related, or related differently for agents and patients.

As these few illustrations suggest, the concept of agency is problematic, particularly so with regard to a course of life. For example, Bandura (1977) limits self-efficacy (belief that one can successfully complete a task) to specific tasks. Being able to succeed in chess does not necessarily have relevance to self-efficacy in selling used cars. While it has been indicated that one can go beyond a specific task upon the basis of task similarity, such a strategy of generalization only enlarges a sense of agency from a task to a set of tasks. Still left unanswered is the original concern of what it

means for a person to be a generally strong or weak agent in living. What are people saying when they report feeling in charge of their lives or like an author of their own destinies? How can one conceive of a more general and enduring sense of agency that could pervade a life rather than being bound to a task or set of tasks?

While this entire book constitutes an attempt to clarify a sense of agency and how it can be enhanced, this chapter provides a selective and critical review of concepts. Our concern is selective in order to shape diverse views into a more coherent starting point for investigation. Our perspective is critical in order to gain distance and flexibility for examining actual cases with more sensitivity. If our initial view were narrow, erring on the side of omission, it would limit further study. If our initial view were too defective, it would misguide investigation. The aim of this chapter, then, is to sketch a perspective on a sense of agency that incorporates other views and that can be examined in actual lives as they are lived.

Action and Agency

The concepts of agency and action are so interrelated that it is difficult to distinguish the enhancement of agency at a time (e.g., in a particular task) from the empowerment or strengthening of action. To enhance agency in, for example, driving a car seems very close indeed to increasing the effectiveness of action in driving. Of course, the concepts differ. A strong sense of agency can endure over lengthy periods of time and in many situations. Customarily, action is restricted to some definite striving to bring about something. While the concepts differ, their borders seem very fluid, perhaps because agency does not involve an agent in isolation or an action in isolation, but rather the character of the agent in relation to the quality of action. In short, agency concerns an agent taking action, but a course of action might be momentary or span years.

Because the borders of the two concepts are so fluid, one can characterize agency by elevating aspects of action into traits of a person. Rather than a persistent action, there is a persistent person. Rather than a goal-directed action, there is a person who shows purpose or commitment. All theories of agency are implicitly or explicitly grounded in the conceptual network of action, a configu-

ration of terms that constitutes an everyday competence in practical understanding (Ricoeur 1984). Even theories that begin with a singular focus, such as self-efficacy, elaborate by gradually encompassing motivation, goals, plans, and other aspects of action (Bandura 1989).

If the major conceptions of agency are generalizations from action, one serving as a model for the other, then one major implication is that personal agency cannot be regarded as a single thing like locus of control, but must be conceived as a complex configuration of parts. No part can be adequately described in isolation from the others for it is the coordination of parts into a functional whole that makes up personal agency. We understand a part through its place within a comprehensible whole.

The aim of this section is to identify and briefly describe the core ingredients of personal agency, as drawn from major theorists. Theorists differ to some extent in the aspects drawn from the conceptual network of action (the overlap is, however, considerable), but largely in the aspects emphasized. Because of this redundancy, we are not concerned here with describing each theory with its distinctive line of research. Rather, we are intent upon the redundancy itself to try for a reasonably broad identification of parts. Indeed, wherever possible, we shall use plain words rather than theoretical terms to entitle a feature. In this way, we can use theories to help compose the central features of agency without prematurely bogging down in theoretical disputes.

Self-determination

For deCharms (1968, 1976), the fundamental condition of agency is an internal locus of causality. The cause of action is within oneself. The person is the origin of action. In contrast, given an external locus of causality, a person feels pushed around like a puppet on a string. Self-determination is not something that can be perceived (after all, a person does not really observe oneself as one observes others), nor deduced with credible potency. Rather, the sense of being the personal cause of one's actions (or more broadly, one's fate) involves a totality of situated experience, more akin to felt judgment, that a person is acting out of his or her own

motives. "In short, a person's motives are the reasons for thinking and acting and therefore explain or give meaning to an actor's behavior" (deCharms 1981, p.339)."

As deCharms has refined his theory of personal causation, the meaning of self-determination has expanded through the network of action terms. "The complexity of the origin concept forced us to consider all of the related concepts—choice, freedom, responsibility, and ownership of behavior. The guiding conceptualization was broadened to include them. In a nutshell, originating one's own actions implies choice; choice is experienced as freedom; choice imposes responsibility for choice-related actions and enhances the feeling that the action is 'mine'" (1984, p. 279). In another work, deCharms (1987a) stated that "personal causation means deliberate action to produce intended change" (p. 8). Thus, the experience of being a personal cause is connected with having a meaningful motive, choosing, forming an intention, using knowledge and skill to produce changes (in short, planning), taking responsibility, ownership, and freedom.

Each expansion is problematic. For example, freedom might be conceived as freedom from threats, constraints, and even responsibility. Basically, one seeks escape and might view situations narrowly in terms of barriers or impositions of any form. Such an outlook, however, characterizes a pawn, one with little sense of agency. In contrast, freedom might be conceived as freedom to strive for meaningful goals. One is directed, looking through obstacles for a path toward one's goals. If one is free to pursue one's goal, a person is free enough, so to speak. This sense of freedom is compatible with responsibility for it involves the taking on of responsibility for a course of action. These sorts of distinctions (freedom from versus freedom to) are crucial for resolving the difficulties of expanding personal causation through the network of terms, for sharpening an understanding of agency.

Self-legislation

According to Frankfurt (1971), a distinctive characteristic of human agency is that persons evaluate their own desires, motivations, and choices. Evaluation of one's desires leads to a second

order of desire or volition, in which a person wants to have certain kinds of desires or to be free from certain desires. For example, a soldier might yearn for courage, a priest for compassion, or an athlete for discipline. Alternatively, a fashion model might yearn to be rid of a desire for pastry, an academic from the attractions of a more active life, or a judge from sentimentality.

As Taylor (1977) has clarified, a first order evaluation seems more concerned with outcomes. Will one's craving for pastry be more satisfied by a butterhorn or an éclair? Certainly, many views of agency are tied to such a utilitarian outlook. Both self-efficacy (Bandura 1977) and locus of control (Rotter 1966), for instance, are concerned with beliefs that one can complete a task or secure an outcome. The difficulty of such a restriction is that these views neglect meaning, worth, and moral codes, making it impossible to then consider responsibility in any full way. The Marquis de Sade might be just as much a model of agency as Mahatma Gandhi.

Second order evaluations require considerably more depth since what is at issue is not the sheer fact of desire and how it might be satisfied, but the qualitative worth of the desires one has or has not. What qualities should be encouraged and discouraged? Which motives for action are nobler and more base, honorable or dishonorable, virtuous or depraved? Evaluative questions such as these cannot be judged apart from an understanding of the kind of person one wants to be, the kind of life one wants to live. "Our identity is defined by strong evaluations" (Taylor 1977, p. 124). Fundamental evaluations about what ideals and values are to prevail in life are inseparable from a sense of self as agent. Since we decide and act and interpret meanings out of fundamental evaluations, to experience a shattering of or dislodgement from our evaluative constitution as persons would involve a "terrifying breakdown of precisely those capacities which define a human agent" (p. 125).

Amidst the temptations, confusions, conflicts, and distractions of life's options, a person who is to stay on course with some continuity of identity requires a capacity to articulate one's position in deliberation, and to articulate it with the depth necessary to resolve the commensurability of possible courses of action with the desired shape of one's life. When the great German sociologist, Max Weber, was invited to become more active on the national committee for the Democratic party, he tried to explain to a sena-

tor why he could not accept this invitation, nor remain on the committee.

The politician shall and must make compromises. But I am a scholar by profession . . . The scholar dare not make compromises nor cloak any nonsense. I definitely cannot do this. Those who have other views, such as Prof. Lederer and Dr. Vogelstein, are unprofessional. If I acted as they have I would regard myself as a criminal to my profession. (Frye 1967, p. 123)

In this case, the compromises that are necessary and even virtuous in politics are contrasted with the uncompromising character of a scholar. In pursuing the truth, there can be no compromise. One is incommensurable with the other (not reducible to a common measure). If Weber failed to articulate his fundamental evaluations or to do so with the depth necessary to resolve this temptation, he would have endangered his constitution as an agent of his own life. For this reason, among others, Taylor (1977) asserted that "an agent who could not evaluate desires at all would lack the minimum degree of reflectiveness which we associate with a human agent, and would lack a crucial part of the background for what we describe as the exercise of will" (p.117).

Meaningfulness

Both self-determination and self-legislation rest on meaning, and according to Howard (1989), "the most important mechanism humans use to achieve volitional control is meaning" (p.vii). Kobasa (1979) and Maddi (1988) place meaning at the center of commitment and a sense of purpose. Commitment (one of the three components that make up their concept of hardiness) might be summarized as allegiance to one's own distinctive values as they are integrated into a life plan and serve as a basis for involvement in activities. For Werkmeister (1967), "we are not really a person unless we are lawgivers unto ourselves" (p. 127). Restraining, encouraging, and directing desires are intended to help those values to prevail and flourish to which a person stands committed.

For all of these scholars, meaning is concerned with the kind of person one is to be and the kind of life one is to lead. Since meaning transcends the immediate pull of satisfactions to include a past and future, and involves a placement of value upon what is really being achieved in pursuing an immediate desire, meaning concerns a representation of life. But what form does such a representation take?

Werkmeister (1967) has developed a standard or guide for ordering the worth of desires or "felt value experience" from higher to lower. He noted, first, that the literature from diverse cultures, ancient and modern, supports a rough ordering of value experiences, ranging from sense pleasures, gratification of appetites, and a sense of well-being through satisfactions of human interaction, peace of mind, and joys of constructive activities to a sense of self-fulfillment regarding a whole life. What in our experience justifies the ordering that makes the taste of an apple pale alongside the significance of producing a work such as the *Table of Elements* or *Hamlet*? Werkmeister's answer is that as one goes up the ordering of felt value experiences more of the self is involved and at stake. Lower order value experiences are felt to be tangential to the self. For example, showering after a hot, tiring workout is certainly pleasurable, but one is hardly at stake in any significant way. There is no danger of self-betrayal, but no promise of self-fulfillment. As one moves higher up the ordering, the self becomes more profoundly involved and at stake. Such experiences are more self-defining and life defining. The order of these levels is thus a "measure of the profundity of the self involved in the experience . . . determined by the depth of the involvement of the experiencing self" (p.125).

Intuitively, Werkmeister's ordering is compelling, but it does not provide an individual ordering. To understand why Weber, for instance, felt that the uncompromising stance of a scholar was more meaningful than a compromising stance of a politician, we need a representation that encompasses an agent's actions and experiences over time. Such a representation is a narrative, or as Bruner (1987) stated, "we seem to have no other way of describing lived time save in the form of narrative" (p.12). "Human beings think, perceive, imagine, and make moral judgments according to narrative structures" (Sarbin 1986, p. 8).

The plot of a narrative configures goals, relations, influences, events, circumstances, and actions, among other things, into a temporal whole (Polkinghorne 1988). In particular, characters are aligned in story and a person assumes one of the prominent roles. According to MacIntyre (1984), "the self inhabits a character whose unity is given as the unity of character" (p. 217). Summed up most directly by Howard (1989), "a life becomes meaningful when one sees himself or herself as an actor within the context of a story" (p. vii).

Thus, Weber rejected the compromising acts of a politician because they clashed with the narrative plot of a German scholar uncompromisingly (that is, with integrity) searching for truth. In a political plot, a compromise might be regarded as an act of brilliant leadership or statesmanship, but in a scholarly plot it reflects a loathsome lack of integrity. In this way, the configuration of character in a story provides the basis for shaping oneself to play a part and shaping the life one leads.

Purposefulness

People set goals and strive to reach them. In this sense, everyone is purposive. However, people vary in the nature of the goals established. Some are filled with a sense of purpose; others are alienated from their own goals and lack a sense of purpose or commitment (Kobasa 1979). What are the differences between goals that enhance the sense of being a purposeful human agent and goals that undermine this sense?

In the context of a human life, a goal is a symbolic vehicle for transforming ideals into actualities. Human existence involves a chronic double vision of ideal and actual. We have an actual self-concept and an ideal self-concept. We assess life as it is actually lived alongside our vision of a good life. Double vision allows us to see into situations with a depth that would be denied a being with no capacity for idealization. Through contrast, we construe our own incompleteness, erecting gaps between what is and what ought to be (Cochran 1985). Gaps are experienced as disturbances, yearnings, upsets, disenchantments, and conflicts, all moving a person toward completion, the actualization of what is better or more

ideal. In personality theory, this portrait is the general basis for what Maddi (1980) terms the perfection theorists such as Adler (1956), Allport (1955, 1961), and Maddi (1970) himself. The fundamental striving of a human being is toward completion through actualizing the ideal. In this sense, goals are representations of possible completion (Maddi 1988).

According to this perspective, there are two fundamental aspects of setting agentic goals. First, is the goal anchored in a strong theme of meaning? Does it constitute a translation, really, of meaning into a goal (deCharms 1976)? The goal might be individually constructed, set by context (work, tradition, etc.) or even imposed by others, and these differences might indeed alter one's sense of agency in taking action, but the main consideration is whether a goal emerges from meaningful motives. Second, the goal is possible. Drawing from work on the achievement motive (McClelland 1961), deCharms (1976) argues persuasively that challenging goals are more agentic, goals that are difficult but achievable. This point has been supported extensively through research on goal setting (Lee, Locke, and Latham 1989; Locke and Latham 1984). Goals that are too extravagant or too trivial simply lack a serious appraisal of reality and make commitment rather doubtful. The extravagant goal, for instance, is too close to an unrealistic wish, insufficiently anchored as a definite possibility for which to strive. Then too, its very improbability moves too easily into excuse making, impressing others with goals rather than attainments, and justification for giving up. The trivial goal is too easily attained, not requiring a strong exercise of agency and probably not capable of actualizing ideals very powerfully. Certainly, there are other features of goals to consider such as goal specificity or the integration of short-term and long-term goals, but the meaningfulness and challenge of a goal seem to be the most critical features for agency.

In Maddi (1988) and Kobasa's (1979) concept of hardiness, an important component is a disposition to view change as a challenge "At the core of the search for novelty and challenge are fundamental life goals that have become increasingly integrated in a widening diversity of situations" (Kobasa 1979, p.4). Perhaps seeking challenge should be made into a separate feature of agency, but it is so interrelated with purposefulness that it is difficult to sepa-

rate. In a situation, a person might seek meaningful opportunities and challenges, but these are apt to amount to the same thing, and in any case, come together as a goal.

Confidence

Agency theorists such as Bandura (1989) and Rotter (1966) have tended to be concerned with what Frankfurt (1971) termed first order desires, essentially a utilitarian outlook. In this case, confidence is concerned with a person's capacity in relation to desired outcomes such as success or attaining positive consequences. Does a person have the capacity to make a difference in the course of events, to influence what happens that affects his or her life? Confidence is concerned with a person's trust in and reliance upon oneself to get things done, to act effectively. The opposite of confidence might be learned helplessness (Seligman 1975).

While Bandura and Rotter focus upon a belief that one can control outcomes, emphasizing the Platonic separation of cognition, emotion, and conation, deCharms (1981, 1984, 1987a, 1987b) stresses the experienced totality of confidence and other features of agency. For deCharms, confidence is not just a matter of belief, nor is it just an inference from observation. Rather, it concerns the whole quality of experience as lived, more akin to a felt judgment or part of an orientation. Conceiving and feeling are united in taking a position or making a valuative judgment (Cochran 1985), and this emphasis upon the quality of experience is more congruent with such intimate terms as trust, reliance, or faith. The difficulty with the emphasis upon belief is that the term is so ambiguous. Beliefs might be superficial or deep, implicit or explicit, impassioned or dry, fragile in the face of reality or unshakable, and professed more than acted upon. Better distinctions are needed to use the term with much assurance.

A second difficulty is that this view of confidence neglects second order desires, those concerned with evaluating the desires one has or lacks. From a second order perspective, confidence would concern faith, trust, or assurance in the desires one has or the course of action one is following, more like confidence in a right direction. Confidence of this kind might be maintained regardless

of success or failure, positive or negative consequences. Among notable figures, Mahatma Gandhi illustrates this order of confidence. Here, there is no necessary assurance that one can make a difference, but there is assurance that one will try, and assurance in a higher vision that deserves or is meant to prevail.

Active striving

Given the disparity between the actual and ideal, what is and what ought to be, a person with a stronger sense of agency takes a more active posture, perhaps as one more accustomed to actualizing the ideal. DeCharms (1976) found that striving emerged as the major difference between agents and patients. Agents take action while patients endure or seem more passive in response to disparity between the actual and ideal.

Further, agents tend to be more proactive than reactive (deCharms 1987a). The difference is that reactions are guided by external circumstances while proactions are guided by individual purpose in light of circumstances. Thus, someone who simply reacts is apt to lose sight of meaningful possibilities, acting on urgencies, obstacles, and opportunities as they arise. Unguided by a sense of purposefulness, a person reacts to or against circumstance. Guided by a sense of purposefulness, a person is apt to view circumstances in a more balanced perspective. Obstacles are restraints to move through or around to attain goals. Opportunities are sized up in relation to priorities and purposes. Having a purpose encourages a balanced response to circumstances, allowing a person to stay on course. Lacking a purpose encourages imbalanced reactions for there is no clear course to be on or off.

From a utilitarian perspective, striving is grounded in confidence. Given a belief that one has the capacity to succeed in various tasks, a person is encouraged to strive and persevere. From the second order or, what might be termed, a moral perspective, striving is apt to be grounded more in meaningfulness and purposefulness. One strives because it is the right thing to do. There are ideals worth striving to actualize, not necessarily because their attainment is probable, but because their actualization is right or good and giving up amounts to yielding to wrong or bad. In both cases,

however, the mark of an agent is that he or she takes active steps toward goals.

Planfulness

Planning involves realistic appraisal and the construction of a course of action. Planning links what a person wants to the realities of a context, in the form of a planned course of action. Like goal setting, planning mediates between the actual and ideal. Planning is part of agency for the rather obvious reason that agents take action, and they cannot take very effective courses of action without planning.

DeCharms (1976) refers to planning as reality perception, the appraisal of means, obstacles, constraints, opportunities, interpersonal influences, and resources. Contexts are sized up realistically according to what will facilitate and hinder movement toward a goal. While deCharms emphasized realism, we prefer the concept of planning for it indicates what realistic appraisal is for.

Phrased most directly and simply, if a person is serious about actualizing an ideal or achieving a goal, he or she will assess realities to devise ways the goal might be achieved. If one's motivation is not serious, there is no need to take reality into account in this way. There are an endless number of ways in which the realities of context might be experienced. One person might be alert for restrictions of any kind, feeling unfair infringements at every opportunity. Another person might be alert for offenses or attention or fun, and so on. Of course, strong agents are not immune to highlighting features of reality in diverse ways, but when pursuing a meaningful goal, reality is ordered in a particular way. Namely, planning is a kind of plot construction that configures ingredients of reality along a story line. For example, if one wanted to get good grades, the basic story line is set. Realities become relevant to this line of intent to the extent that they facilitate or hinder movement. A chatty acquaintance, the quality of one's study lamp, sleeping habits, recreational interests such as listening to music, noise, and the like might all configure in the plot to get good grades. Planning is a way to configure an agentic plot in which some things are minimized or eliminated while other things are enhanced to attain a goal.

Spivack, Platt, and Shure (1976) have argued, and provided reasonable evidence, that adjustment depends upon problem-solving capability, involving certain skills such as means-end thinking, generation of solutions, and causal thinking. However, in learning these skills, a person comes to resemble very closely what is meant by an agent, particularly in the way planning is developed from impoverished narratives to richer, more flexible narratives. Thus, it could be reasonably argued that agentic motivation enhances skills, which in turn strengthen an agentic posture. If one were acting as an agent, planning and striving to achieve meaningful goals, skills of planning or problem solving would be precisely those that would be exercised and developed.

Responsibility

Several senses of responsibility are relevant to agency. First, if a person experienced self-determination in setting a course of action, he or she would be responsible for it, and liable to respond to deviations off course or necessities for readjusting one's course of action. Second, if one believes that a successful outcome or positive consequences are within one's control, one is then responsible for a successful outcome or consequences, barring unforeseen circumstances and developments. Without the power to make a difference, one cannot be responsible.

These senses of responsibility seem reasonably clear although they can become muddled in experience. For example, do we take responsibility for unintended consequences? It all depends, but on what? Sometimes, unintended consequences are contingent affairs that could hardly be foreseen. Sometimes, they are more necessarily tied to intended consequences and should have been foreseen. As another example, it can be much more agentic to claim exact responsibility rather than just more responsibility. Suppose a student received a poor grade on a test. By accepting or denying responsibility, in a general way, a person is in no better position to study effectively for the next test. However, by examining the situation in a more balanced and realistic way, one might be able to see that one's failure was due to a neglect of basic terms, inadequate review, incomplete understanding, low investment of time, and so

on. In this sense, assigning exact responsibility for poor performance is empowering since it can lead to corrective efforts, to understand exactly where one can take responsibility for doing better. Alternatively, one might discover that the teacher made the test tricky and no one did well. In this case, one is empowered not to do better, but through being alleviated of responsibility for a result that did not reflect one's capabilities and efforts. Both of these instances call for judgment and for a just discernment of reality, of what is really the case, and both are clearly connected with agency. For these kinds of reasons, no glib pronouncement about the role of responsibility is possible. It is more the case that an agent searches for what one can be responsible for. What one can take responsibility for, one can change, whether it be concerned with first order or second order desires. Taking responsibility, then, emerges as an exacting task of one disposed to making things happen. To err on the side of lack of responsibility blinds one from exercises of agency that could make a difference. To err on the side of taking too much responsibility leads one toward futile exercises of agency.

Commentary

Perhaps the most striking quality of these agentic features is their interdependence, which is unsurprising if most or all make up the conceptual network of action. For example, action requires a goal and if that goal is set too high or too low, action is doomed to futility or triviality. A particular feature cannot be adequately framed apart from other features. Indeed, it became clear that there is considerable potential for incompatibility without the right stresses and exact distinctions. For example, not all senses of freedom fit harmoniously with responsibility. Overconfidence clashes with the realism necessary for serious planning. Goals can be alienating if not anchored in meaning. And so on.

This interdependence of agentic features also indicates that no feature adequately accounts for agency. For example, one might have efficacious beliefs and still feel powerless. As a young man, Saint Augustine (1961) was successful in his work as a teacher and in lustful pursuits, but felt trapped and helpless. He felt a slave to ambitions and passions that were worthless and meaningless, and

he scorned his capacity to satisfy these ambitions and passions. "Eager for fame and wealth and marriage" (p. 118), and clearly capable of actualizing these ambitions, Saint Augustine could but feel that his "misery was complete" (p. 118). Similarly, one might have an enhanced sense of meaning, seeing oneself as the main character in a fine drama, but meaningfulness takes on the status of a daydream unless it is acted upon, is filled out with goals, plans, choices, and actions. Alone, each feature has obvious counterexamples to undermine any presumption that agency is just a matter of confidence, responsibility, or whatever. If this is so, a sense of agency is concerned with an integration of agentic features, a whole rather than a collection of parts.

While agentic features are interdependent and this interdependence seems necessary to understand a sense of agency, the examination has only yielded parts with only a vague sense of what the whole might be. The analysis into parts has not as yet led to a way to form a synthesis. However, three valuable criteria have emerged to guide such a synthetic effort.

First, a sense of agency is concerned with meaning, or a unifying theme of meaning composed of several strands. A sense of agency is not, for instance, the property of an organism. To properly assess a person's sense of agency, we need to understand that person's orientation. Responsibility, goals, intention, and the like, all concern meaning from the perspective of the agent. Second, an agent is thoroughly contextualized. Outside of a situation or context of some kind, there is no conceivable agent. Or arrived at in another way, agency is always exercised in relation to context, and context offers its own contributions to meaning.

Third, a sense of agency is lived or experienced; it is not just a dry belief. This criterion greatly restricts compositions of meaning that are applicable to a sense of agency. There are compositions that ordinarily cannot be lived such as the chemical composition of a plant, a map of a territory, or a mathematical series. Such knowledge might figure in agency as means, but is not livable (except perhaps through intuitive and imaginative processes). However, a narrative composition can be lived. The dramatic plots of Horatio Alger novels, for instance, were lived by large numbers of people. Further, narrative emplots characters in context and forms a unifying theme of meaning, capable of unifying quite

diverse strands. Narrative is probably the only composition that is capable of satisfying the three criteria presented here, with the possible exception of metaphor.

Story and Agency

To describe an action or course of action is to tell a story. To describe the successful action of a potent agent is to tell a story with a strong agentic plot. Ordinarily, to represent agency, we portray the kind of plot in which an agent figures as a main character. Certainly, one might attempt to represent agency in other ways such as mathematical formulas or flow diagrams, but these are special representations for a very restricted audience. The ordinary, everyday form of representation is narrative (Polkinghorne 1988).

A narrative representation not only offers a way of understanding, a meaningful interpretation of experience, but guides action. To enact a story, one follows the plot in one's interpretations and actions. Narrative constitutes a synchronic structure that is diachronically unfolded as an intelligible replication of itself in perhaps novel circumstances. From a realist's perspective on science (Manicas and Secord 1983), a narrative plot is a powerful particular (Harre 1974), a real causal structure that shapes the course of action over time. Shaping is evident in both the course pursued and corrections taken when one deviates or moves off course. From this perspective, agency is grounded in the plots a person follows in daily life.

Agentic Plots

A story is organized around the opposition of beginning and end. The beginning has been traditionally characterized as an upset, disequilibrium, disturbance, or conflict, a gap between what is and what ought to be. The end brings closure to what was aroused in the beginning. There is some latitude in what might count as an ending, particularly since the nature of the beginning might be elaborated throughout the story. For example, if one lost a job, a person might find a job, become resolved to unemployment, or

gain a recreational activity. There are many possible endings for any beginning, but each would constitute a form of opposition.

The middle of a story concerns how a person moved from a particular beginning to a particular end. Since beginning and end offer two poles of an opposition, a coherent and potentially rigorous guide is offered to determine the relevance of events, people, and circumstances. If an element did not bear upon the movement toward or away from the end, it would lack relevance and could be edited out of the story. The middle is more than a chronology; it involves a plot that explains how the end came about (Danto 1985), showing the causal significance of parts as they configure in a whole account of the change.

An agentic plot can be filled in by both theory and research. Theoretically, for instance, a Bandura tale would almost certainly emphasize perseverance despite setbacks. A Taylor plot would involve allegiance to ideals that define a person and a course of life. For a little more detail, consider Maddi (1988) as a script writer for agentic plots. Within this theory, patients are stuck in "facticity" (the fixed and unchangeable) while agents explore and actualize possibilities. Through cultivating symbolization (more refined representation), imagination (to conceive of possibility), and judgment (to distinguish what is fixed and what is possible), the central task of an agent is to discern meaningful possibilities to guide courses of action. In such a plot, there are discoveries of two types. One might discover that what seemed fixed is really changeable or discover that what seemed possible is really limited or fixed. Whether encouraging or discouraging, agents continue exploring to shape the most meaningful life that is possible. Pivotal kinds of events would include timely support from others, mastery experiences that enhance a sense of competency and increased possibility, and experiences of change that are enriching rather than chaotic. Rather than experiencing change and novelty as threats, a hardy agent would search for opportunities, feel challenged to vigorously search for and act on new possibilities. There would be more experiences that seem worthwhile and interesting, and a more active, involved orientation to making things happen. In short, the plot would depend in part upon the planning, organizing, and doing of the agent, all with a more uplifting anticipation that it is within one's power to make a happy ending more likely.

While theorists have not specified details of an agentic plot, each is quite suggestive regarding what such a plot would be.

Empirically, there are numerous studies that might help fill in an agentic plot. One of the most comprehensive efforts is the strangely neglected work of Arnold (1962) on constructive motivation. Using Murray's (1943) Thematic Apperception Test, she elicited stories from individuals. Viewing each story as the exploration of a problem and its resolution, she formulated the import or moral of the story to reveal a conviction of the storyteller, a motivational pattern or principle of action. Given several stories from a person, the sequence of imports reveals a fuller range of convictions about moral conduct, reaction to adversity, what leads to success and failure, and other people. For example, below are the first two stories from a fifteen-year-old female. She had recently moved to a new school where she was repeating grade nine. According to her school counselor, she was doing poorly and might have to repeat grade nine again if her motivation did not improve.

"This young child has just received an assignment from his music teacher to play in front of the class. He goes home and tries writing something that he can play and accomplish, and also please the teacher. The night before the big day he grows excited at the thought of getting a chance to prove himself to the teacher. That night, his mom wants him to practice and be prepared, but he decides to go outside and play with friends. His mom gets mad, but tells him to decide for himself. When he comes in, his mom wants him to practice, but he is tired, so goes to bed. In the morning, he rushes around, trying to get prepared to present the composition and his mother tells him just to do his best and don't rush it."

"After teaching a class, the teacher was totally exhausted. Outside, the teacher started walking with a mother toward the edge of town where the mother lived. On the way, they had an argument over the way the teacher was teaching the children. The teacher argued with the mother over the way she raised her children. The mother was stubborn and became angry while the teacher was frustrated and confused at the thought that the mother had a higher priority for farming than for school."

The imports for these stories seem reasonably clear. "While you might get excited about proving yourself by performing well, you play instead despite the urgings of others, and have to rush to

prepare at the last minute." Here, there is an initial desire that does not come to fruition. Instead of taking adequate means to perform well, the main character becomes distracted in play and too tired to practice. What is the consequence for neglecting adequate practice or abandoning a desire? It might be failure, an embarrassing performance, letting oneself down, and so on. But in the story, the only consequence is that he has to rush to prepare. Dismal preparation leads only to a last minute rush.

The second story explores achievement further. What if one did work hard? "Even if you work yourself to exhaustion, people will criticize and downgrade your work, and you will end up frustrated and confused." Phrased in the idiom of the age group, if you slack off in work, nothing much really happens. However, if you knock yourself out working, you will be put down anyway. As convictions, principles of action or inaction, it is of little wonder why she was doing poorly in school.

Just as the import or moral is derived from story, a proverblike statement of a story's point, an import might be filled out in story, providing a skeletal plot for development. From Arnold's work, it is as if a person held a repertoire of plots, only some of which would serve as a basis for action. For example, the girl above would not be likely to work hard if, in her view, working led to criticism and downgrading. In contrast, she would be more likely to play or engage in immediate attractions because there is no strongly negative outcome for lack of effort. Throughout all of her stories, there was no positive outcome, only negative and neutral ones. Perhaps she has no credible plot for a positive outcome. Since there is nothing to compel her effort, it is as if immediate attractions win by default.

Based on her research, Arnold (1962) compiled a system of categories for scoring the imports of stories. Imports that reflect constructive motivation are scored 2 or 1. Imports that reflect destructive motivation are scored -2 or -1. There are four main divisions (achievement, right versus wrong, human relationships, and reaction to adversity), each with a number of subdivisions. To score a story, one looks up the subdivision that is most similar to the import and uses the examples to guide scoring. For example, under the subdivision of means taken toward a goal, an import is scored 2 if success came through active effort or adequate means, or if failure