“Mostly Automatic: Humanity at the Edge of Agency and Ethics”
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During the American Historical Association, Ethan Kleinberg’s live tweet of the session on Freud quoted Ben Kafka: “whenever I hear a student say that objects have agency, I say that I have a bridge that wants to sell itself to them.” Soon after, this response, from Rebecca Spang: “‘objects have agency’ is commodity fetishism for theory heads. Objects have properties and properties have effects. Not agency.”

We can observe a couple of things here. First, the reaction: students and theory heads, they’re the ones who believe in agential objects, not the scholars who do the right kind of materialism. Believing in the agential object is wrong because it’s either too fashionable, too new, or it’s too old, the kind of unselfconscious attitude toward the object typical of both primitives and those enthralled by capitalism. Anyone who’s opened the gates of human agency to others lacks the analytical distance from the object that is the very hallmark of agency. Because agency here seems to require self-consciousness: “I have a bridge that wants to sell itself to [you].” Agency here requires mediation, a slight gap that splits the deed from the motivation.

You can probably see where I’m going with this: while the liberal humanist subject, the bête noire of critical theory, follows a straight line from motive to deed, the subject as we theory heads know it starts from a motive and then loses itself in a wilderness, never quite arriving only where it intended. If this is agency, it’s an agency in which self-consciousness does anything but lay down a neat highway. To stretch the metaphor, the very sense of autonomy is itself a roadblock, since we know that the self is a fetish to the degree that it believes its wants to be its own.
Furthermore, I’ll suggest that discussions of agency have tended to forget the both subtlety of the term and work that’s been done on the concept at least over the past few decades.¹ Take Kathryn Abrams 1999 “From Autonomy to Agency,” which itself builds on years of feminist work, particularly black feminism, to argue that the fantasy of the autonomous liberal humanist subject does anything but liberate women. The feminist struggle requires collective action. It requires abandoning the dream of going it alone, a dream that, at any rate, has always sustained itself by forgetting the “background labor” that fosters the self.

Feminist struggle requires not autonomy, but agency, which, without allowing women “to transcend...socially conditioned versions of self,” nonetheless allows them “greater room in which to affirm, reinterpret, resist, or partially replace them.” Agency makes for wiggle room within a field of limited action and dependence. “Agency” recognizes that things happen mostly not through breaks, but through nudges, where self-consciousness is never untangled from social consciousness and its constraining productivities. And it’s not of course limited to feminism, for, as Abrams observes, feminist poststructuralism recognizes that “partial autonomy [is] less the exception than the rule.”

Let’s take another idea from Abrams: ultimately, she is arguing for consciousness raising and resistance. For her, agency and resistance become almost synonyms. Agency is struggle, including the struggle of not doing something, like not laughing at a sexist joke, becoming what Sara Ahmed calls a “killjoy.” I think we can flip the script here: if agency is resistance, it’s the capacity that slows things down, redirects them, lays new paths or blocks old ones. Agency from the one side is activity; from the other side, from the side of one agency meeting another, it’s an impediment. A full study of agency therefore

requires attending to both its resistance and to what resists it. It requires attending to agency as a field of productive resistances.

People tend to take the human subject as the one agential subject, and to define that subject as oriented either towards self-direction or towards consciousness of its subjugation. Human reason grants us either autonomy or alienation. Everything else in trapped in worldless torpor, compelled to be moved automatically as an element of an ever-shifting field of competing properties, properties translated mindlessly by other elements into effects. And so on.

Human desire separates us entirely from the patently absurd desire of the bridge only if we bracket off all the impediments that make desire in the first place. What human agency gives us is not autonomy, not a transparent relation to our desires, but rather just some room to maneuver within our conditions of being embodied, vulnerable, social, and so on. If we’re going to extend – or deny – agency to others, we need first to pay more attention to how little agency we have. We don’t need to go back to a vigorous and transparent humanism, especially not for ourselves. Nor do I think we need to believe we’re insulting ourselves or others by reducing them “to mere objects.” Rather, we ought to recognize better what dependencies and capacities we share with nonhumans of various sorts, and here I quote Abrams, “without stigmatizing that condition or describing it as fixed.”

Let me reply to our speakers, then. For Craig Dionne, Lear’s rhetorical commonplaces “manage intersubjective trauma” through a “shared,” “habituated” “involuntary incantation.” Rational choice, with its privileging of newness, creativity, and autonomy turns out not to be what this wounded world needs; catastrophe needs “animatronic speech,” not as an abandonment to tradition, but in memory of one’s shared place in a community, in recalling that no one can possibly go it alone.

Here I think of the Middle English Barlam and Iosaphat, one witness of the Christianization of the life of the Buddha, and otherwise a typical piece of later medieval Christian thinking. On the one hand, we
have its frequent condemnations of idolatry: Iosaphat’s father, like other idolaters, claims that these “false idols” are “those who made us.” But being “dumb and deaf,” they can neither move from where they’re placed nor reward their worshippers. On the other hand, we have its frequent affirmations of human superiority to irrational beasts and to the elements, all made only to serve us, which it combines with praise of our free will, “the reasonable will and desire of the soul, without any complaining against it, granted to a man, whether he will do good or evil.” This is our autonomy, in short. Finally [my last hand] we have the text’s frequent repetitions of Christian credos, fossilized into orthodoxy by centuries of doctrinal pressure.

Where, then, is free will? Who are the idols here: the mute statues or the animatronic believers intoning a prerecorded script, praising a maker through a doctrine that many of us think of as being as elaborate a human construction as any work of art? There may be something pathetic about these somnambulists compelled to argue over whose god really has free will; and there may be something wonderful in how the credos wind up these human figures; but, through Dionne’s paper, I’ll ask that we think on our own mechanical, semi-agential relationship to the beliefs and ways of life that we could hardly live without.

How can we recognize this largely mechanical existence as ours too, without disdain?

Kathy Lavezzo’s paper leads me to further thoughts on the Eucharist Host. The anecdotes, sermons, screeds, surveillance, interrogations, trials, and eventually immolations that proved the divinity of the Host are quite literal mystifications; we have an entire culture self-consciously committed to producing a fetish object. But the defenders of orthodoxy might have had a point. Jared Diamond famously

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2 “For þou hast serued fals goddis, nat goddis, but deuelis and ydollis þat ben both dumme and deef vnsencible” (40); “For þe peple maken þes fals mamettis with here hondis, and whan þey haue made hem, þey worshipen hem, and seyn: ‘Thes be þo þat han made us.’ How may þey be here makers, þat þey made with her own hondis?” (42); “What may þi goddis do to hem þat don hem eny worship? Why do þei nat helpe hem in here need and mysche? Treuly, þei may nat” (102-103)

3 “Fre wyl is þe reasonable wylle and desire of þe soule withoute eny grucchyng þe rawynsens, grauntid to a man, wheþer he wylle do good or euyl. Also, fre wylle is intellectual styrynge of þe soule by his owen ryȝt. The fre choice is þe wyse desire and þe good counseile þat is in vs.” (66; the q is “ryȝt,” which I want to translate as power or self-movement, but may just as well mean “moral rectitude”)
observed that grains are the particular foodstuff of settled, urban, highly stratified civilizations, like those of Western Europe. The host should remind us of a system that bound most people to the land, as farmers, as slaves, as overseers, as owners, and as children made to tie one landowning family to another, and of the cultivation of larger and larger oxen and horses for labor. If bread is civilization, the concerted efforts to find God in (some) bread marks its outsized importance, some of whose effects are humans and their cultures. We might also think of the ovine Christ – as he appears, for example, in Lydgate’s *Debate of the Horse, Goose, and Sheep* – as another one of these mystified trade objects. We might think how host miracles render the civilizational importance of grain on a human timescale; they are a sped-up representation of the fact that grain and its way of life could not be lived without. Is this power agency, in itself? The church would say no: it’s not grain but God. For my own reasons, I’m also hesitant, but I’m also reluctant to ascribe agency, at least in an unmixed form, to the humans the Host produces and sustains.

Last, in response to Vance Smith’s paper, I can point to the contempt for flowers in Augustine’s *City of God*. In the first book, while denying Romans the virtue of suicide and arguing that the power of life and death belongs to God alone, Augustine considers the problem of the sixth commandment, “thou shalt not kill.” He sneers at the idea of this commandment sheltering humans and animals both: why not protect flowers too, then? Augustine thinks the answer is obvious. He then delivers *all* nonhuman animals to whatever human use: to labor, to slaughter, to extirpation. He doesn’t do this in the interest of a generalized respect for human rights: immediately after he allows that some humans may justly be killed “either by a general law, or by a special commission granted for a time to some individual.”

Authorizing both war and capital punishment, at least when backed by “divine command,” Augustine makes all worldly things potentially killable, whether flowers, animals, or humans, and shields the killers for responsibility for their actions. Butchers kill because God says they can; soldiers and executioners likewise. Thus, for Augustine, all unreasonable things can be killed and many killers themselves are
ultimately as mechanically irresponsible as animals or flowers, non-agents whose acts are finally the will of another. Objects, in other words. Somewhere amid all this bloody justification, we might find not only the life that can kill everything except itself, but also the life that deserves protection. But not through Augustine’s methods I hope.

I am not arguing that Augustine got here by first uprooting flowers; rather I am proposing that appeals to reason, to rationality, and to the proper subjects of our concern may not save us or save those whom we think need saving. We need to find some other way. And, finally, I’ll propose that the question of the possibility of agency without consciousness remains an open question, as does the question of agency with consciousness.

Thank you.