***On Agency***

**Ted Schatzki**

**September 11, 2017**

**Outline**

1. **“Agency” in common use**
2. **“Agency” in socio-cultural theory**
3. **Are theoretical conceptions of agency human-centered?**
4. **Can other entities have agency, too?**
5. **One posthumanist conception: Latour (Bennett, Pickering et al.)**
6. **Dangers of this posthumanism**
7. **Dolphins, robots, and aliens**

**Quotes**

“…only of a living human being and what resembles (behaves like) a living human being can one say: it has sensations; it sees, is blind; hears, is deaf; is conscious or unconscious” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ¶ 281)

“Look at a stone and imagine it having sensations. – One says to oneself: How could one so much as get the idea of ascribing a *sensation* to a *thing*? One might as well ascribe it to a number! – And now look at a wriggling fly, and at once these difficulties vanish, and pain seems able to get a *foothold* here, where before everything was, so to speak, too *smooth* for it.” (*ibid.,* ¶ 284)

“…these discussions suggest that the concept of agency is very closely bound to a desire to celebrate the distinctive power of human intentionality and, more generally, to elevate the human mode of being above all others. They also reveal a close link between this human exceptionalism and the notion of moral responsibility” (Jane Bennett, “The Agency of Assemblages and the North American Blackout,” p. 452)

**Merriam-Webster Dictionary (since 1828)**

**Definition of agency**

1. ***1a*** **:**  the office or function of an agent (see [agent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/agent)4)***b*** **:**  the relationship between a principal and that person's agent
2. ***2*:**  the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power **:**  [operation](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/operation)
3. ***3*:**  a person or thing through which power is exerted or an end is achieved **:**  [instrumentality](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/instrumentality) *communicated through the agency of the ambassador*
4. ***4*:**  an establishment engaged in doing business for another *an advertising agency*
5. ***5*:**  an administrative division (as of a government) *the agency for consumer protection*

**Definition of agent**

1. ***1*:**  one that acts or exerts power
2. ***2a*** **:**  something that produces or is capable of producing an effect **:**  an active or efficient cause *Education proved to be an agent of change in the community.****b*** **:**  a chemically, physically, or biologically active principle *an oxidizing agent*
3. ***3*:**  a means or instrument by which a guiding intelligence achieves a result
4. ***4*:**  one who is authorized to act for or in the place of another: such as***a*** **:**  a representative, emissary, or official of a government *crown agent* *federal agent****b*** **:**  one engaged in undercover activities (such as espionage) **:**  [spy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/spy) *a secret agent****c*** **:**  a business representative (as of an athlete or entertainer) *a theatrical agent*
5. ***5*:**  a computer application designed to automate certain tasks (such as gathering information online)