

## Workshop - Personal Identity and Agency

Title: The importance of the experience of acting to how we see ourselves as agents

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Agency is an important part of how humans see themselves and how they understand their fit in the world. Much of this understanding is mediated by what some accept as being the phenomenal experience of acting, allegedly a fundamental aspect of human identity as agents (Nida-Rümelin 2007). The present paper is focused on this experience and what it may illuminate about human agency. I will argue that the experience does not support Agent Causation's explanation of action, and that in itself it does not account for the human identity as agents.

Theories that propose an agent causal explanation of action (AC) sometimes claim that their explanation captures the way in which humans experience acting; in this sense, the experience would help illuminate which explanation of action best fits how humans *feel* they perform their actions. It is a claim about the phenomenal aspect of acting, and in this sense it is an empirical claim to the extent that it is possible to investigate the experience empirically. There are a few experiments about the phenomenal aspect of acting, and some pathological cases that help illuminate the issue (Haggard and Clark 2003, Marcel 2003). However, at a closer look, it does not seem like the empirical data supports AC's claim about the theory being able to capture the human experience of acting.

Haggard and Clark's (2003) experiment shows that there is a temporal binding (*intentional binding*) between actions that are intended by the agent and the action result, while the same temporal binding does not occur for the same movement unintentionally produced by Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation (TMS), and the same action result. Haggard and Clark conclude that the difference is related to the phenomenal aspect of acting, the experience the agent has of causally producing her action because of her intention (what they call the experience of source of action), and they associate this experience to control mechanisms in the production of the action.

I believe that this is enough to show that from the armchair, AC may make claims about the compatibility of its theory with the experience of action; however, faced with the empirical data, it goes off track. By making the claim that it captures the way humans experience acting, AC does not make clear how it captures the phenomenal experience of acting. Since what characterizes the theory is the defense of agent-causation (the kind of cause associated to the agent) as how humans produce their actions, I take AC to be saying that the phenomenal experience of action is the experience agents have when they manifesting agent-causation. One may conclude that the phenomenal experience of acting is said to be the experience of agent-causation.

If I am correct, however, the empirical data does not show what AC would expect about the said experience. This is the case because, according to Haggard and Clark (2003), the experience is in fact related to control mechanisms that come into play after the production of action has already initiated. This is not the role that AC would expect for agent-causation, since the theory associates it to the initiation of action. Therefore, it does not seem like AC captures how humans experience acting, because its account of action does not accommodate the experience of acting as a control mechanism, as the experimental data suggests it is. In the face of these preliminary conclusions, I would dare say that agent-causation is not even necessary for an account of action that aims at taking the human experience of acting into consideration in its theory; therefore, it is also not necessarily relevant to our identity as agents.

If agent-causation is not relevant to the experience of acting, then what is? There are situations in which agents act automatically, e.g., when one intends to drive to work, and shifts gears in the car, or when I put my glasses on in the morning and, sometimes, don't even remember having done it—which leads to the humorous situation of searching for my glasses while I have them on my face the whole time. The experience of acting is diminished or unnoticed in such cases. There are pathological situations as well in which agents act, but they do not acknowledge their intentions, neither do they recognize their actions as being their own, such as in anarchic hand syndrome (Marcel 2003). These cases will help make clear what is characteristic of the experience of acting, which will lead to understanding whether the characteristic aspect of the experience is relevant to our identity as agents.

A concern is that one must concede that automatic actions are part of human agents' everyday routine. Therefore, unless one considers these to be estranged from the agent, one must admit that the experience of acting is not necessary to our identity as

agents, or at least it is not an unalienable part of it. It seems to be the case that the experience of acting may go unnoticed in some actions. Perhaps humans still preserve their identity as agents when they perform automatic actions because the experience is in general present in other of the agents' actions; one may even claim that it is present to some degree in the majority of them. Therefore, it may be the case that the experience of acting is relevant to our human identity as agents; however, it may not be the only relevant factor for it, other factors that influence what we perceive as the cause of actions (Frith 2013) may be a relevant part of our identity as agents.