
Reviewed by Stephen Rojcewicz, Silver Spring, MD.

“Agency is a concept that can be as obscuring as illuminating” (p. 51). So writes Elliot L. Jurist, one of the contributors to this collection of essays on psychological agency, edited by Roger Frie. Frie is a philosophically-informed psychoanalyst with a Ph.D. in phenomenological psychology and a Psy.D. in clinical psychology. He has edited or co-written several important books reviewed by this journal (and by this reviewer) in recent years (Frie, 2003; Burston and Frie, 2006).

This volume amply demonstrates both of the predicates in the above quotation. Frie’s erudition and the comments of the nine additional contributors (psychoanalysts, educational psychologists and a psychiatrist) explicate the concept of agency with insight and provide clinical and sociocultural applications. In general, agency is commonly understood as the capacity of human beings to make choices and to act on those choices. For many of us, however, the overall concept of psychological agency is often murky, confused and ambiguous. As noted by Jurist, the use of this term can be “obscuring.”

In his introductory chapter, Frie observes that psychological research and practice do not conceptualize the term agency with any consistency. This appears to be true for the contributors to this volume as well. In the first paragraph of the Preface, Frie writes: “Broadly speaking, psychological agency refers to the human capacity for reflective action, and is based on the potential to imagine and create new ways of being and acting in the world” (p. vii). The contributors sometimes have different slants on the basic meaning of the concept. Jack Martin, for example, describes agency as “the capacity of human beings to self-determine their decisions and actions in ways not entirely dictated by biophysical and/or sociocultural constituents and factors outside of their control” (p. 97), while Jill Gentile defines agency as “the fundamental capacity to create personal meaning to initiate and ‘own’ the communication of desire and intent, and to make the ‘spontaneous gesture’” (p. 118). Jurist describes both a thin sense and a thick sense of agency. Pascal Sauvayre, after describing agency as “an activity that involves the construction and formulation of meaning though the struggle between self and the Other” (p. 138), suggests that the word itself be supplanted, and suggests the term *self-as-agent* as a substitute for both *agency* and *self*. The psychiatrist Arnold Modell even concludes that “our sense of agency is an illusion,” although “an illusion that is necessary for living in the world” (p. 47).

There are other definitions, outside this book, that add nuances (or spread confusion). A book edited by Potter, for example, states that an “agent is someone
who can pursue and realize her goals successfully” (Potter, 2006). As another example, Bandura (2001) distinguishes between direct personal agency, proxy agency that relies on others, and collective agency.

The concept of “agency” certainly seems “obscuring.” In addition, in many of the fields represented by the readers of this journal, the use of the term “agency” is also infrequent. It is not often used in phenomenology, and I have rarely encountered it in the non-philosophic psychiatric literature. It occurs more frequently in writings concerning the “theory of mind”, in analytical philosophy, and in the works of British philosophers and psychologists influenced by British philosophical thinking. I examined the indexes of twelve books in the series, *International perspectives in philosophy and psychiatry*, published by Oxford University Press, hoping to find citations for “agency” or “agent.” This was not a scientific or rigorously statistical search, and so the results must be viewed as purely anecdotal; however, the search disclosed pertinent citations in the indexes of only four of the books.

Frie has written an introductory chapter, as well as contributing one of the essays. As he demonstrated in his introduction to *Understanding experience: Psychotherapy and postmodernism*, and in the summary paragraphs on individual thinkers in *Psychotherapy as a Human Science*, Frie is adept at analyzing complex issues and in describing the views of other writers. In fact, in many instances I found his outline of the essays by the other contributors to this book (pp. 23–28) to summarize their views more clearly than do the individual essayists themselves.

After referring to the problem of consistency in definition, Frie assesses four major challenges to a theory of psychological agency. Naturalism utilizes neurological and biophysical mechanisms to explain human behavior. Postmodernism emphasizes, almost exclusively, social and cultural explanations. The sense of professionalism in clinical psychology results in a tendency to overvalue technical skill, so that psychotherapy becomes “less a matter of direct human encounter than of technical correctness” (p. 11). Psychoanalysis, in both the works of Freud and those of modern analysts, seems to be skeptical of personal agency in clinical situations. Responding to these challenges, Frie argues that agency is not due solely to biological mechanisms nor determined exclusively by social and cultural factors, but is always multi-determined. These factors are important, but are not absolute or mutually exclusive. According to Merleau-Ponty, Frie writes, “the mind can only be understood in terms of the body: “The perceiving mind is an incarnated body” ” (p. 18). Frie then argues that agency is fundamentally embodied and active. He cites child development research to conclude that agency is an affective, developmental capacity that emerges from the affective relationship between infant and primary caregiver (pp. 19–20). Similarly, social and cultural factors are important, but human existence is not reducible to these factors.