Beyond Agency*

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The reason why agency/structure and micro/macro debates remain unresolved is the bad essentialist habit of treating such pairs as opposite natural kinds. Once variation is allowed, agency and structure, or micro and macro, are temporary poles bracketing a continuum, with social entities moving along this continuum over time. Explaining these transformations from agency into structure, or micro into macro, and vice versa is the challenge for explanatory theory. This challenge is met by switching to a constructivist level of second-order observing. Then, agency and structure become variable devices or frames different observers might use to perform different sorts of cultural work.

The relationship between agency and structure is one of the many unresolved core enigmata in social science and social theory. It is connected to a network of related metaphysical and dualistic mysteries, such as micro/macro, mind/body, or reasons/causes. Dualism believes in natural kinds, defined by essential properties and separated from essentially different natural kinds by a great divide, as outlined in Table 1.

More systematically than anyone else, Habermas (1984/1987) has gathered these contrast pairs under the universal umbrella of formal pragmatics. Habermas divides modern society into lifeworlds (micro) and systems (macro). The micro is the realm of ordinary everyday experience and intersubjective understanding. This is a transparent world, known and familiar to those who inhabit it. They can make sense of this world and change it by redefining and negotiating meaning. In the lifeworld, persons act, interact with others, and interact with themselves. Persons have intentions and goals and do something.

Persons make their microworlds but not their macroworlds. Actors do act, but they do so under circumstances not of their own choosing. Actors do define, and redefine, situations, but there are structural limits on what can be accomplished and changed in this way. For Habermas, the most important structural constraints are the money of markets and the power of states. Unlike the lifeworld, these macrostructures cannot be understood from the actor's point of view but require the systematic, and theory-driven, analysis of a distant observer. To the actors themselves, the behavior of markets and states is opaque, beyond their subjective understanding. They have little knowledge of and control over this world. To them, money and power appear as quasi-natural, or reified, forces.

Once the social world splits up into two such essentially different realms, populated by two separate orders of being, attempts follow to "bridge" the resulting gaps, to "translate" between micro and macro or, more ambitiously, to claim that one of the realms does not really exist and can be "reduced" to the other one. In rational choice, macrostructures are aggregate outcomes of individual actions (Coleman 1990). In ethnomethodology, they are accomplishments and "summary representations" of microrealities (Cicourel 1981). Macrorealities are secondary and derivative, given that our "true" experienced reality is the reality of persons, situations, and encounters, not states and world systems (Collins 1988:375–408).

Table 1. The Great Divide

Agency	Structure
Reasons	Causes
Action	Behavior
Micro	Macro
Intentions	Mechanisms
Lifeworlds	Systems
Humanities	Sciences
Soft	Hard
Understanding	Explanation
Mind	Body
Subject	Object

Arguably, not much actual progress has been made in the micro/macro mystery (Alexander et al. 1987). For the most part, it is social theorists who wonder about the relationship between agency and structure. Their more empirically minded peers do their research on either agency or structure, without worrying much about their general connection. Theorists who work to bridge the agency/structure gap in theory often keep the two apart when they are not doing theory. This is perhaps most obvious in Weber, whose foundational concept is meaningful subjective action, whereas his writings on comparative history do not involve much agency vocabulary.

"Agency" has been conceptualized in many different ways, as have its counterparts. There are many theories about both agency and structure, plus many different suggestions on how to integrate the two. It is uncertain what to expect from a successful agency/structure integration. Optimists, perhaps inspired by the micro-driven breakthroughs in molecular biology, tend to think that the resolution of this foundational mystery will remove remaining obstacles to scientific progress. Pragmatists counter that micro- and macrotheories have made some advances independently, without prior integration.

SCALE AND TIME

Generally, the agency/structure problem depends on differences in the size, scale, and duration of things social. The smaller, and less durable, something is, the more it belongs to "agency." Examples are actors, actions, conversations, and small groups. In contrast, size, scale, and time push a social entity toward "structure." Examples are organizations, states, stratification, and markets. Once this contrast is established, the next problem is how to get from small social things that do not last very long (agency) to larger things with more historical stability and broader range (structure) and back.

In the opposite direction, from structure to agency, the theme is the constraints on action from those circumstances and conditions that cannot be changed at will by action. In the tradition of Marx and Durkheim, theories of structure insist that acting occurs under structural conditions not of its own making; these may include social status, generational transmission of culture, language, network location, institutions, and the like.

The most fundamental difference between micro- and macrotheories is their respective location of the social. In microtheories, the social is in everyday situations and ordinary encounters, such as talk and interaction. Macrotheories locate the social in organizations

and networks. What happens on the microlevel does not make much difference to the behavior of macrostructures. In turn, microtheories counter that, without persons doing something, there would be no social structure.

A frequent mistake in agency/structure dualism is to assume that agency, being opposed to structure, is without structure. However, conversation analysis and ethnomethodology show that interactions and encounters are highly structured, from opening and closing rituals to conversational turn taking and repairs of interactional failures and breakdowns (Boden and Zimmerman 1991). These structures are fairly solid and stable over time and across encounters. This interaction order is emergent.

Another mistake is freezing "micro" and "macro" into essentially opposite natural kinds, so that something is either micro or macro intrinsically. Instead, operationalize the distinction as one of degree—as a continuum on which things social move over time, depending on how big or small they actually become. *Micro* and *macro* are relative and relational terms. An empire that is falling apart moves toward more micro status, while a science that colonizes another science is getting more macro. Becoming micro and becoming macro are not irreversible or incompatible. A large organization, for example, "houses" many small encounters and groups, which make up its informal systems.

I believe the agency/structure problem has become a foundational mystery because of bad essentialist habits. In essentialism, something either "is" or "has" agency or structure but not both. Something is either micro or macro, and neither condition can vary or change. Dualism is comparative conceptual statics. Ask, instead, which forces make something small bigger or what happens as a macrostructure, such as a bureaucracy, falls apart into local fiefdoms. These are empirical, not conceptual, questions, concerning not any agency/structure or micro/macro transition "in general" but rather to be dealt with case by empirical case. One can still theorize but about variables, not constants (Fuchs 2000).

ACTORS, ACTIONS, AGENCY

The conceptual core of most agency theories and microtheories is the human person. Humans are special. They come equipped with certain mental faculties lacking in the rest of the world, especially its inanimate or "physical" parts. Humans are knowledgeable and capable. They may have certain natural rights, entitlements, and privileged mental states. With their minds and conscious experiences, human actors are the ultimate source of social and cultural meaning and reality. It is persons who mean something, intend this or that, and then do something about it.

It is part of human nature and personhood to "have" agency. Agency requires consciousness, free will, and reflexivity. Persons can relate to themselves, to the external world, and to other persons. Since they have consciousness, they are aware of who they are, of the reality of physical objects and things, and of their relationships with other persons. These internal and external relationships are symbolic and meaningful.

Persons have internal conscious states, such as wants and beliefs. Their world is will and representation. Consciousness allows humans to think about what they are going to do, to compare various alternatives, and to anticipate possible outcomes. Unlike inanimate nature and lower animals without minds, human actors have considerable leeway and discretion. By nature, humans are flexible and adjusting. Human action is driven by reasons; animal behavior by causes. Humans have free wills; they can always do otherwise or nothing. In this lies their responsibility.

Action is the realization of a purpose or goal, assisted by empirical knowledge about the world. The meaning of an action is understood once it is known what a person in-

tends to do and how he or she plans to achieve a goal. Once an actor's internal states and the situation he or she is in are known, that individual's actions can be understood as meaningful.

Some microtheories, notably rational choice, focus on solitary actors who meet other solitary actors in competition over resources. These actors act rationally and selfishly, considering social relations occasions for exchanges and resource transactions and choosing among them according to personal utility. The relationship is over when the transaction is complete. When many selfish and rational persons engage in such exchanges, markets emerge, as aggregate outcomes of individual action.

Less visible, though still present, is the actor as a "member" in Garfinkel's ethnomethodology. As opposed to the actor, the "member" enacts impersonal practices of sense making and accounting. Likewise, in Parsons, the actor is not a person, much less an individual, but the outcome of an intersection between four "action systems" (AGIL).

SOME TROUBLES WITH PERSONS

That persons have free wills explains nothing by itself. If they do something, the fact that they chose to do so but could have done something different adds little or nothing to our understanding of their actions. We still have to explain why they did what they did. Free will is a negative and abstract capacity to act differently "in general." The obscurity of this abstraction explains why philosophers are so concerned with it. In a typical situation, however, there is no such "in general"; this abstraction emerges only later, after the fact, and from an outside philosophical viewpoint. Assuming that whatever an actor actually did, he or she could have done otherwise does not explain what the actor actually did. Free will and agency are moral concessions, not social facts.

Likewise, that persons "have" agency—together with minds, intentions, decisions, and alternatives—does not contribute much to explaining any actual actions. Agency theorizing just assumes that persons do, in fact, have agency. But no *particular* action follows from agency in *general,* nor have we explained such an action by deriving it from an abstract mental or intentional faculty.

There are many persons with many unknown intentions. The vast majority of these intentions are completely inaccessible to sociology, or indeed to any observer, short of an omniscientist God. There are about five billion persons alive, all of whom presumably have intentions and likely have very many of them. We do not know what these intentions are or how many of them there are. We assume that persons have intentions and experiences, but what these actually are remains unknown. One can survey intentions, beliefs, and desires, but the result is then as much due to the interactions that are surveying as to any "true" mental states. We do not know the intentions and plans of most dead persons or of persons not yet alive. If we knew someone's intentions, that knowledge would not get us much closer to explaining or predicting social outcomes, since intentions and outcomes are very loosely coupled, especially in very complex systems and structures. For example, how much of what happens when a major earthquake hits a big city can be explained as the result of intentions?

The intension of "intention" is subject to stationary philosophical debate. Some materialist and eliminationist neuroscience suggests that "intention" is a folk, not a scientific, concept and does not refer to anything real (Churchland 1992:chap. 1). "Intention" is loaded with philosophical and analytical problems, including whether intentions are reasons or causes, whether they explain or define action and how to distinguish between idle intentions and those initiating some real action. Are intentions in the group, consciousness, the mind, or the brain?

When it comes to those microblocks of social life called, variously, interaction, encounters, or conversations, agency and intentionality do not fare much better. Conversations, for example, have an emergent flow or rhythm that is not directed or controlled by mental states. Much of what happens in interaction bypasses personal intentionality and awareness. One can say or do something, and some of this might get noticed by an encounter, but what happens down the line, as the encounter goes on, does not follow from any one intention of any one mind in particular. Rather, it is the other way around—conversations direct mental states and focus the brain's awareness on whatever the conversation turns to next. Of course, there would be no conversations without minds, but the difference between necessary and sufficient conditions remains. Yes, contemporary physics would not exist without the big bang, but physics does not "follow" from the big bang any more than an encounter "follows" from the conscious and intentional designs of persons. Such designs can become the topic of an exchange, to be sure, but no one's mind is so powerful that it could unfold an entire conversation in front of its eye before that conversation actually occurs.

Predicting conversations or exchanges might be more successful in some situations, for example, in repetitive and constrained order-giving and order-taking rituals performed in coercive organizations. But this is an exception, and even, or specially, prisons house conversations that the hierarchy does not know about and cannot really "control." Add to this the sheer number of encounters and interactions going on in society. Conversations occur in the massive parallel and plural. Whose mind could grasp what transpires in all of these conversations? It is, of course, still possible to theorize about interaction and conversation, but such theorizing concerns the "hows," rather than "whats," of interactions and conversations as emergent orders (Fuchs 2000).

There is also no aggregate or master mind, above the minds of actual persons, that could orchestrate all the conversations and encounters, as they happen in the world, at any point in time, all the time. More caution is needed when it comes to "collective consciousness." How large can the group be in which some conscious content is actually "shared," and how long does this "sharing" last? When it comes to explaining society, minds are vastly overrated. They may intend, plan, rehearse, and reflect on this or that, but the actual difference this makes to society and culture is rather small and likely gets smaller still when longer time periods are being considered. Society goes on as persons lose their minds and become unconscious with sleep. Persons and their minds die, but, as long as they live, they cannot really die socially—including slaves, whose "death" may be civil but not social. Encounters proceed while, and despite, the minds of participating persons wandering and roaming around a bit, experiencing this or that sensation. An experience can, of course, be communicated and then turn into a topic for a conversation, but while this happens, the minds involved do not stop experiencing something else. A conversation can deal with experiences one at a time but would fall apart if asked to deal with everyone's experiences all at once.

A mind can understand or know something, but what any one person "knows" is, compared to the behavior of society and culture, negligible, almost pitiful. This includes the minds of presumably very knowledgeable persons, such as scientists and experts, since, under conditions of advanced specialization, an expert is an amateur in all the cultures or specialties in which he or she is not an expert. Minds also age, start forgetting what they once knew, acquire less and less new knowledge, and soon are dead. Dead minds make no further contributions to culture, and whatever contributions they did make before they died will likely be soon forgotten. There are some exceptions, or "memes," with considerable longevity, but never are such memes the result or outcome of a single mind, though they may be attributed to a mind, as in "Newtonian mechanics," "Marxism," or "Freudian slip."

Compared to the lifetime of culture, even these fecund and longer-lived memes are of extreme short range and duration. How many memes will truly be "immortal"?

These troubles with persons as fundamental carriers of society and independent sources of culture explain why social theorists and philosophers of agency and intentionality discourse about the "nature" of agency and intentionality "as such." Since they do not know most persons' actual or empirical intentions, they wonder about the mystery of "intention in general." The results of such theorizing are mostly trivial—actor has plans and will travel; plans don't work as planned; actor adjusts plans over time. This is pretty thin for a novel, as well as for a sociological science. Add some heavy rhetoric, though, and watch agency become

> a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its "iterational" or habitual aspect) but also oriented toward the future (as a "projective" capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a "practical-evaluative" capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment. (Emirbayer and Mische 1998:962)

Or you might prefer Pickering (1995:22):

> The dance of agency, seen asymmetrically from the human end, thus takes the form of a dialectic of resistance and accommodation, where resistance denotes the failure to achieve an intended capture of agency and practice, and accommodation an active human strategy of response to resistance, which can include revisions to goals and intentions as well as to the material form of the machine in question and to the human frame of gestures and social relations that surround it.

SOCIOLOGY WITHOUT AGENCY

With Luhmann (1995:255ff.) and White (1992:3), I think persons and their natural faculties are overrated, at least when it comes to explaining society and culture. Systems theory and network analysis dispense with "actor" and "agency" as basic sociological concepts. For Luhmann, persons are systems whose autopoiesis is accomplished by consciousness. This means they produce mental states from other mental states. In contrast, social systems use communication in their own autopoiesis. While there would be no communication without minds, communication does not "follow" from minds and cannot be "reduced" to it, as if minds "entailed" communication. Persons cannot really communicate; they can say or write something, but what happens next, if anything, is decided by the behavior of communication, not by mental states and consciousness. For a mind, it is quite impossible to force networks of communication to react or respond to it. An author's works are read and understood in ways the author did not intend or anticipate. If these works are not being read at all, there is not much the author can do about it. If anything, sociology suggests modesty about persons.

Network analysis goes to work without "person" also, although much network analysis thinks of networks as networks among persons. But this is just a special case. There are networks of theories, cultures, instruments, and reputations. Rarely or never are entire persons, in their full biographical richness, linked as a totality to other such complete and unified individuals. Rather, what are being linked are roles, statuses, and expectations. An antihumanist and nonliberal network theory turns "person" into an outcome, not a source, of network activity. A person might be a node in a network, but what the network does

cannot be explained as the result of individual actions and intentions. If anything, what a network "does" next "follows" from its immediately preceding states and activities.

"Action" and its corollaries are network devices and constructs. Some networks use "person" as their way to make sense of what happens in the network. As observers, some networks employ the cultural apparatus of "personhood" to stop asking further causal questions and avoid causal regresses opening up behind, or underneath, persons. This is most obvious in the observer commonly called "common sense," which explains what persons do in terms of their wants and beliefs (Churchland and Churchland 1998:3–15). The level of persons is the level beyond which common sense does not go. Persons and agency are the blind spots of the particular way in which common sense observes.

For the observer "sociology," person and personhood are attributions of a network. The observers common sense and sociology differ precisely in where they interrupt the causal chains and histories. For sociology, persons are not the primordial and given elements and constituents of social structures and networks. Persons come later than networks, and not all networks handle or produce them as cultural frames and certainties.

Instead of persons and agency, sociology might start with variations in social structures. Agency is not a solid explanatory concept but rather an explanandum and dependent variable. Starting with social structure, sociology might switch to second-order constructivism (Luhmann 1992) and explain "person" as the outcome, not the origin or source, of certain kinds of cultural work. On this second level, we might explain why some observers use "individual" or "intention" to make sense of an event or a result and why different observers use, say, "social structure" instead. In this way, the paralyzing philosophical mystery of agency is transformed into a soluble empirical puzzle. Intentions are no longer something that persons "have" qua persons, as part of their essential nature or repertoire as actors. Instead, "intention" becomes a variable attributional device and cultural frame that some observers use, under certain conditions, to make sense of what is happening somewhere in the world, maybe in order to blame or reward someone, promote or fire leaders, or fall in love.

We might summarize sociology's approach to person, personhood, and agency in three serious, all-too-serious, methodological rules of thumb. First, nothing is ever anyone's fault in particular. Second, no one can do all that much about anything. And third, fewer people actually care about anything you say or do than your vanity is willing to consider.

The antiessentialist question, then, is not whether there are, or are not, persons. This is an irresolvable pseudo problem. Instead, allow for variation and observe under what conditions some observers attribute some outcomes to persons and when they manage to observe without persons. Observing without "person" can be rude and offensive, for example, in small encounters and intimate associations. In such contexts, "person" still does a lot of moral and cultural work. So persons are far from dead. It is persons who fall in love—or is it the habitus falling in love with itself? It is persons who say and do something—or is this an attribution of a structure?

Regardless, observing with "person" does not make for good sociology, since one either knows all the persons who can be known or has some prior rule or rationale for excluding and ignoring most of them. There is no such rule; the only filters we do have are structural, not personal, such as "power," "network location," or "habitus." Agency theorizing has led nowhere and has not even solved its own basic enigmata, including intention, will, decision, and the like.

A similar and converging line of attack on persons is Neo-Darwinist "memetics" (Dawkins 1976/1989:chap. 11; Dennett 1995:352ff.; Blackmore 1999). Memes are thought of as cultural replicators competing and struggling against each other for limited spaces and opportunities for further replication. Persons and their minds are carriers or vehicles for

the independent replication of culture. As opposed to evolutionary psychology, which reduces culture to minds and then to the evolved brains of hunters and gatherers (Pinker 1997:21), the theory of memes points in the opposite direction, toward seeing minds as "meme nests":

> The haven all memes depend on reaching is the human mind, but a human mind is itself an artifact created when memes restructure a human brain in order to make it a better habitat for memes. (Dennett 1991:207)

In other words, it is thinking that produces the thinker, and music that produces the musician, not the other way around. With this, persons and their minds lose a great deal of their former agency and sovereignty, much as is implied by systems and network sociology as well.

Allowing for variation, sociology does not consider the mysteries of agency, such as the perennial enigma of free will. Instead, operationalize free will as the variable amounts of discretion granted to workers in certain positions within a network or structure. There is more "free will" when a structure or situation allows for more discretion in the handling of tasks, inviting the language of intentionality. An example is high status professional work at the frontiers of innovation and uncertainty. Contrast this with a structure or situation that constrains the options and elbow room more rigidly. An example is routinized bureaucratic administration of large numbers of cases. Intentions matter more when high discretion gives persons more room to maneuver. This space allows them to introduce and admire themselves and each other as important players, powerful forces to be reckoned with.

Following this antiessentialist, or relationalist, approach turns intention from a constant into a variable. Intention is being encouraged or expected under some conditions and in some situations but not in others. For example, total institutions curb intention and discretion as much as possible, by means of repetitive and supervised disciplines and drills. In contrast, more permissive and pluralist environments tolerate or encourage a great deal more agency and discretion. The "low group" condition of Douglas (1992) and Bloor (1983) fits this latter pattern, with its characteristic individualism and liberalism. For sociology, the task is to find the covariates for these variables, not to speculate on the meaning of intentionality as such.

CONSTRUCTIVIST OBSERVING

To overcome the essentialism of the agency/structure duality, it is necessary to allow for variation. One way to do this is, with Luhmann, to switch to a second level of observation and observe when first-order observers use either "agency" or "structure" to account for social causes and outcomes. Then, agency and structure turn into variable devices for sense making employed by different observers, the observers themselves located in different positions in the social structure. Instead of philosophizing about the nature of agency, we can now observe when agency and related concepts are being employed to explain some outcome and when an observer resorts to more structural explanations, possibly for the very same outcomes. Explanation and making sense are social activities, and, as such, they vary together with other social variables.

Once variation is allowed, the agency/structure dilemma loses its mystery and becomes an empirical puzzle, to be worked on by normal empirical methods. Then, it no longer makes much sense to assume the social world divides naturally, all by itself, into two separate and distinct realms that then must somehow be reconciled or reintegrated. The social is of one piece. There are some smaller and larger things, but the critical problem is,

how do small things, or things that do not last long, become larger, or how are they made to last longer? There is nothing intrinsic or essential to either agency or structure. Agency is not, by its very nature, flexible, interpretive, or imaginative. Structure is not, by virtue of its essence, impersonal, external, or objective.

TAKING THE INTENTIONAL STANCE

Agency essentialism thinks of agency, intentionality, and mind as something persons have qua persons. They are what makes actors essentially human. They are internal and intrinsic properties or states of persons, defining what it means, and is like, to be a human actor. As essential properties, agency and the agency-related faculties of mind are not allowed to vary. The result is philosophy and metaphysics.

Sociologically, agency is an attribution. Daniel Dennett (1987) argues that sometimes observers take an "intentional stance" toward systems whose behavior appears accountable under the assumption that such systems do, in fact, have intentions, minds, goals, and mental states. Following this lead, sociology might investigate when certain observers but not others resort to the intentional stance to do their observing and accounting, and when an observer manages to observe without intentionality and agency, possibly framing his or her observations in terms of "structure" instead. What follows are some likely structural variables that explain when these outcomes are more likely to obtain. These variables include social distance, moral boundaries, time, uncertainty, and size. I have chosen to discuss these, rather than others, since their effects are well documented in other areas of sociology. As always, variables interact, and so all hypotheses are to be interpreted ceteris paribus.

All other things being equal—which they never are—intentional interpretations and *Verstehen* are more likely to occur when observers and observed are socially close and when the observed are few in number. Then, the observer is more likely to use such "soft" and very time-consuming methods as participant observation and *Verstehen*. One can *verstehen*—but not that many people. Therefore, when observer and observed are separated by some large distance, and when there are very many systems to be observed, the observer is more likely to conceive of the observed behaviors and effects as driven by impersonal causal forces, to be measured by quantitative formulas and explained by general theory. For this, the vocabulary of "structure" is being chosen. Distance and size are, of course, variables, which means that we are dealing with a continuum here, bracketed by "understanding" and "explanation" as opposite ideal types.

Ceteris paribus. *One extreme pole is the pure understanding of one person: love. The opposite extreme pole is pure explanation of all organisms: genetics and molecular biology.*

Consider a more concrete example. One does not normally understand one's spouse as an impersonal system, driven by causal forces and not responsible or accountable for his or her actions. This does not mean that the spouse's actions are enigmatic mysteries that cannot, in any way, be explained by science, only that science does not reach into love. What the spouse does may indeed be explainable as the result of chemistry, neuroscience, or social class, but explanations of this kind do not work in close and intimate relations. Here, "individuals" occur, and each of them is supposed to appreciate and understand the other as "really special," not "just" as a particular configuration and outcome of empirical forces and causes. In this "just" would lie a disrespect for personal sovereignty, threatening the relationship in the very process of explaining it. In intimacy, agency terms are more expected and appropriate; not even the hardest-nosed neuroreductionists could approach

their wives and children as outcomes of a structure, at least not *while* and *during* intimate encounters and interactions.

As an intimate relationship breaks up, of course, mutual explanations and attributions may change, moving once again closer to the structure pole. Divorces are harsh—including the ways in which former lovers observe each other now. Gone is the romance and with it thick interpersonal softness; enter rational choice and mutual suspicion. The general point is that understanding and explanation are different social relations.

Likewise, people tend to take the intentional stance toward their own pets, granting them some amount of agency and taking a more interpretive approach toward making sense of them. Such pets acquire the "rich inner life" normally reserved for persons, whereas persons with Alzheimer's stop being observed as having a rich inner life. Such former persons move closer to becoming physical objects in beds, to be handled much as other physical objects. The important *sociological* difference is not between things and people but between the attribution of interpretivism or determinism.

Pets move closer to personhood on the agency-structure continuum, especially when they have been around for some time to become an integral part of a close moral community, such as a family. Not all cats and dogs are alike to all observers, Harry Collins (1998)! As part of a family, pets might even acquire "character," warranting the taking of a more intentional stance. Over time, "character" may reify and generalize into "stereotype." Stereotypes are condensations and generalizations of character, for purposes of explaining more scientifically, with less and less agency and free will. More structural and socially distant still is "status" or "network." With stereotypes, and social distance, explanations of behaviors move back along the continuum, closer to the structure pole. Nonpets, or other people's pets, are not part of one's intimate circle of associates and so are treated more as "strange" physical objects and biological organisms. Such organisms may live in one's house, such as spiders, or even in one's body, such as bacteria, but they are not part of a moral community and so do not acquire the privileges of agency. Their behaviors do not express "character" but must be explained by the causal methods of hard science.

In addition to distance and size, another factor is time. Over time, some systems tend to get better understood and routine and so move closer to the mechanistic and deterministic thing pole, where entities behave according to structures and forces. Over time, a system can be rendered more predictable by training, discipline, and domestication. As this happens, the capacity of a system to surprise its observers decreases, and the intentional stance is gradually replaced by more determinism, structuralism, and mechanism.

At the same time, the variable of time will be counteracted by social closeness and moral boundaries around groups (Smiley 1992:12,114). Within those boundaries, intentionality is a stronger assumption than outside. Whatever is far outside the moral boundaries separating "us" from "them" acquires a more thinglike character, implying that "they" cannot participate as equals in "our" constructions of "their" behaviors.

Such mutual exclusions are characteristic of ideological observing, for example. Ideological observing moves the observed referent closer to the structure pole of the structure-person continuum. The opponent's behavior is objectified as caused by social forces, bypassing awareness and intentionality. If "they" are stuck in ideology, they are unwilling, or unable, to see through their self-constructed maze of deception and need to be explained from the outside. Then, "they" become a target for "our" science and explanation, not equal hermeneutic partners in conversation.

Interpretation (agency) and explanation (structure) also vary with the amount of perceived uncertainty. When some observer is very uncertain about the erratic behaviors of some rather hard-to-predict system, he or she is more likely to assume that that system has an internal center where it makes decisions and choices according to unobservable rules,

beliefs, and preferences. In the movie *Backdraft,* the fire inspector, played by de Niro, muses that a fire does not grow because of the physics of flammable liquids but because it "wants to." Agency is being attributed here to the behavior of fires as a result and expression of uncertainty and unpredictability.

SURPRISE, SURPRISE!

Another way of saying this is that "agency" is the expected or observed capacity of a system to surprise its observers. "Agency" is a residual, consisting of that portion of variance unaccounted for by social structure. Agency is not the cause, but the effect, of failures at prediction. If something happens that was not predicted, one explanation is that the system in question may have agency, free will, creativity, and such. Upon being surprised, the observer might try to get closer to this system by softer and more interpretive methods. She or he might try to develop a "feeling for the organism" and to understand this system "from the inside"—*as if* it had agency. Agency is a capacity that a system *receives* from an observer who is not, at present, entitled or able to make sense of that system in deterministic terms. Agency is both a moral entitlement and the result of an observer's inability to construct deterministic explanations. Granting an entity agency also documents a readiness to expect still more surprises from that entity.

A system receives agency from an observer when that observer starts believing that the system has some internal or mental center where it thinks, imagines, decides, and wills. For sociology, as a scientific observer, agency is what is left when structure has done all it can do. Again, different observers, in different relations, will observe in different ways. A person looks very different to a lover, an enemy, his or her many researchers, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, or a surgeon. Sometimes there is more agency than structure, sometimes not.

Outside of close relationships, and at a distance, most observers who do not deal with innovation will probably try to construct deterministic explanations first, because these are simpler, faster, and more generalizable across classes of systems. One does not have to construct a separate explanation for each individual case. To do this, that which makes individual cases individual has to be renormalized or averaged first. One must *make* something count—and countable. In this way, deterministic explanations economize on explanation costs. They are more accommodating to the "bounded rationality" of all observers or their limited ability to deal with complexity, exceptions, and novelty.

This is especially so for organizational observers, because the organization sets the parameters for how and what its workers are supposed to observe and what they are expected to ignore and also because organizations generally try to simplify and routinize as much as they can. In this, they often fail. When routines prove infeasible or inappropriate for some reason, and when exceptions and surprises accumulate, these *very same workers* may be granted faculties such as "spontaneity," "creativity," and "originality." In this case, the organization and its observers might make special emendations to the rules and routines, such as creating special programs for "gifted" students, who rise above the pack and cannot seem to be processed by the routine methods.

Scientific observing amounts to explaining the behavior of systems and networks from the outside, when their behavior is serviceable under the assumption that it is comparatively simple, repetitive, and invariant across time and place. Such behavior follows, and is explained by, "structure." Making behavior simple and repetitive, however, is an accomplishment and outcome, not an independent fact existing in and of itself. Behavior is "naturally" neither simple nor complex but must be made simple, and maintained simple,

against entropy and complexity. For this, it does not matter whether the system is a person or a thing, since "personhood" and "thingness," or agency and structure, are the outcomes, not the causes, of observations, attributions, and cultural work. At least, *this* particular way of assigning causes is the specific contribution of sociological constructivism.

"Thicker" descriptions and explanations will be chosen when observer and observed are socially close, or even intimate, ceteris paribus. In such cases, an objectifying and distant attitude would violate the moral expectations and taboos of such associations. Taking one's intimates apart and fitting their behavior into scientific accounts is not the method to love. One grants the other a rich inner life that cannot easily be compressed into standard algorithms and formats, such as self-interest or stimulus-response. In intimate relationships, the subjective matters; were subjectivity canceled, the relationship would be over or would turn into a very different relationship. This rich inner life also allows for surprises, which preserve the "magic" of the relationship. This magic is a vital Durkheimian sacred object, which would be violated by a "scientific" attitude. This may be the reason why scientists are not considered perfect spouses. In a variation of Black's law of law (1976:41), we could say:

CETERIS PARIBUS. *There is more explanation between strangers; there is more hermeneutics between intimates.*

Outside of love and intimacy, there are very routine areas of culture, such as large batch manufacturing or elementary public school teaching (Woodward 1965). In such routine bureaucracies, there is little hermeneutics, but much method, for dealing with many things or thinglike persons, constructed as roughly similar before being subjected to the same treatments. When this happens, agency declines and structure increases. As a matter of *their* fact, bureaucracies routinely perceive thinglike persons as standard cases, holders of ID numbers, and treat such classes or sets *as if* they were fully describable by the bureaucratic formulas and classifications. This does not mean, of course, that a bureaucracy observes all that there is to observe about persons. To the contrary, the same persons are observed very differently by different observers in different relationships. But where routines and repetitiveness rule, structure takes precedence over agency, since discretion and individualism are neither being observed nor encouraged then.

To stay with the example from education, bureaucracy and its modes of operation decrease when there are fewer and richer students in smaller classes in more elite liberal arts colleges. Such organizations are paid and equipped to encourage more discretion and perceive more individualism. Parents expect teachers to expect that their children are all special students, in their own special ways. Now, it is up to the teachers to find, or help find, just what these special talents might be. More care is being extended here to individuals; they are being challenged to discover and invent themselves. Narrative and personal evaluations may complement, or even replace, standard report cards. This is when agency flourishes. Due to small size and higher teacher:student ratios, all this is now possible.

In sum, agency and structure are not opposite natural kinds, bridged by a great divide. Rather, they are means of observing and attributing effects and outcomes. These means vary together with the locations and mutual relationships of observers. In addition, agency flourishes in situations encouraging and expecting discretion, while structure is the outcome of attempts at curbing agency effects and individualism.

EXAGGERATIONS OF AGENCY

I want to demonstrate the benefits of allowing for variation, and overcoming essentialism, by decomposing "agency" and "intentionality" in their most dramatic and spectacular

cultural forms and expressions—genius and creativity. In genius, agency and its creative faculties seem to be present in their purest and strongest form. In the genius, the faculty of agency seems elevated into the mystique of dramatic creativity and breakthroughs. The genius is a true world maker indeed; not just a regular actor but a very special and unusual combination and intensification of capacities and talents present, to a much lesser degree, in all of us. Genius seems to escape accountability in terms of structure and regularity. If, however, we can show genius to be an outcome of regular networks and structures as well, this will apply even more directly to "ordinary" actors and agency.

In common and nonsociological parlance, creativity, charisma, and genius are mysterious and awe-inspiring properties of special persons. Persons with genius are somehow different from ordinary persons, because they seem to have certain exceptional talents and gifts. As agency generally, creativity and genius are seen as a property of persons, as something some persons "have," while others do not. It is unclear where these special talents come from or how the genius manages to accomplish what she or he does. This uncertainty gives a religious quality to the genius, who is often seen as driven by divine or supernatural inspiration. Historically, genius worship spreads with the romantic cult and idealization of the special and unique individual, as opposed to the rational Enlightenment homme, who is more brotherly, and less aristocratic, than genius. More democracy breeds suspicion toward elites and genius and levels genius into creativity and reputation.

REPUTATION

In common nonsociological sense, reputation, much as agency, is something that persons "have" and that they get by making valuable contributions, performing honorable deeds, or living a respectable life. Common sense centers reputation on what persons do and thinks of reputation as a property of persons.

Sociologically, however, reputation belongs to a structure or network, although persons can be credited with reputation when a network takes the intentional stance. In a network, reputation acts as a selective filter, focusing the attention of a field and reacting to bounded rationality. Reputation is a specialty's way of reducing its own self-produced internal complexity by focusing attention on the communications of its leaders. Reputation is an amplifier, directing attention to those who have accumulated a credit of trustworthiness in matters of truth. Reputation can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, feeding the Matthew effect (Merton 1973).

Such personal attributions conceal the fact that persons do not "make" reputations for themselves. They cannot really "control" their reputations, since reputation depends on recognition and appreciation within a network. Reputation is not a personal quality, something that persons carry around with them. In most cases, a reputation makes a difference only in a fairly small specialty, circle, or network. When persons leave the network in which they "have" a reputation, that reputation no longer makes much of a difference, although some rare reputations extend beyond the boundaries of the network in which they were obtained originally.

Reputation is not a thing or property but a relation within a network through which reputation circulates. A reputation exists not by itself but only in relation to other reputations. Reputation is just this difference or relation, making it a network, not a personal, possession. Networks grant or withdraw recognition and bestow or strip someone of reputation. It is networks that make some reputations higher than others; a person who is alone in claiming a reputation for him- or herself has no reputation at all. One might complain that one's reputation is not what it should be or that someone else's reputation is undeserved or inflated. But such complaints are largely idle; they do very little, if any-

thing, to change the actual configuration of reputations in the network. In reputational networks, no one is completely without reputation, and one's own reputation is what it is only relative to someone else's reputation. Reputation is not a "thing" but rather this difference.

Persons can do little, networks a lot, and most of what networks do does not follow from the intentional actions of persons. It is not just that *other* persons make one's own reputation, although this is a bit more accurate already. But not just any other person will do, and some persons' appreciation of your efforts goes a longer way in making your reputation than that of others. To make a reputation, you have to have some reputation as well. That is, *reputations make reputations,* and only previous reputation can increase subsequent reputation. This explains the empirical stability of reputational rankings over time. Much as honor, reputation does not get bestowed by one's peers but by their own honor or reputations. The more reputation they "have," the more they can do for someone else's reputation. This explains why reputation grows by accumulative advantage (Merton 1973): the best way to draw more recognition and admiration to oneself is by being recognized and admired already, for whatever reason this happened initially.

Reputation is built up by communication, both formal and informal and both local and cosmopolitan (Fuchs 1995). Reputation starts out locally, at a specific place and time. In expert cultures, the largest amount of reputation one has at the beginning of a career is reputation borrowed from the reputations of mentors, departments, labs, and so on. But one has to make good on this promise. Since reputations are properties of networks, not persons, they can survive persons and, to a degree, be transferred between persons, through horizontal and vertical interaction chains and network ties (Randall Collins 1998). To some extent, reputation can be transmitted through master-apprentice ties, not unlike charisma, where association with the leader passes some of the leader's extraordinary capacities on to followers.

Though reputation is a property not of persons but of networks, some networks condense their observations of themselves into certain "sources" and points of origin to explain where contributions come from and to reward the contributors. "Authorship" is a simplified observational scheme a network uses to attribute contributions to certain persons but not to others. Authorship and reputation are not essential properties of natural persons but are controversial and contested schemes for simplifying and condensing observations of intellectual origin and property. Such schemes are conventional, but never arbitrary, interruptions of causality and temporal regress. It is often possible, if only in principle, to go back further in the causal and temporal chains and investigate the influences on an author. As this is being done, the author as person or agent becomes embedded in a larger structure or context, losing at least some of his or her sovereign agency and discretion. This more structural mode of observing is what historians or sociologists of science might do; they do not stop at "person" or "author" but examine the context and structure behind agency. At the same time, historians or sociologists might receive awards for this work in their own fields and then assume full credit as actors, persons, and authors as well.

Observational schemes and attributions can be contested by other observers, causing chronic and notorious conflicts over property and priority in various expert cultures. It is often possible to claim, if not show, that some idea or technique or discovery actually originated elsewhere, in a different person, or at another time. Interruptions of causal and temporal chains are contingent, but actual conflicts over authorship will sooner or later be settled within, and by, the network in which they occur. Once a prize has actually and officially been awarded, or authorship has finally been established, an envious rival cannot continue to insist that the network was at fault for doing so and should have awarded the prize to him- or herself. At least, such continuing complaints become idle or annoying after a while, likely damaging the plaintiff's reputation more than increasing it.

FROM CREATIVITY TO GENIUS

Genius and creativity are dramatized and unusual forms of reputation. While everyone has a reputation, fewer seem to be creative, and genius is much rarer still. Sometimes, the flow of reputation through a network forms an eddy, swirling around persons being elevated to extraordinary heights in this way. Some positions in a network, those in the core, are more likely to be caught up in such eddies. "Creative" minds have diverse currents of communication flowing through them; these currents get tangled up and redivided in the process, so that something new might emerge. For creativity, awareness is secondary—as it is in that prime creative force, evolution, which goes to work on mutations through decomposition and recombination, without any plan or intention at all.

Sociologically, creativity does not belong to persons but travels in groups; it is concentrated in space and time, leading to unusually creative periods and schools (Randall Collins 1998). Not all reputations go to creativity, however. Reputations are being attributed to creativity when the network looks forward in time, toward changing its outcomes and making new advances and discoveries. When a network looks back through time instead, toward a sacred origin or creation, as most religions do, creativity is not an asset but an idle and vain temptation toward heresy, which should be punished, not rewarded. In innovative networks, however, "creativity" is taken to be the cause and justification for reputation and its associated rewards and awards. These awards are Durkheimian ritual ceremonies, celebrating a network's most sacred possessions and elevating those who are credited with "having" such possessions into charismatic figures with special talents and gifts.

Creativity and genius do not start out as facts. Both grow gradually, and genius grows more quickly than creativity or reputation. If a contribution turns out to make a big splash, its author might be observed as someone creative, and interest in this person increases, drawing attention to and focusing attention on this person. In very rare cases of dramatic breakthroughs, genius appears, much in the same way as charismatic prophecy, that is, very suddenly and out of the blue. At least, this is what followers of genius or prophets experience. For them, the surprise is part of the magic. If they could predict their own prophet, that prophet would not emerge or would lose some of her or his mystique, which would weaken the prophet's otherworldliness and prophetic status.

A sociologist, in contrast, cannot share this surprise and mystique but instead goes to work on the social structures that explain variations in genius and prophecy. And so the sociologist should when explaining variations in agency and structure more generally. He or she might possibly become a genius or prophet him- or herself in a specific network, acquiring more personal depth or agency, charisma, and even some individual mystique. In sociology, we have the classics, and they are also outcomes of network attention and activity. If there is something else besides social structure that causes genius as well, such as genes or brains, or muses and spirits, it is up to biology and neuroscience, or alchemy, but not sociology, to find it.

Despite popular images of genius as a weird loner, genius cannot command the recognition that builds it up. One can think of oneself, privately, as a genius, but if no one else pays any attention, and no network reacts, such insistence will make no difference and will be observed as a personal idiosyncrasy or disorder. Then, the person claiming to be a genius turns a bit tragic or comic and resists by blaming the network for its inattentiveness. The longer this goes on, the shriller the tone and the more majestic the great silence and indifference of the network. Alternatively, one might still make it in the distant future; genius likes to think it is being misunderstood. The prophet sometimes counts for little in his or her old stomping grounds.

Genius also seems related to the history of a network; it produces more genius in the very beginnings and the very ends. In between, there is a long period of institutionaliza-

tion, maturity, systematization, and normal science (Mullins stages). That is, genius either makes new or destroys old worlds or both. Newton is a genius because he, among others, is credited with creating the mechanical mass-in-motion universe; Nietzsche is admired as a genius because he destroys systematic philosophy. With Spengler (1923/1993), genius belongs to the spring or winter of a culture.

Genius is an increase in selectivity and rarity of reputation. Genius must be rare, since a network full of geniuses would have conflicts over who is the "true" or "real" genius. There are innovative and synthesizing geniuses. The great synthesizer unifies a culture into a coherent and confident culture at the height of its reign. In innovative cultures, genius goes to those credited with major breakthroughs or revolutions. Here, genius is the simplified and abbreviated way in which the network observes and explains how it produces its most dramatic breakthroughs, innovations, and accomplishments. To itself and to common sense, genius appears as the exact opposite of rules and method; it is "personal knowledge" par excellence (Polanyi 1958). Genius cannot be taught; it cannot be formalized in textbooks and manuals. Genius escapes procedure and formalization. It thrives in ambiguity, ambivalence, and uncertainty. Genius has a disdain for routine and accountability. The genius cannot explain his or her own accomplishments, thus contributing to the surrounding religious enigma.

Sociologically, genius is not the cause but the retrospective outcome of major ruptures and transformations in a culture. These may happen for structural reasons, such as normal accidents, network fragmentation, or organizational revolutions in the modes of cultural production (Fuchs 1995). At least, this is what a sociological observer must look for, since it is not possible simply to repeat, or contribute to, the official celebrations of "genius" within the network the sociologist studies. Neither can sociology decide who is and who is not a genius in any field other than its own.

Sometimes, though even more rarely, genius can travel across several networks, producing Renaissance intellectuals. This probability decreases as specialization and differentiation increase, because this restricts reputation to more narrow areas of expertise. Renaissance geniuses become the all-purpose guardians of society's and culture's grand and deep concerns. They like to make major pronouncements on universal problems and values—peace, "the" environment, society's future, technology's evils, civility, morals, and so on. Now, the genius turns into a popular celebrity. When some of the most creative scientists become celebrities, they no longer contribute much to their home science and eventually become amateurs there also.

CONCLUSION

Sociology needs to move beyond agency and person. Agency, creativity, and genius are not essential properties that some persons "have" qua person. Rather, they are attributions and dependent variables, more likely in some situations, on some occasions, and in some networks than others. Social structures vary according to how much agency they expect and are prepared to handle. Some networks celebrate agency; others discourage it. This depends on levels and relations between observers. Bureaucratic observers have much less room for agency than intimacy. A science cannot handle persons or what is unique and personal about them. The task for sociological theory is to find out when a social structure observes more agency, as opposed to more determinism.

The present shape of this theory might be summarized in the following propositions, all of which obtain "all other things being equal" (ceteris paribus).

1. *Agency and structure, and micro/macro, are not opposite natural kind but variations along a continuum.*

2. *On a second level of observing, agency and structure are attributional devices different observers draw upon to make sense of social outcomes.*

3. *As a variable, "agency" increases when the numbers are small, the distance is short, the relations are intimate, and the observer takes an intentional stance.*

4. *As a variable, "structure" increases when the numbers get larger, the distance between observer and referent becomes longer, and the observer employs more mechanical and deterministic explanatory frames.*

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