

Agency Beyond Metaphysics of Subjectivity

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Abstract : One of the problems with a post-structuralist account of agency is that it appears to reject the freedom of an acting subject, thus seeming to deny the very phenomenon of agency. However, this is only a problem if we think that human beings can be agents exclusively in terms of being subjects, that is, if we think agency subjectively. Indeed, we tend to understand traditional theories of human freedom (e.g., Plato's or Kant's) in terms of a peculiar ability of the subject. The paper suggests to de-subjectivize agency with the help of Heidegger's later thought. To do it, it argues that classical theories of agency may indeed be interpreted as subject-oriented (sometimes even by their authors), but do not have to be read as such. Namely, the claim is that what makes agency what it is, what is essential in agency, is not its belongingness to a subject, but its ontological configuration. We may say that agency "happens," and that there is a very specific ontological characteristics to this happening. The argument of the paper is that we can find these characteristic in the classical accounts of agency and that these characteristics are sufficient to distinguish human freedom from other natural phenomena. In particular, it offers to think agency not as one of human characteristics, but as an ontological event in which human beings take part. Namely, agency is a (non-human) characteristic of the different modes in which the experienceable existence of beings is determined by Being. To be an agent then is to participate in such ontological determination. What enables this participation is the ways human beings non-thematically understand the ontological difference. For example, for Plato, one acts freely only if one is led by an idea of the good, while for Kant the imperative for free action is categorial. The agency of an agent is thus dependent on the differentiation between ideas/categories and beings met in experience - one is "free" from contingent sensibility in terms of what is different from it ontologically. In this light, modern dependence on subjectivity is evident in the fact that the ontological difference is thought as belonging to one's thinking, consciousness etc. That is, it is taken subjectively. A non-subjective account of agency, on the other hand, requires thinking this difference as belonging to Being itself, and thinking human beings as a medium within which occurs the non-human force of ontological differentiation.

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