Agency
A figment of reality?

Wolfgang Teubert
University of Birmingham (UK)

Am I responsible for what I say and how I say it? Or is what I say just a random transformation of what I have heard so far? Is my agency as a discourse participant perhaps borrowed from the agency of discourse? This ties in with another dimension: Is the reality confronting us, a reality that surely includes the notion of agency, a mere discourse construct? For the cognitive and neural sciences, individual agency is only an epiphenomenon of the real world, while it is endorsed by folk psychology and cultural anthropology, having long been a cherished tradition of western discourse. Obviously, selfhood in some form is part of our nature, though we only have discourse to talk about it. Thus it appears as a phenomenon of our contingent culture.

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1. Setting the scene

“Yes we can.” This is the battle cry Barack Obama used seven times in his victory speech. As a key ingredient in all his campaign speeches, it became emblematic for the far-reaching plans Obama had for his country. It is within our power, he promised, to take charge of things and shape the world according to our aspirations. “Yes we can” is an expression of agency, as defined by Alessandro Duranti (2004):

Agency is here understood as the property of those entities (i) that have some degree of control over their own behavior, (ii) whose actions in the world affect other entities’ (and sometimes their own), and (iii) whose actions are the object of evaluation (e.g. in terms of their responsibility for a given outcome).

(Duranti 2004, 453)

Agency is a matter of interpretation, not of what ‘really’ is the case. We often disagree if someone, for instance a person, a company or a nation is responsible for
causing a car accident, getting the economy on course or starting a war. Someone’s behaviour as such has no meaning. It is us, the members of a discourse community, who allocate a meaning to it, in our case by assigning or rejecting intention. For someone is responsible for what has happened only if they had intended their course of action and had envisaged or at least considered the outcome. This concept of agency has become part and parcel of our modern western culture, originating perhaps in the Renaissance, or as a consequence of the reformation, or brought about by the enlightenment movement, depending on whom you ask. Other cultures have their own views in respect to agency. They may not share our core conviction that grown-up individuals have, at least in principal, the freedom to act as they like. The same goes for groups of people acting together and also for institutional entities. They, too, can ‘act’ and are understood to be responsible for their actions. Still it wasn’t before 2007 that corporate manslaughter (but not murder) was made a crime in Britain. Agency is, in all its aspects, a cultural concept prone to change its meaning over time. It is not part of discourse-external reality.

Who are the ‘we’ of whom Obama speaks? Is it an aggregation of individual actors, or is it the nation as a whole that acts? Let us take a look at some of his speeches. Interestingly, in his victory speech the word together does not occur once. Instead we find the phrase each of us: “So let us summon a new spirit of patriotism, of responsibility, where each of us resolves to pitch in and work harder and look after not only ourselves but each other” (Blaisdell 2011, 231).

But in his campaign speeches, there are six occurrences of collective agency, made explicit through the word together, among them:

Let us begin this hard work together. (Emling 2013, 400)

It must be about what we can do together. (Emling 2013, 401)

And we can come together as one people and transform this nation. (Emling 2013, 476)

On the other hand, there are ten instances of the individualistic each of us, for instance:

Each of us, in our own lives, needs to do what we can to help the poor. (Emling 2013, 485)

Each of us can pursue our individual dreams but still come together as one American family. (Oswald 2008, 65)

And it was here in Europe, through centuries of struggle – through war and Enlightenment, repression and revolution – that a particular set of ideals began to emerge: The belief that through conscience and free will, each of us has the right to live as we choose. (Obama 2014)
The awareness of having a free will is what seems to distinguish the agency of an individual from that of a group or an institution. This is more or less the same as what is commonly called selfhood or personhood, a notion that includes consciousness. By joining a society we see ourselves not as giving up our selfhood, but as voluntarily devolving part of our agency to that body. We have grown up to believe that the way a person is aware of herself is different from the way a nation is aware of itself. Rightly or wrongly, I experience my selfhood as innate, as part of my nature. Our modern western mainstream discourse tells us that only an individual person possesses consciousness, and thus selfhood. It seems only metaphorically that we can also ascribe feelings and actions also to a nation, the markets, an ideology or an inanimate object (Google: ‘Britain feels great.’; ‘The markets hate uncertainty.’; ‘Communism has killed about 110 million people.’; ‘The Eiffel Tower has made its way on the Top 10 World Wonders.’). The concept I am concerned with here is agency in connection with selfhood or personhood. The concept of agency Bruno Latour (2005, 63–86) assigns to objects is outside of my scope.

2. A brief overview

How ‘real’ is selfhood, how ‘real’ is agency? Ever since Descartes it is popular knowledge that a person consists of a body and a mind. The mind is seen as the seat of personhood and agency (‘res cogitans’) but has no physical body, while the body (‘res extensa’) is material and defined by shape and movement. This is, however, where the trouble starts. For if the mind is incorporeal, how can it have a causal effect on the physical world, including a person’s body? How do the immaterial mind and the corporeal brain interact? Which of the two possess agency?

For the philosophy of mind, popular in the second half of the 20th century, the answer was supervenience. Consciousness and agency are phenomena that can be broken down into things happening in various modules on the lower level of cognition, corresponding to observable processes happening in various regions of the physical brain. My awareness of my agency (“Yes I can”) supervenes on neurons firing in certain ways in my brain. Today’s neurosciences tell us, Daniel Dennett suggests, that my behaviour is caused by brain processes, though I am under the illusion that it is my mind, my spiritual self that is in charge (Dennett 2007, 88). Others are not convinced. For them, consciousness and agency are aspects of the self’s intentionality. But is there such a thing? Google lists 29 occurrences of the sentence “Intentionality is an illusion”, while “Intentionality is not an illusion” only occurs twice.

That selfhood and agency are thought to be an illusion is the legacy of the enlightened natural sciences of the 19th century. They made short shrift with
everything out of reach of the natural sciences, whether spiritual, metaphysical or supernatural. Thus to replace the soul by the mind, as the centre of consciousness and agency, was not a satisfactory solution. Because only the brain is open to scientific inspection, some suggested that the notion of a free will was meaningless. As cousins of the great apes, humans should be studied like them. In an essay called ‘On the hypothesis that animals are automata’ (Huxley 1874) Thomas Huxley, having misread his spiritual master Charles Darwin, shocked his readers by the hypothesis that all animals, including humans, are in principle not different from all these newly exhibited and widely popular automata imitating human skills (e.g. chess-playing machines). For Huxley, free will didn’t exist. Consciousness, Descartes’ self-aware mind, was, he said, an illusion, it was no more than what is called now an ‘epiphenomenon’ (a term introduced by William James in 1890 (James 1890, 129), thus “a by-product of neural processes” (Anger 2009, 50), i.e. processes to whom it would make no difference if there was consciousness or not. Interestingly, Georg Christian Lichtenberg, a contemporary of Immanuel Kant and more sharp-witted than most protagonists of the German enlightenment, had already refuted Descartes’ argument of ‘Cogito, ergo sum’. Thinking, he says, is something that happens, but it doesn’t prove there is an ‘I’. This reminds us of phrases like *mich deucht* and *methinks*, which also sever the link between thinking and agency. In David Vender’s translation, the relevant passage in Lichtenberg’s *Sudelbücher* reads:

One should say *it thinks* just as one says: *it flashes*. To say *cogito* is already too much when it is translated by *I think*. To assume an *I*, to postulate it, is a practical requirement. (Vender 2006, 5)

It is surprising that the same mainstream enlightenment that had created the notion of the autonomous person, endowed with a free will, for instance in the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, had, at the same time, erected an edifice of the natural sciences excluding everything that was not physical, grounded on replicable experiments, as the only reliable information we have of how things ‘really’ are. Facts are what can be detected, counted and measured by using apparatuses cancelling the observer’s subjectivity. To this day, the mind-body dichotomy still separates the natural sciences from the humanities and folk theories, determinism from randomness and free will, classical physics from quantum mechanics, and processes from actions.

In his response ‘Are we automata?’, the pragmatist William James raised opposition to Huxley’s thesis. Rejecting Huxley’s idea that the conscious mind is “unable to react upon [our nervous processes] any more than a shadow reacts on the steps of the traveller whom it accompanies” (James 1879, 1), he invoked common sense: “[R]elevancy and purpose are symbolised to our present intelligence [i.e. 
consciousness] in terms of action and reaction and causal efficacy” (James 1879, 22). Is it ‘really’ our consciousness that allows us to interpret our behaviour as intentional, and to establish us as agents? In what looks like a leap of faith, Huxley seems convinced our intentions can cause things to happen. Do they really?

There is the world as it ‘really’ is. It is a world full of (physical) stuff and always in motion. Only if we grow up without language, we have direct access to it, through the sense data we perceive, subject, however, to conditions imposed on us by our genetic set-up and by the behavioural patterns we acquired through imitation and trial and error processes. We do not (normally) need language to satisfy hunger and thirst, find shelter, mate and what else is relevant for our survival and the survival of our species. The languageless world is the world of solitary selves, selves that haven’t become part of a community held together by language. They interact without being aware of it. It is a world untouched by reflection. Without language, people do not worry about what makes one thing different from another, and where one thing ends and the next one begins. It is a world without categories, except those provided by instinct: what is good for me, what is bad, and what is dangerous. Yet wanting to give a meaning to what is going on is not part of the instincts people are born with. Before the invention of language, humans may still have had direct access to the ‘real’ world, but they would not have been aware of it, could not describe it, and did not ponder it.

It is the entirety of what has been said that creates and represents the meaning of the world out there. It turns people into members of a discourse community discussing, negotiating and not always agreeing on what is happening in the ‘real’ world. Language severs our direct access to this reality. As members of a discourse community, we no longer see things as they ‘really’ are, but according to what we have been told about them. The vast majority of us grow up into a meaningful world, a world where our acquired knowledge of things has replaced the data our senses receive. Even our notion of thingness, a thing being something that can be isolated from its background, is created through the interactions, both behavioural and verbal (i.e. symbolic), between our caregivers and us. They teach us to turn the stuff making up our environment and what is beyond into distinct things, to form categories distinguishing a cushion from a duvet, a small red ball from a large green cube, a tree from a shrub, or a hill from a mountain. Some philosophers, for instance John Searle, disagree and claim that the thingness of the natural world is a given: “Among the mind-independent phenomena in the world are such things as hydrogen atoms, tectonic plates, viruses, trees and galaxies” (Searle 1998, 13ff.). But when does a stream become a river? And there is so much else we are taught: to experience ourselves as having permanence and continuity (at least as long we live), to tell right from wrong, happy from sad, good from evil, beautiful
from ugly, weeds from crop plants, and to distinguish what we do intentionally from what just happens.

The world we learn to experience is a world populated by people, things, aspects, happenings, actions and ideas. We have learnt the words for them, including their meanings, from our caregivers, who may not always have agreed. We took on what appealed to us, and kept modifying this conceptual knowledge in later negotiations with our peers. We learnt that the apple we were given grew on a tree which has blossomed in April, that it is sweet and sour, that it is a fruit, that it is not a pear, that it keeps the doctor away, and that you have wait till autumn to pick it or buy it anytime in a shop, that there is apple juice and apple cider. Apples are part of the diet of many, but not of all nations. That is much more than recognising an apple due to its resemblance to apples one came across earlier. A chimpanzee will spot an apple due to its iconic image, and if she has learnt to like it she will go for it when she sees one. For her, it’s good edible stuff. For us, immersed in discourse, it is more; it has become part of our culture, culture being the entirety of what members of a discourse community talk about. Through discourse, we create a world that is meaningful. Culture turns solitary minds into people exchanging and sharing ideas, into parts of a whole. It seems the reality confronting us is not what is ‘really’ out there, or inside us, but what has been said in this discourse, this fathomless corpus of utterances, with all its inherent contradictions, made by members of our community, or communities, to which we belong, by birth or choice.

Of course, the world we talk about is not independent of the ‘real’ world. We will accept only what ‘works’, only what makes sense to us. We will agree that stones are heavy and feathers are light. We will reject anything contradicting our experience. Our experience, though, doesn’t tell us how things ‘really’ are. From early days, it is informed by the often contradictory instructions, descriptions and narratives to which we have been exposed. Discourse speaks in many voices, and we choose between them, actively or randomly, depending on one’s perspective. Is it Father Christmas or is it baby Jesus who brings us our presents? Or, on a more academic level, is causality a property of the ‘real’ world or of our mental set-up, or is personhood, our individuality, part of our innate nature, an acquired skill or just a discourse construct?

That discourse offers multiple, often incompatible versions of ‘reality’ is one of the arguments for the natural sciences as a paradigm apart from how folk talk. Its promise is to tell us what is ‘really’ the case. That there is an ‘objective’ scientific discourse mirroring reality is still held up by many serious scientists, and even some philosophers of science, in spite of the many doubts people like Paul Feyerabend or Thomas Kuhn, or more recently Lorraine Duston and Peter Galison, have cast (Feyerabend 1975; Kuhn 1962; Duston/Galison 2010). Due to its strict methodology, this discourse promises to eliminate everything except verified factual
knowledge. Thus the concept I am concerned with in this paper, agency, holds no place in the discourse of the cognitive and neural sciences, while remaining a principal topic of folk psychology, or anthropology, or the history of ideas.

In what follows I want to explore some aspects of the notion of agency. I will begin by comparing the approach of the cognitive and the neural sciences to the lore of folk psychology. In passing, I will offer a glimpse of cultural anthropology, before I question the widely held belief that our concept of the individual as an autonomous person dates back to the Italian Renaissance. After a brief discussion of the personhood of a languageless self, I will compare two narratives of the relationship between the self and discourse, before offering a few thoughts on how discourse makes our agency real and encourages us to make use of it.

3. The battle between science and folk psychology

In the early sixties of the last century, the philosophy of mind and, almost contemporaneously, the cognitive sciences, reintroduced Thomas Huxley’s equation of animals including humans with mechanical automata, in what was called the computational theory of the mind. Computers in those days were solitary machines. There was no web, no browser, no cloud. The hard-wired central processing units were seen to correspond to the materiality of the brain. Innate mental faculties could be explained in analogy to system software, and all acquired behavioural patterns were accounted for as the results of programs for specific tasks. Knowledge was data input stored in memory. It was a theory to fill the void the behaviourists’ black box had occluded. The computer had finally provided a blueprint of what was happening inside a person (for a more detailed outline see Teubert 2010, 31–72).

To the diehards of cognitive science, the idea of intentionality, i.e. the notion of a selfhood combining self-awareness, the awareness of what things are about, and the faculty to look ahead and carry out plans, necessarily remains elusive, immaterial, not part of the computational model. For Daniel Dennett the ‘intentional stance’ implies that we, interacting with a fellow individual, take them to be a “rational agent, who harbors beliefs and desires and other mental states that exhibit intentionality or ‘aboutness’” (Dennett 1991, 76). For him, intentionality is less an object of science than of common sense. To approach the issue in a more scientific manner, he turns from the mind to the brain. Intentionality, he says, emerges when the brain’s subsystems interact, forming an increasingly complex architecture (perhaps equivalent to Jerry Fodor’s modules of the mind; cf. Fodor 1983):
The idea is that, when we... reverse engineer a biological system like a person or a person’s brain, we can make progress by breaking down the whole wonderful person into subpersons of sorts agentlike systems that have part in the prowess of a person, and then these homunculi can be broken down further into still simpler, less personlike agents, and so forth – a finite, not infinite, regress that bottoms out when we reach agents so stupid they can be replaced by a machine.

(Dennett 2007, 88)

The even more radical school of ‘eliminative materialism’ excludes anything from scientific discussion that has no causal bearing on the physical world. Its followers eliminate the Cartesian mind, as there is no plausible explanation how a thought (for instance to move one’s finger) could have an effect on matter. For thoughts are immaterial; they are about something, but themselves are nothing. What makes neuroscience so attractive to many is its promise that we may find, at the bottom of intentionality, something ‘real’: identifiable firing neurons. In the words of Patrick Haggard (2005):

The subjective experience of conscious intention is a key component of our mental life. Intention is a complex and elusive experience, which might involve reconstructive inferences. However it also arises as a direct consequence of pre-movement brain activity in the frontal and parietal motor areas. The supplementary motor area is a particularly important site for intention. The parietal and frontal lobes jointly develop, monitor and refine the motor commands for intentional action. These neural processes often give us the conscious experience of intention-in-action.

(Haggard 2005, 294)

Intentionality and agency (in the sense used here) are not things or properties of things of the physical world. They are only objects of discourse. As such, however, they are part of the (plurivocal and multi-perspectival) reality confronting us in discourse. Our world, including our very selfhood, is a world of never-ending dialogic interaction, with our caregivers, our teachers and our peers. They exhort us to make decisions, to accept responsibility, to do things. “Yes you can!” we are told. Each of us is addressed as an individual. This where our sense of intentionality and agency originates. It is not innate; it is what we acquire by being part of a discourse community. For eliminativists, however, these concepts belong to folk psychology, “the tag given to ordinary talk about the mind. It does not talk about the biology of the brain and central nervous system; rather it refers to talk about beliefs and desires, intentions and fears, wishes and hopes” (Christensen/Turner 1993, xvi).

The Oxford scholars Maxwell Bennett, neuroscientist, and Peter Hacker, Wittgenstein specialist, are deeply sceptical about the contribution brain studies can make to the understanding of personhood. “The world as we experience it is largely a figment of our imagination” (Bennett and Hacker 2003, 130). However,
for Bennett and Hacker it is still the traditional notion of the solitary mind they are concerned with. In my view, personhood, agency, intentionality are not innate, but the consequence of partaking in discourse. That certain forms of behaviour are habitually interpreted as agency is the (always provisional) outcome of ongoing negotiations among people, be they philosophers of mind, cognitive linguists, anthropologists, historians of ideas, or just normal folk. Folk psychology might have something to tell us. For Jerome Bruner, in his *Acts of Meaning* (1990), it “must be at the base of any cultural psychology… [F]olk psychology summarizes not simply how things are but (often implicitly) how they should be” (Bruner 1990, 39ff.). The self is “a concept created by reflection, a concept constructed as much as we construct other concepts.” (Bruner 1990, 100). Folk psychologies are determined by the culture in which they are embedded. But they have something in common: “At their core, all folk psychologies contain a surprisingly complex notion of an agentive Self” (Bruner 1990, 41). It may be useful, therefore, to have a brief look at what we can learn from cultural anthropology.

4. Agency in cultural anthropology

There are different ways to look at other ethnic groups and compare them with us. Universalists would say that in spite of difference in appearance the way we experience ourselves and the world around us is fundamentally the same. Less common in our time is the idea that there are developmental stages in societies, with the presumption that over time immutable social laws (cf. Hegel’s *Weltgeist*) will ensure that less advanced societies will eventually become like ours, in an evolution leading towards social progress (or, in other versions, that a society of noble savages will succumb to western decadence). Then there is the relativist (or constructivist) notion that cultures are contingent on how humans interact to make sense of themselves, thus creating their own specific conventions, and that their development is unpredictable. Influences from other discourse communities play a role, as societies are practically never completely isolated. An anthropologist can explore a social group and by communicating with its members fathom its culture (diverse as it may be), but the necessary cross-translations of categories often have a lasting and quite unpredictable impact on both source and target culture.

Universalists have a tendency to accept what feels ‘natural’ to themselves, such as their (western) concept of personhood as an innate property, and they tend to mould their perspectives accordingly. Like other relativists, Clifford Geertz critically questions what looks like received wisdom:
The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational cognitive universe, a dynamic centre of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against its social and natural background, is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the contexts of the world’s cultures.

(Geertz 1973, 59)

Anthropology is not a ‘hard’ science; it is part of the humanities. None of its wide spectrum of methodological approaches can allege to be bottom-up and data-driven. Discussions of concepts like agency, rationality or emotion often betray a modern western perspective. They are cultural inventions, not discoveries. Can people really regard themselves as autonomous persons if such a concept doesn’t exist in their discourse?

People in different ethnic groups follow different behavioural conventions. The self-aware agent as we tend to see ourselves and those we encounter is a product of growing up in a culture attaching great value to agency. Elinor Ochs and Bambi B. Schieffelin have compared growing up in an Anglo-American environment to growing up in the tiny Kaluli nation living in the tropical rain forest in Papua New Guinea. In America,

from birth on, the infant is treated as a social being and as an addressee of social interaction. … [C]aregivers treat very young children as communicative partners. … Further, the child is a focus of attention, in that the child’s actions and verbalizations are often the starting point of social interaction with more mature persons. … Finally, the child is learning how to settle on a possible interpretation [of what she has said] and how to show agreement or disagreement. This entire process socializes the child into culturally specific modes of organizing knowledge, thought and language. (Ochs/Schieffelin 1984, 286–288, emphasis in the original)

In stark contrast,

[Kaluli] life is overtly focused around verbal interaction. Kaluli think of, and use talk as a means of control, manipulation, expressing assertion and appeal. … Therefore it is surprising to see that mothers never treat their infants as partners (speaker/addressee) in dyadic communicative interactions. … Furthermore, a mother and infant do not gaze into each other’s eyes. … Rather than facing their babies and speaking to them, Kaluli mothers tend to face their babies outward so that they can see, and be seen by, other members of the social group. … Thus, throughout the preverbal period very little language is directed to the child. … However, this does not mean that Kaluli children grow up in an impoverished verbal environment and do not learn how to speak. Quite the opposite is true. The verbal environment of the infant is rich and varied, and from the very beginning the infant is surrounded by adults and other children who spend a great deal of time to [!] one another. (Ochs/Schieffelin 1984, 288–292)
When Kaluli children start speaking, we are told, they get no response until they can say what they want to express in proper adult language. It is only then that they become accepted as partners in dyadic communication. This kind of education ensures collective coherence but does not work towards developing a sense of self-awareness in the child. No one addresses her. She receives no training to respond to verbal challenges, to answer questions, to interpret ambiguous expressions. She is not dealt with as a member of the group until she has become fully integrated. She learns to behave more by trial and error and by imitation than by actually being taught. Thus she cannot develop her own self through symbolic confrontation with other selves. Unlike Anglo-Americans, the Kaluli can be expected not to view themselves as autonomous persons. While the Kaluli may not even outwardly behave very differently from their Anglo-American brothers and sisters, they would view themselves and their environment from a different perspective. A joint reflection on the divergent discourse modes would impact on both cultures.

Anthropology is, just like most of psychology and sociology, a cluster of folk theories, either those of the (often western) observers or of more recent conjectures attempting to fuse the horizons of observers and those observed, in laborious and always deficient translational approximations, as practiced by the relativist Clifford Geertz (1973). It is in the latter case that agency, as defined at the beginning of this paper, will appear not as a given of human nature, but as a discourse construct. It is present when people experience themselves as agents, and they only see themselves as agents as long as talking about individuals’ agency is a relevant part of their discourse.

5. Inventing the modern western man

It was the 19th century that invented Renaissance man (and sometimes also woman). Jacob Burckhardt (1944) described him (never her) in these words:

> In the Middle Ages, both sides of human consciousness – that which was turned within as that which was turned without – lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. … In Italy this veil first melted into air … man became a spiritual individual, and recognized himself as such. (Burckhardt 1944, 81)

Peter Burke (1986) reminds us that Burckhardt later seemed to retract, for he is reported to have said “You know, so far as individualism is concerned, I hardly believe in it any more, but I don’t say so; it gives people so much pleasure” (Burke 1986, 193). Still, the idea that the Renaissance had invented the uomo nuovo caught on. This may have had more to do with artists than with scholars whom we now call humanists (a term invented in the early 19th century (Davies 1997, 9),
most erudite and assiduous men but certainly not enacting the modern notion of agency. It was the multitude of scientific and artistic geniuses, many of them stemming from the fringes of society, celebrities like Leonardo or Michelangelo, rather than the gentlemen scholars of patrician origin, who came to be seen as the prototypes of modern western agency. Giorgio Vasary dutifully delivered the script. One of his preferred key words, in his Lives of the Artists (1991), was invenzione (‘invention’; 74 occurrences), the other one was genius (34 occurrences). “Each of [Leonardo’s] actions,” he states, “is so divine that he … clearly makes himself known as a genius endowed by God (which he is) rather than created by human artifice”. (Vasary 1991, 291).

Genius, for Vasary, meant divine inspiration. For him, the work of art was not the result of conscious intentions, of methodical design and execution, but of unconscious intuition. This cult of genius became widely popular and had its heyday in the course of German romanticism. We can see it almost as the antithesis of the autonomous person created (more or less contemporarily) in the age of enlightenment. This is how Arthur Schopenhauer describes genius: “The artist is not conscious in abstracto of the intention and the aim of his work… He works, as people say, from mere feeling and unconsciously, indeed instinctively” (Schopenhauer 1969, 235). It is this concept of the genius as unconscious executor of intuition or inspiration accredited to God or nature that is one of the origins of hermeneutics, as defined by Friedrich Schleiermacher. For the task of interpretation, as he saw it, was to “understand the [poetic] utterance first as well and then better than, its author” (Frank 1977, 94; my translation).

How ‘modern’ was Burckhardt’s Renaissance man? Instead of individuality and agency, Stephen Greenblatt, talking not about the Italian but the English Renaissance, views, in his much discussed book Renaissance Self-Fashioning (1980), ‘self-fashioning’ as the socially required construction of one’s public persona according to the social standards of a class-obsessed society. While denying the possibility of a “history of the self” and hardly touching on the topic, he accords language the key role in self-fashioning, the conscious construction of a persona, which he imputes, without further explanation, to involve “some loss of the self”(Greenblatt 1980, 8ff.). In James Clifford’s words, “Greenblatt’s study concludes that Renaissance self-fashioning was anything but the unconstrained emergence of a new individualist autonomy” (Clifford 1988, 94). As we cannot capture a lapsarian self in words, it seems all we can agree on is what has been said about selves in discourse. Thus we can try and fuse two discourses, that of the Renaissance and that of 20th century academic scholarship, in a new narrative, providing often rather vulnerable interpretations.

Searching the origin of the modern self including its agency in the appeal the Reformation’s hasty promise had for believers to make their own sense of the Bible
is no less questionable. In the context of early Protestantism, an exegesis (another word for interpretation) of religious texts, unguided by tradition or dogma, vindicated itself solely through the interpreters’ sincere endeavour. For Corey McCall, “[t]he object of the reforms instituted by Luther concerned the individual: it was the individual who ought to have the right to interpret the Scripture in her own way” (McCall 2004, 13). But it would be wrong to read the Protestant (or Calvinist) invocation of conscience as sole arbiter as a serious endorsement of individuality and self-awareness. Up to the 18th century, conscience was overwhelmingly not seen as something individual, but as a kind of (innate) relay connecting the person to celestial authority (Kittsteiner 1991, 229–253). To do right was to follow the command of an external voice. Therefore I agree with Nico Vorster, who says that the Reformation’s “notion of selfhood was far removed from that of secular liberalism … but was very much aware of the dangers of the emerging autonomous notion of selfhood” (Vorster 2014). For the Protestant discourse north of the Alps self-awareness and agency was as little a topic as in Renaissance Italy. Though we may find the reported behaviour of people in those days similar to that of modern men and women, the social, religious and philosophical contexts were different. Protestant ideology still required the subject to submit their individual agency to the diktat of the deity. As long as one’s actions were justified as the execution of celestial commands, all was well. It encouraged a self-analysis aimed at convincing oneself that one’s acts were enactment of Providence.

In this sense, Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, too, is not yet the modern western man, proud of his individual agency. Like the other Puritans, Robinson “has learned to internalize divinity, to identify his own passions with the will of God” (McKeon 2001, 394). In Defoe’s British society the entrepreneur still understood himself as God’s instrument, not yet as the conqueror of the markets. In his fascinating article ‘The parrot’s voice: language and self in *Robinson Crusoe*,’ Eric Jager paints a more modern man, by looking at another aspect, namely the role of language, or, as I would say, the engagement in symbolic interaction with real or imagined others. In the absence of an external voice, Crusoe converses with his conscience (which refers him to God’s words), as his other self. “By talking to himself … he ‘checks’ the imbalances and ‘vents’ the excesses of feeling that otherwise would make him his worst enemy” (Jager 1988, 320). Jager approvingly quotes John Richetti, for whom Crusoe is “liberated from survival by the reciprocal relationship with an ‘other,’” this other being God (Jager 1988, 322). Crusoe also takes up writing a journal, and later, when he has run out of ink, he engages with it as another voice from the past. In the absence of external discourse partners, also the parrot has to function as a substitute for an interlocutor, “addressing him as a voice from another” (Jager 1988, 327). There is, however, a disadvantage with imagined others: what they say is repetitive and does not help us to come up with new ideas.
It is the arrival of Friday that brings welcome change: “Crusoe clearly means that his exchanges with Friday carry his thoughts further than he could extend them by discoursing with himself, no matter how dramatic and prolonged his solitary conversation [is]” (Jager 1988, 328). In the longer run, this reminds us, personhood can only exist in a social environment in which language allows us to share and exchange ideas, including those constructing a notion of personhood.

The real breakthrough of modern western man (and woman) came only with the enlightenment. It created a contempt for all self-assigned authority, whether celestial or secular, and substituted for it the discourse object of a self endowed with free will. This modern self person seen as emerging from participation in discourse. Thus it was society grounded on symbolic interaction that gave rise to self-awareness, namely a reflection “born of the comparison of ideas, and it is the plurality of ideas that leads to their comparison. … Long familiarity deprives [people] of the attention requisite for such examination. But to the degree that something strikes us as novel, we want to know it. We seek rapport with those we know”, as Jean-Jacque Rousseau wrote (Rousseau 1966, 33). His ideas on the role of discourse are echoed by Johan Gottfried Herder: “Excellent how this new, self-made sense of the mind is in its very origin again a means of contact! – I cannot think the first human thought, I cannot align the first reflective argument without dialoguing in my soul or without striving for dialogue” (Herder 1966, 128).

This modern idea of personhood thus presupposes membership in a discourse community. Intentionality, self-awareness and agency can only come about to form what we consider an autonomous person as long as it is in communication with others, in a discourse in which these notions are negotiated. The plausibility of this claim is underscored by the common loss of personhood as a consequence of long solitary confinement, and also of dementia.

Therefore it is strange to see that when the enlightenment fused first with moral sense philosophy and then romanticism, the idea of an innate, solitary self quickly became the new paradigm of western discourse, while the self as the object of social construction was so successfully edited out of discourse that today hardly anyone questions the ineluctability of a prelapsarian monadic self. Self-aware selfhood was now seen as an essential property of human nature. This new understanding might have been the unintended consequence of the ascent of universal reason, owed to Descartes, forming the other, the rational, strand of the enlightenment. For as soon as we ascribe universal, innate rationality to our pre-linguistic self, there was, as Friedrich Schiller told us in his essay ‘Of the sublime’, nothing, not even God, that can keep us from exercising our free will:

[W]e feel ourselves as beings of Reason independent of the Almighty itself, in so far as the Almighty itself cannot nullify our autonomy, cannot direct our will
against our principles. … To feel oneself independent from the Deity in one’s disposition of will, means nothing other than to be self-conscious, that the Deity could never work upon our will as one power. … We deny it therefore merely the influence over our will, in so far as we are self-conscious, that through nothing other than its unanimity with the pure law of Reason within us, hence not through authority, not through reward or punishment, not through regard for its might could it bear upon the disposition of our will. … Thus the Deity, conceived of as a power, that can admittedly cancel our existence, but as long as we still have this existence, can have no influence over the actions of our Reason, is dynamically sublime – and also only that religion, which gives us this conception of the Deity, bears in itself the seal of sublimity.

(http://www.schillerinstitute.org/transl/trans_of_sublime.html)

6. Does individual agency presuppose language?

The notion of personhood, understood as the discursively constructed individual’s intentionality, self-awareness and agency, comes, I hold, with language. To find out if an individual is a person in the sense that she sees herself as in charge of her actions, we must be able to communicate with her about her notion of agency. She has to assert that what happened was her doing. Otherwise her behaviour would not warrant agency. Of course, people without language can, and do, survive. They are driven by their innate instincts. But can they possess the kind of personhood we accredit to ourselves? Or do they largely keep behaving in ways that have turned out in the past to have been successful, processing the iconic and indexical signs they encounter in their environment? They are unable to reflect on who they are and how they behave, cannot consciously plan projects and are incapable of evaluating their outcomes. They won’t ask themselves what the things happening around them mean, and they won’t ask themselves how they are seen by others.

There has been a long fascination with young people languageless beyond the age when language is normally acquired, for instance Kaspar Hauser, Victor, Genie, or Helen Keller. Such adolescents can well deal with iconic and indexical signs. But when they enter civilisation they have not learnt to deal with arbitrary signs. A controversial case has been reported by Susan Schaller in her book A Man without Words (1991). There a deaf young man who has never been taught a language, called Ildefonso in the book, encounters the author, an interpreter for the deaf, and through laborious efforts of her teaching and him learning he finally, and quite suddenly, understands how arbitrary signs function, and subsequently, rather slowly, learns to sign. Unfortunately, the book tells us very little about his former life. Apparently he had grown up in a family that considered him feeble-minded and incapable of being taught, and eventually he had left them and drifted
into urban life surviving by relying on his innate faculties of trial and error and imitation. For Schaller, though, there was more: “His brain,” Schaller writes, “full of twenty-seven years of experience and stimulation, had kept busy, building as much sense of the world as an isolated mind could” (Schaller 1991, 92). When Ildefonso expresses horror at the colour of green, she has this explanation: “He was an illegal resident. … He still knew nothing except what he had pieced together by himself. He had seen people avoid capture by a piece of paper overlaid with green lines [the ‘green card’] to men dressed in green who drove green cars. The sign and symbol ‘green’ could not mean a general color to Ildefonso; green men were too important in his life. … ‘Green’ was both greenness and all the things related to his experience with green” (Schaller 1991, 94, 97). Such ratiocinations as imputed by Schaller are not altogether convincing. It is widely assumed that the concept of a colour like ‘green’ is not innate but culturally constructed. Without thorough colour training, he could not have subsumed the green card, police uniforms and police cars under the same category. Schaller’s reviewers comparing Ildefonso to the better documented cases of Genie or Victor, are not quite persuaded of his prior complete lack of cultural conventions. Carol Padden points out that he “must have had a concept of human interaction, of the rhythm of humans coming together and moving apart, of sitting in space with others. … Schaller never explains how [he] arrives at his classroom on time each morning, appropriately clothed and sitting in his appointed chair” (Padden 1992, 651). Jürgen Tesak mentions an encounter between Schaller and Ildefonso ten years after they originally met, where he is quoted as saying “I remember when I was very young. … I began noticing words on paper and in books. … One day I saw children with books walking down the street. I knew they were going to learn what was in those books. I begged my parents to let me go with them” (Schaller 1991, 170). This narrative shows, according to Tesak, “a highly developed conceptual system in the child and the existence of relevant social interactions” (Tesak 1992, 665), which he finds incompatible with a total absence of some ad hoc sign language. Indeed it is hard to accept that Ildefonso would have had a concept of ‘word’ or ‘book’ at the time. It is impossible to know, however, if his report is his interpretation of something he actually experienced at the time or a narrative he appropriated later when he had acquired language skills.

There is, it seems, no way to find out how a languageless person experiences what is going on. Brain scans won’t tell us. All our assumptions, all the tests we could carry out, and their results, are based on presuppositions, on conceptualisations owed to a specific (often academic) culture. For us who have acquired language there is no way to find out how the world is experienced by those who haven’t. We cannot conceive how ‘pre-linguistic’ thought is turned into language, or how the hearer transforms this linguistic expression back into mental content.
Language is not a mechanism to transport ‘pre-linguistic’ content from one mind to another. It is only the linguistic utterance itself that contains symbolic content. If there is pre-linguistic content it can’t be put it into words.

If we didn’t talk about it, agency as defined by Alessandro Duranti wouldn’t exist. Yes, people behave, but behaviour as such means nothing. It is only when we call it agency, when we assign intentions to it, that it ceases, for us, the observers, or for the reflecting self, to be merely accidental, and becomes meaningful. If in a football match one player jostles another, we are free to agree with the referee’s decision that it was intentional, a premeditated attack, a case of agency. Yet the presumed wrong-doer will call it an unfortunate, unintended move. It is interpretation that makes the difference. However, interpretation, as I understand it, presupposes language. Agency, just as intentionality and self-awareness, provides a model to interpret certain kinds of behaviour. In a discourse lacking these concepts, we could not call ourselves (or others) agents, or self-conscious, or carrying out a plan. Such concepts only emerge when people belonging to a discourse community talk about their own and other people’ behaviour, and if they are thought to be socially useful, they will flourish.

Unlike most westerners, the Kaluli culture of Papua New Guinea does not claim individual auctorial ownership of the things they do or the ideas they express. Modern western discourse has taken a different direction. The ubiquitous concept of innate selfhood or personhood, discursively promoted to be an feature of human nature and intricately linked with the legal structuration of our modern society, has enabled western *homo oeconomicus* to turn what he or she does and what he or she says into her own. Individual agency and private property have become inseparable concepts. To us, they seem to be part of our nature. They are evidence of how almost impossible it is to dissociate oneself from the culture to which one belongs, to understand that the reality confronting us in discourse is contingent.

7. **Agency, a figment of which reality?**

Cultural concepts such as agency or consciousness have informed our caregivers’ thinking, and in turn our caregivers have spared no effort to pass these concepts on to us, until we believe they are part of an innate self. It is how I experience myself now, a person in charge of my actions, having forgotten how hard it was to learn to accept one’s responsibility for whatever one was blamed for. Like brushing my teeth, it has become part of my nature. One’s reality and its meaning, including and foremost one’s sense of selfhood, is created through discourse,
the discourse of the community to which one belongs, and passed on through caregivers, teachers and peers.

There is, of course, an innate selfhood, as well. Apes and other animals are said to distinguish themselves from their environment. However, it is culture that provides the platform for communicating selfhood. Some time ago, people used to talk about one’s humours, tempers, passions, and more recently about one’s emotions, concepts employed to characterise a person’s individuality. What such concepts mean is determined by discourse, and they change over time. The humours are barely remembered; temperaments are renamed, passions were transformed into feelings, the vapours disappeared, and melancholia became depression. Whenever we try to talk about innate selfhood, we cannot but leave nature behind and move into the realm of culture. For we can only reflect on ourselves in terms of concepts that have a negotiated meaning, but no discourse-external reference.

Discourse, any discourse, is inevitably plurivocal. On matters such as the necessity to brush one’s teeth, there may be but little dissent in our discourse community. On most other matters, though, for instance on the question of selfhood, intentionality or agency, there is disagreement, and we are free to take sides. Each of us has, in principle, a voice in discourse. We are free to interpret what has been said on these matters, accepting, modifying or rejecting bits as we like. Once we have learned to speak, we feel the urge to verbally interact with the people around us. Communication helps us find our place inside our group, just like grooming each other does for chimpanzees. Most of what we say tends to be a reaction to what has been said before, our aim being that others accept or even prefer our view to what has been previously said and therefore take us more seriously. As long as discourse evolves, as long as people engage in dialogue and try to shed new light on what has been said before, a discourse community’s culture will evolve and move in new, always unpredictable directions.

It is my insistence that our selves depend so much on the discourse in which we partake that is, I believe, the reason why Adrian Pablé takes issue with my stance, as argued in my article ‘Was there a cat in the garden? Knowledge between discourse and the monadic self’ (Teubert 2013a). “Teubert,” says Pablé in his far-reaching response, “subscribes to a radical form of social constructionism, where ‘discourse’ is reified and endowed with agency to the extent that humans become ‘the instruments of discourse’ (Teubert 2013, 295), the latter having a “collective mind” equipped with intentionality” (Teubert 2013, 276)” (Pablé 2015, 452). What I actually have said was: “We see ourselves as agents. But at the same time we are the instruments of discourse” (Teubert 2013a, 295). Before we develop our personhood and our agency, these concepts are already a part of the reality confronting us in what our caregivers say when they interact with us. Mainstream western discourse confronts us with a reality in which we cannot but experience ourselves as
self-aware, freely acting selves. But engaging in a dialogue, our contributions will be prompted not so much by our intentions than by our interlocutors’ utterances. Regardless of our plans (already infused by what we have been told), our utterances will react to what has been said, by others, but also by ourselves, in this, or in previous situations. It is the self-organising force of discourse that determines its evolution.

A key feature of general intentionality is ‘aboutness’. It means to refer to what is the case. A commentary to a Platonic dialogue is about this dialogue. But from the perspective of individual intentionality, aboutness is more: it is being aware of what something is about. It is society’s and, subsequently, the individual’s interpretation of what is the case, for instance that a given book is a Plato commentary. Aboutness is not about what is ‘real’, outside of discourse. It doesn’t make sense to ponder whether there are ‘really’ such things as angels, justice, or Plato commentaries. The aboutness of discourse manifests itself in the intertextual links between what is said now and what it refers to. It is what has been said about what has been said. It is the virtual space in which utterances create innovation by recombining, permuting and varying what has been expressed in previous utterances. A person’s individual intentionality participates in the aboutness of discourse. People’s aboutness is unthinkable without the aboutness of discourse.

Discourse, the symbolic content of what has been and is being said, is the entirety of what has been said about discourse, and as such, it is itself an object of discourse, just as agency or intentionality. In this sense, discourse is autopoietic: it talks about itself. Discourse in general, or the discourse of a given discourse community, constitutes the (symbolic) reality confronting us, the only reality to which we have access. From a discourse perspective, it matters little what goes on inside people who take part in it. It only matters what they say. Discourse keeps evolving as long as there are new utterances. Most of what is said makes no impact. Only what is referred to, implicitly or (rarely) explicitly, in subsequent utterances, brings about a change in the discursively constructed plurivocal reality. If medi eval discourse does not talk about agency and self-awareness, or about authorship and intellectual property, while modern discourse talks a lot about it, then our contemporary concept of selfhood is historically contingent, and not innate. The “creative, active agent” capable of “individual experience” (Pablé and Hutton 2015, 9), i.e. experience that is not a reflection of the entirety of experiences inscribed in the discourse of a given community, is no more than a figment of the discursive reality confronting us. It is as hollow as Heidegger’s Dasein (‘being-there’). “The Dasein is a being which I myself am, its being is in each case mine. … The who is answered in terms of the I itself, the ‘subject’, the ‘self’” (Heidegger 2010, 112).

Inspired by the radical constructivism of Humberto Maturana and Francesco Varela (1980), and even more by Niklas Luhmann’s account of ‘society’s society’
(Luhmann 1997; cf. Teubert 2013b, 130–138), I would like to suggest a perspective on the relationship between the person, or subject, and discourse that is complementary to all those for whom the self is an irreducible given. For Chris Hutton and Adrian Pablé, it is “the experience of the first-person autonomous self” that assigns all “methodological and philosophical reductionism” positing a “third-person viewpoint or metalinguistic order,” to second-level abstraction (Pablé and Hutton 2015, 5, 9). They see the (prelapsarian) intentionalities of the members of a discourse community as the source of all that is shared and exchanged in symbolic interaction. Aboutness, from this perspective, must be innate. But from where do we draw all the conceptualisations of what we experience, the ideas populating our minds, indeed our own personhood? When I see a cat at the bottom of my garden, how do I know that what I see is a ‘cat’ in a ‘garden’? Thingness is not innately given. It is constructed.

There is another way to look at the link between the self and discourse. In the narrative of radical constructivism discourse is not an abstraction; it is on the same level as the individual. Both are discourse constructs. We can visualise discourse as a distributed, aggregate, autopoietic, recursive, self-organising, self-referential system of its own kind, consisting of and constantly generating new symbolic output (utterances). It keeps evolving in unpredictable directions. Rather than describing it as a parasitic infestation, we can look at it as a non-material life-form emerging when humans had first learnt to speak, and ever since it exists in an unbreakable symbiosis with them. It is discourse that adds a social dimension to a solitary biological entity. It is discourse, the collective mind of all of us, that creates society. It does it by engaging humans in dialogue. While Reiner Keller’s sociology of knowledge approach to discourse analysis, fusing, in the succession of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (Berger and Luckmann 1966), Karl Mannheim’s ideas with those of Alfred Schutz, would not support my apparent hypostatisation of discourse, it accepts that the capacity of consciousness to constitute meaning is not a genuine, extra-worldly ‘production capacity’ as if consciousness creates the existence and the meaning of the world out of nothing in an act of solitary productive creativity. Consciousnesses do indeed … draw on social interpretation schemata …, which are taken from the socio-historically generated and established collective stocks of knowledge/universes of discourse, for the most part primarily within socialization processes.” (Keller 2012, 57)

From there it is only a small step towards acknowledging the force discourse wields on the selves to the extent they are not part of nature.

A group of solitary, languageless individuals doesn’t make a society. Though such an individual interacts with her environment, her behaviour is determined solely by her innate behavioural patterns and by patterns learned through imitation.
and by trial and error. No new patterns enter the individual from the outside, as long as there is no discourse. She is not taught how to behave. Her behaviour is triggered solely by things happening in her environment that have a sensory effect on her. She has no sense of agency. A group of languageless individuals will try to adapt to a changing environment but will not engage in collective acts to change the environment. It will not develop a culture. It will be static.

For a group to turn into what Niklas Luhmann calls society and I call a discourse community, language is a prerequisite. A discourse community is more than the aggregate of its members. By building a collective culture on top of the solitary nature of languageless individuals, discourse, plurivocal as it is bound to be, offers a shared, controversial yet meaningful reality, a construct of arbitrary signs, rather than some discourse-external reality signifying nothing. As human nature drives individuals to participate in discourse, it is the ensuing dialogue that has the potential to lead to innovation. New ideas will remould the environment. It was only when humans started using language and discourse emerged, perhaps not even two hundred thousand years ago, that all of a sudden many more complex tools than the simple biface or hand-axe appeared (cf. Tattersall 2016). Our modern concept of agency may have been invented in the western world, but with the global dominance of western discourse it is has conquered the world, for better or worse.

8. Coda

People are social animals. There are, as I have said, two aspects to human beings. First there is their undefinable innate selfhood. To engage in collective behaviour is part of each individual’s nature. People instinctively avoid being alone, they practice grooming, they eat together, they hum, they dance together, they tend to fall in step, they imitate other people’s behaviour. But without language they nonetheless remain solitary individuals, a bit perhaps like fish moving in shoals or birds flying in formation. They will exhibit a kind of crowd intelligence but won’t reflect on what they are doing, individually or collectively. Once language, this faculty to deal with arbitrary signs, comes along everything changes. Solitary individuals turn into members of a discourse community. They begin to interact with a purpose in mind, to communicate, ask each other questions, ask for support, transform the stuff making up the ‘real’ world into individual things and develop categories for them, they learn to plan and carry out designs, together and individually, they interpret first collectively then individually what’s going on, find a way out if in a mess, and, becoming aware of themselves, invent names for their feelings towards others and develop personal relationships. As members of a
discourse community, they take part in a continually evolving dialogue that shapes and remolds their culture. A stationary group of solitary selves has become a dynamic community of collaborating people. It does not really matter whether they, depending on the culture in they live in, view themselves as agents or cogs of a gear. Discourse is their collective mind; without it, nothing would change.

Our personhood, our intentionality, our agency is part of our western discourse, though it may not exist for other cultures. For us it is as real as the world we experience, the world we have discursively constructed. It is not the world out there, but the world as defined by the culture into which we are born. With such culture-specific concepts, people all over the world, engaged in dialogue, will always change the reality confronting them if their new interpretation of it ‘works’ better than the inherited one. As long as these changes are experienced as successful, in the sense of Richard Rorty’s neo-Pragmatism, they will also transform our ‘real’ environment (Rorty 1982, 12). Or, in the words of Barack Obama: “Yes we can.”

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Author's address

Wolfgang Teubert
Elisabeth-Hattemer Str. 2
64289 Darmstadt
Germany
W.Teubert@bham.ac.uk

Biographical notes

Wolfgang Teubert has been the Chair in Corpus Linguistics from 2000 to 2015. Before he was Senior Fellow at the Institute for German Language in Mannheim, responsible for corpus research in the framework of European co-operation. He has been the founding editor of the International Journal of Corpus Linguistics. Now that he is now fully retired, his aim is to show how hermeneutics (i.e. the art and craft of interpretation) can become the theoretical foundation of a theory of meaning for corpus linguistics and discourse analysis. He has also developed a keen interest in the role language plays in classical Chinese philosophy, in Confucian and Daoist texts, and in the Zhuangzi in particular.