The bricoleur as practical political agent: Conceptualizations of non-reflective agency in the work of Robert Pippin and Raymond Geuss

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Table of content

Introduction

There is a specific problem that relates to discussions on action and its relationship with individuals. Philosophers who adhere to a scientific worldview might argue that human action is *causally determined*: at the moment of a human action taking place, the event of the action is the *only* possible event. The action can, then, completely be explained by natural laws. Therefore, talking about autonomously undertaken action is nonsense. Christine Korsgaard has put forward the specific problem I am considering by responding to this idea in the following way:

> 'The worry seems to be that if we were sure we were determined or knew how we were determined then either we could not act or we would not act […] Having discovered that my conduct is predictable, *will I now sit quietly in my chair, waiting to see what I will do? Then I will not do anything but sit quietly in my chair'* (Korsgaard, 1997, p. 95; emphasis mine)

I understand this in the following way. Even if it is the case that *scientifically*, we do not have an autonomous role in our acting, we *are* continuously acting. To be more precise: I belief that in practice, human beings generally have the feeling and the belief that what they are undertaking derives in some way from themselves (this phrasing is purposefully somewhat unclear here, I will soon come to show why this is the case). On a continuous basis, there are actions to be undertaken and decisions to be made and "I, qua agent, cannot simply 'wait' to see what my neuro-chemical processes will result in" (Pippin, 2005, p. 115). This conviction also has straightforward societal implications, such as that we can hold people accountable for their actions.

There is, then, a theoretical necessity to give an account of the relationship between an action and the individual who undertook the action. The philosophical problem I want to formulate an answer to, henceforth called the chair-problem, does therefore *not* concern the question whether our action is causally determined or not (I am not taking a position on that question here). What I propose is to regard human action in a practical manner (in the way I explained above) and formulate a theoretical account of our acting. I believe that this account is captured in a conceptualization of *agency* and will elaborate on this in the following paragraphs.

In working on this topic, I will primarily look at two philosophers: Robert Pippin and Raymond Geuss. There is, in terms of the projects these philosophers have been engaged in, no immediate thematic connection between their work. Geuss is predominantly (known as) a political philosopher, while Pippin concerns himself with many topics. What *does* connect them is, firstly,

the usage of certain non-philosophical sources and concepts in their work; I will come to speak of that. Secondly, there is a major (in the sense that it is substantially reflected throughout their work) similarity in their *rejection* of a specific sort of non-determined theory of human action, namely what Pippin calls the reflective model of agency. Broadly speaking, this is the idea that 'our reflective nature gives us a choice about what to do' and human decisions on action are 'something over and above all of your desires, something which is *you*, and which *chooses* which desire to act on' (Korsgaard, 1997, p. 96, 100)[1].

In their criticism, the philosophers I am looking at find themselves in a specific situation. They reject the idea of autonomous acting as portrayed in the reflective model, but do not replace this model by arguing that action is causally determined or that there is no such thing as agency at all. Instead, they put forward alternative conceptualizations of agency, mostly having to do with internal and external barriers that prevent us from being agents, or directly influence, even shape, our agency. Sometimes, these barriers are inescapable and all-encompassing, preventing any attempt to act autonomously. In other cases, agency is a predicate that is reachable, either because we can overcome certain barriers or because they turn out not to be so problematic, even helpful, for speaking about agency. I will evaluate their conceptualizations based on *usefulness*. Before explaining this criterion, I will first put forward the research question that follows from this:

What is the most useful non-reflective conceptualization of agency?

Some words on the separate elements of this question and the criterium. That the conceptualizations of agency put forward by my two authors are non-reflective, meaning that they reject the reflective model of agency, becomes clear from numerous of their works, and I will come to show what they mean with this. That I will evaluate them on *usefulness* demands more immediate explanation. This criterion comes forth out of the practical perspective on human action I proposed above and is, therefore, a logical implication of the chair-problem. I belief that the conviction, even if it is illusory, that human action somehow relates in a direct way to an actor lies closest to how we experience our lives and judge our own actions and those of others. What makes a conceptualization of agency that lies close to that reality useful is then that it is quite literarily of direct use for explaining and understanding how our actions relate to us. In so far as that is possible, I want to put forward a practical kind of philosophical theory. A useful conceptualization of agency

[1] The references to Korsgaard in this introduction are not intended to portray here as reflecting one specific viewpoint on human action. In the debate, she has simply put forward accurately what is at stake.

must, then, reflect the possibility of having agency, but also that of *acquiring* agency. I namely believe, with these authors, that seeing humans as 'exclusively rational calculators or creatures of pure practical reason' does not adequately reflect our actions (Pippin, 2010, p. 13). But I also think that there are many situations where my actions *do* reflect me in some way or form and that it is possible to *let* my actions be a more genuine reflection of myself: it is the possibility of overcoming barriers that I think a useful concept of agency must include.

As we will see later on, one of the key aspects of the reflective model is flexibility: the ability to interpret my circumstances and, if they ask for it, adjust my (plan for) actions accordingly. Whereas I do no belief that this is a capacity we always have, I think we can only think about agency when it includes the possibility to acquire (some form of) it. Again, this is attuned to our daily experience. Later on, we will also consider conceptualizations of agency in Film Noir. Without saying too much about what I will argue there, we can say that these movies show characters that first and foremost *lack* agency. The actions of these characters can often be said to be separated from the subject undertaking them. Whether such a description of action is philosophically interesting is, then, besides the question. It is not useful, as such a description of action does, I believe, not relate to how we see ourselves as individuals, as *actors*, in the world. A useful conceptual conceptualization *must* show a relationship between ourselves and our actions.

Some more introductory remarks must be made to clarify the scope of this essay. They concern my own methodology and that of the authors I am focusing on. As I said above, one of the similarities between these authors is their usage of non-philosophical means in constructing philosophical arguments. Pippin has written extensively on the concept of agency in various places. Most interesting, however, is his work on agency in *film*, where I will specifically focus on his work on Film Noir, Westerns, and the Hitchcock film *Vertigo*. In the case of Geuss, reflections on agency can likewise be found throughout his work. I will focus first on the strand of political philosophy he is often associated with, political realism. Thereafter I will work with *his* usage of non-philosophical means by focusing on the concept *bricoleur*, which comes out of the cultural anthropology of Claude-Lévi Strauss. What justifies the focus on these non-philosophical sources in an analysis of agency? What do these sources in particular have to offer us? Answering the first question will serve as a justification of my methodology. I will do that by means of the methodological reflections my authors have themselves put forward. The second question will, hopefully, become clearer in my substantial reflections on these philosophers.

First Pippin, who rephrases the problem in the following manner when considering so-called film-philosophy: 'what philosophy is, such that a film could be said to bear on it; and how an art object, a film in particular, must be conceived such that it could intersect with, bear on, philosophy' (Pippin, 2019, p. 1). The most straightforward answer to this question seems to me the most convincing: watching, interpreting, and understanding a movie requires a special kind of attention *and* one that is primarily concerned with human action. He puts forward what *any* watching of a movie involves: "We have to 'make sense of what characters do'" and "we bring to bear on that question the ways we attempt to make sense of our own and others' actions." (Pippin, 2012, p. 2).

Watching a filmed fictional narrative wherein characters perform actions (as basic as that sounds) requires us, helps us, to think about the relationship between an individual and an action, if only because that is often the most substantial thing we get to see in a movie. Nonetheless, there remains a problematic aspect to this approach. We want a concept of agency to say something about the relationship between an individual and an action in *our* daily lives, not in a specific film, or genre, or as a reflection of the twisted brain of a director: to what extent can a(n analysis of a) film be said to fulfil this objective? This is not a worry I can take away here; I can only point to the many philosophers who preceded Pippin in using this method.

A second worry might be that a focus on explaining agency by means of (concepts from) other disciplines is, in fact, a step *away* from philosophy. In considering this, we also get to a second justification. Geuss puts forward the *modus operandi* that is most common in academic philosophy: formalized conflict between multiple theories on a philosophical question and, consequently, a focus on 'winning' such conflicts by arguments that, for instance, prove the inconsistencies or false assumptions of the opposing theory. An interpretation of, say, an anthropological concept such as the *bricoleur* will likely not operate in this way because it is primarily focused on interpreting the concept in a philosophical way.

One of the justifications Geuss uses to step away from these methods is that 'The philosophical habit of focused individual criticism of clearly formulated theses is not useless, but it is of limited value in discussing large-scale, historically persistent movements' as these movements have an *open texture*, they are 'in many ways amorphous, open at the edges, and like living organisms in their ability to change (in various ways) while retaining their identity' (Geuss, 2022, p. 3). Later on (on p. 14), I will discuss Pippin's idea of thinking about agency as a social practice and show how he thinks theories of agency are fluid, continuously developing on par with societal developments.

Without here anticipating on that idea, I think it will show a way in which the same sort of open texture applies to my topic, conceptualizations of non-reflective agency. The wide variety of different ways agency is considered philosophically, if only in the work of the authors I focus on, adds to this belief.

To conclude here by means of Geuss: the aim of (some of) his work is not to 'win arguments or convince people' but 'to get some kind of understanding of some basic features of the world' (Geuss, 2022, p. 10). I share this perspective and also think it coincides with the desire to think about philosophy in a practical manner. The work of Geuss and Pippin, and hopefully this work, shows that a partial step away from the standard methods of doing philosophy creates space for the instrumentalization of non-philosophical means for the sake of, at least, showing a way of understanding our actions.

My thesis will proceed in the following way. In chapter 1, I will begin with proposing a framework for conceptualizing agency by means of three aspects. Then, I will explain the characteristics of the reflective model of agency. Chapter 2 and 3 will show two alternatives of Pippin to that model coming forth out of his analysis of the Film Noir Genre and the film *Vertigo*: agency as reflected in our actions themselves and as a social practice. I will reject both ideas as they do not tell us anything about acquiring agency and neither do they answer the chair-problem. Chapter 4 will bring us closer to a useful conceptualization of agency. There, I discuss the work of Pippin on Westerns and specifically the film *The Searchers*. I will argue that by means of that movie, we can explain human action by means of the local context individuals find themselves in. I build upon that idea in chapters 5 and 6 by means of the realist political philosophy of Geuss. He adds to our useful conceptualization the idea that we can acquire agency by means of understanding and applying concepts from political philosophy. One thing is at that point still missing for answering the chair-problem: a more detailed understanding of the relationship between motivation and subject. I will provide such an understanding by means of the anthropological concept *bricoleur* in chapter 7. In the end, I will conclude that a culmination of different ideas contained in the works under discussion provide us with the most useful conceptualization of agency within the framework of my research.

1. An initial understanding of agency: conceptualizing and 'running the show'

I want to start out by explaining what I think conceptualizing a philosophical topic means. I will do so by means of a section of Bernard Williams's *Shame and Neccesity* (2008). One of the purposes of that work is to correct the idea that ancient Greek philosophy and literature did not describe and judge human action by concepts such as 'human agency, responsibility, regret, and necessity' (Williams, 2008, p. 20). He often refers to the work of Homer to do so, such as when arguing for the obvious existence and usage of the concept of responsibility in ancient Greece. After considering a specific action of the character Agamemnon (stealing a war prize from Achilles), the regret Agamemnon expresses for this action (he argues that 'Zeus took my wits away from me'; Williams sees this as some form of irrational madness) *and* the willingness of Agamemnon to set right his mistake (he will give Achilles back the prize), Williams puts forward the following analysis (the other 'incident' he refers to I do not consider here):

'Just from these two Homeric incidents, then, we have four ideas: that in virtue of what he did someone has brought about a bad state of affairs; that he did or did not intend that state of affairs; that he was or was not in a normal state of mind when he brought it about; and that it is his business, if anyone's, to make up for it. We might label these four elements cause, intention, state, and response. These are the basic elements of any conception of responsibility' (2008, p. 55).

By means of this model of conceptualizing responsibility, notably by means of a non-philosophical source, I want to propose here in a similar way three elements that I think make up any conceptualization of *agency*. I think there is reason to believe that we can undertake a similar breakdown of agency if only because the two phenomena, responsibility and agency, seem so closely related to each other (when considering agency as social practice on p. 17 I will show more closely why this is the case). The basic elements that can be found in any conceptualization of agency are a, I propose, a subject, an action and an intention.

The subject is also commonly known as the agent, the person who is said to either have or lack agency. He is, we could say, at least the *physical* origin of the action. Being an *agent* seems inherently connected to the possession of agency, but the predicate is not always so straightforward. It might be complex to find out when and how we can say that someone has agency and whether it is up to the agent themselves or others to claim this predicate. Furthermore, we can think about whether we should relate agency to one action or to multiple actions. I will soon also discuss the idea that

whether someone is an agent or not can only be determined in retrospect. As it might be difficult to say whether someone has or lacks agency, it might also be difficult to say that he *is* an agent. This remains a context-dependent judgment.

Agency is related to action, but not every action is done autonomously. When I am held at gunpoint and told to open the cash desk, it seems that the action I am about to undertake is the opposite of what I would want to do. This action cannot be considered a consequence of my intentions in this situation; it is an involuntary one. But there are other ways of thinking about action as well. Merely my ability to move my body (in this situation: opening the cash desk) can also be considered an action. A conceptualization of agency, however, involves action *and* intention (and subject). When we are considering mere bodily movement as action, we seem to miss out on what is crucial in thinking about agency: a psychological account of the subject.

Intention (or motivation: I will use both interchangeably), then, refers to that psychological account. It concerns *what* motivates an agent to act in a certain way. Agency is, in this sense, a loaded concept: to speak of agency is to speak of *something* that can be said to be the reason for or leading to the action. This can be, but does not have to be, the reason the agent himself gives for his actions (and it is not always the case that *that* reason is the intention, neither is it always possible for the subject to know about his intentions). It is therefore also *not* the cause of the action: it is simply what the agent tries to achieve by means of his action. As we will see, in many situations, intentions are not immediately at hand (or can only be retrieved or constructed retrospectively) or there seem to be various, perhaps conflicting, intentions for (an) action.

For Williams, 'there is not, and there never could be, just one appropriate way of adjusting these elements to one another – as we might put it, just one correct conception of responsibility' (2008, p. 55). This is one of the reasons why we are looking at conceptualizations of agency in a specific context, the chair-problem, as this provides us with a way of evaluating them. We will see various attempts at such adjustments, specifically those that reject the reflective model of agency. Before we can get there, however, we need a more thorough understanding of what that model involves.

I will provide such understanding by looking at another work of Williams, namely his paper *Moral Luck*. It shows us two things. Firstly, a specific attempt at theorizing agency in which we can see the three elements given above return. By means of a well-functioning example, Williams shows that the question whether we have or lack agency can in some situations only be determined

retrospectively, by judging whether the decisions we took delivered the results we anticipated. To be specific about the consequence of this idea: whether we had agency follows from whether I am capable of justifying my actions. Williams shows that whether I can provide such justification often depends on external factors, for example on the topic of his paper, which is luck. Secondly, the way he sets up his example gives us a pathway to understanding the reflective model of agency (without suggesting that Williams supports that model in his paper or elsewhere; that is beside the point).

Let us proceed with the example, which involves the painter Paul Gauguin, and more specifically the well-known decision of Gauguin to leave France and establish himself on the remote island of Tahiti. It was a decision with consequences we can imagine without having intimate knowledge of the case, such as: the pain of abandoning loved ones, giving up his responsibilities towards them, the anxiety involved in leaving familiar territory and the risks involved on a personal and professional level. Williams wants us to picture a Gauguin concerned with these consequences (in the sense that he was aware of them, took them into consideration) but also with a motivation for his decision, namely 'a life which will enable him really to be a painter that he opts for' (2025, p. 16). It should be obvious that in sketching this situation, we see the three elements of agency given above.

What determines whether Gauguin has agency in this situation depends, for Williams, on whether his decision can be considered a success. We therefore have to follow Williams in deciding what would count as a success and, more importantly, what would count as a failure (and thus as a lack of agency). Success for Gauguin in this situation is the ability to *justify* the decision he made, and declaring such success is to a large extent related to factors that stand in some way outside of Gauguin's considerations. If it turns out that what we thought would happen when we acted and the eventual outcome does not align, we cannot be said to have agency, according to Williams.

There are two further aspects to this idea of justification. First of all, whether he will be able to justify himself can in this case not be determined before or during the action. A justification in this context does not refer to the reasons Gauguin gives for his decision, but to the reason he gave (to be a painter he opts for) turning out to be *true*, turning out to be a realistic implication of his action. Only in retrospect can Gauguin point to the situation that was created due to his action and argue that his decision to leave can be justified. Secondly, Gauguin declaring his decision a failure can only be an outcome of a wrong judgment by himself. Williams puts this accurately: 'If Gauguin

sustains some injury on the way to Tahiti which prevents his ever painting again [that] does not provoke the thought in question, that after all he was wrong and unjustified. He does not, and never will, know whether he was wrong. What would prove him wrong in his project would not just be that it failed, but that he failed' (Williams, 2025, p. 18). Even though a clear case of *extrinsic* bad luck prevents Gauguin from being an agent in the literal sense in this situation, this does not 'unjustify him'; a true moment of justification namely never arrives, and no-one could reasonably argue that Gauguin was wrong in his decision to leave (Williams, 2025, p. 20). A *sincere* lack of justification occurs due to intrinsic luck, which in this situation means the paintings Gauguin creates and the commercial and artistic success they bring him; it is the question of whether Gauguin is truly the gifted painter he thinks he is.

It is only in the situation that Gauguin fails to report home on his successes, that he himself and other people will consider his project a failure. The potential success of Gauguin's work is what Williams calls epistemic luck: 'It is not merely luck that he is such a man, but luck relative to the deliberations that went into his decision, that he turns out to be such a man: he might (epistemically) not have been' (Williams, 2025, p. 26). The luck that is relevant here is thus the arbitrary fact that he turned out to be really good in painting. Even in the situation (which was not the case for Gauguin) that the subject for some reason knows about his future capability to justify his action, Williams still pertains that we can argue that it is a matter of luck that this knowledge was available at the moment of making the decision (2025, p. 28).

Our agency is thus partially determined, construed by external factors. It is important to stress here that Williams does not mean that our *decisions* are determined by taking into account the uncertainties of the situation we find ourselves in; they can be but, as the example shows, are not necessarily. What he says is that whether or not we can be said to have agency is not determined by our capacity to turn our motivations into actions, but by the turn of events showing that action and motivation align. This is, I think, a significant shift from common ideas about agency. His example however also *aligns* with these common ideas. I want to leave the specifics of William's article for now and use it as an introduction to these common ideas. William's representation of Gauguin namely fits rightly with what Pippin calls the reflective model of agency.

I want to zoom in on a specific aspect of Williams's representation of Gauguin's decision, namely the moment Gauguin steps on the boat to leave France. The decision he makes at that moment is, Williams stresses, one that comes after deliberation about the consequences of his act. As we saw,

this deliberation itself did not make Gauguin an agent (yet), according to Williams. Nonetheless, a clear picture of Gauguin as a subject emerges from the example, namely one wherein individual decisions are genuine and a result of consideration. Furthermore, the action was conducted after evaluating its effects and potential outcomes.

I am considering here agency at the moment of acting itself (instead of, like Williams, in retrospect) and presenting Williams's Gauguin as a *reflective* agent. As said, this means that the decision by Gauguin, we assume, is a culmination of different considerations: he compared different options (staying, leaving, leaving for a place closer by), thought of the options his financial situation bestowed on him, and perhaps more practically, at what time he should leave his home to be on time for the boat. We can assume that especially the weighing of different options and deciding on the best one is a decision he came to himself, i.e. autonomously. This picture of the decision is what, by means of Pippin, I have called *the reflective model of agency*. The best way to further understand what this model implies is by simply following Pippin's explanation of its two prime assumptions.

Firstly, it assumes that actions are purposive, meaning that they are done by an agent to achieve something (Pippin, 2012, p. 13). Secondly, actions are assumed to be reflective, intentional, and subject to deliberative control. Before we act, we have gone through a thought process and *when* we act, we do so because the action seems the right thing to undertake following these considerations, and, to a certain degree, these considerations are rational (Pippin, 2012, p. 13). I do not want to bother too much with rationality here as I think explaining what it entails in this context demands more elaboration than I can give here. Part of such elaboration is captured in the idea of deliberative control. In this context that means that besides my action being the result of my considerations leading to a decision, I am also motivated to follow up on these considerations; I am 'reason responsive' (Pippin, 2012, p. 98).

The agent in this model is also characterized by flexibility. What Williams pointed at was that factors external to my actions can influence both the result of our actions and our considerations. No conceptualization of agency could deny this. Nonetheless, the reflective model of agency emphasizes the ability of individuals to understand these factors, interpret them and, if necessary, adjust their behaviour. Pippin summarizes this framework as autonomous individuals 'running the show' (2012, p. 14). He is very much motivated to show the shortcomings of this model, which we will see now by working out conceptualizations of non-reflective agency through his work on Film Noir and *Vertigo*.

2. Rejecting the reflective model: someone else is running the show

After having seen what the reflective model entails, I now want to focus on two conceptualizations of non-reflective agency in Pippin's work on film. In this chapter, I wil put forward my interpretation of both of them. I will argue that, for different reasons, they are not useful in giving an answer to the chair problem. The first conceptualization is a rather sober one and can be constructed from his interpretation of three Film Noir movies. The second derives from his analysis of the Hitchcock film *Vertigo*. I will focus on what Pippin has to say about one specific character in a specific scene in that movie and relate it back to his work on Film Noir.

Both of these works consider individuals who are clearly *not* running the show: their deliberation seems to be either absent or not leading to anything in practice. Especially in Film Noir, characters exist in a state of indecisiveness. In some situations, individuals *think* they have deliberative control, but the incongruency between what they thought would happen as the result of their actions and what *did* happen shows their lack of agency. In analysing these films, and putting forward what philosophical conclusions can be drawn from them, Pippin does not seem to suggest that agency is a quality we (can) possess, and instead mostly argues for the difficulty surrounding purposeful action. This already suggests why I do not deem these conceptualizations useful. Before getting there, however, we need to find out what Pippin specifically has to say about these movies.

I will begin with Pippin's representation of agency in *Fatalism in American Film Noir* (2012). As said, the films in this genre provide a bleak conceptualization of agency. Phrased differently: they provide characters who are lacking in agency in the sense that we have seen it up until now. Its characters often act (in a philosophical sense) in an initially incomprehensible manner; for the spectator, but also for themselves. They seem to lack knowledge of *what* they are doing, and cannot or do not put forward any justification for their actions. Neither are they concerned with figuring out what they *should* be doing (in order to achieve something). More than often, the turn of events shows that the considerations or justifications actors might have, are mistaken. In other cases, actors know what the right course of action is, but for unknown reasons, both for themselves and the spectator, they decide to act otherwise (so-called motivated irrationality). The events in Film Noir are often not the result of deliberative actions, but merely things that happen *to* characters.

To relate this picture to the three elements of agency: it is the relationship between action and motivation that is heavily distorted here. What is driving the lack of deliberative agency in these characters is, Pippin argues, primarily external factors. The circumstances these characters move in do not *allow* them to take a 'step back', to reflect on the right course of action (Pippin, 2012, p. 4). Primarily, they seem to lack the flexibility to adapt to real-life situations that is asked of the deliberative agent. The plots of these movies however often lead these characters into places where immediate acting *is* crucial. It is obvious that this combination is a useful one when you want to question the reflective model of agency.

The question naturally arises *what* these circumstances are that make it impossible for Film Noir character to take a step back. Pippin gives multiple answers to this question. I will discuss two that, I think, do not lead to a very clarifying understanding of agency. They are however necessary to understand his explanations that *are* more theoretically interesting. There is, firstly, the *giving up* on agency by these characters. Pippin suggests that in Film Noir, reasoning about what the right action is seen as meaningless because characters are 'trapped by some situation, or by some social necessity, or by their own past, or even by some obsessive love' (2012, p. 15). They perceive the world as driven by unfathomable forces or simply human nature; the course of their lives is effectively out of their control (hence the emphasis on fatalism in the title). I will come back to this idea later on and explain how this characteristic relates to (the lack of) self-knowledge.

Secondly, there is a related idea in what Pippin calls 'The Destiny Machine'; the 'enormously more powerful shaping, conformity-inducing, perspective-altering capacity, and the drastically constraining effects of, modern mass-consumer societies' (Pippin, 2012, p. 96). What is negatively affecting the agency of Film Noir characters is, then, social-economical-political circumstances. These dictate a certain way of living without allowing for the possibility to step out of the framework it prescribes. This is a rather broad notion that is mostly interesting, I think, as an analysis of the historical context in which Film Noir was produced. It does not directly tell us much about how Pippin thinks we should understand the *concept* of agency. Again, we namely return to the idea that there are external forces that affect what we do and our ability to be genuine actors. It is, in a way, also not a direct rejection of the reflective model of agency. That model does not suggest the absence of such external circumstances: on the contrary, the existence of such circumstances explain the the presumed flexibility of actors to act in response. Furthermore, the reflective model suggests how actions comes about by means of the three elements of agency. The Destiny Machine does not, and it is therefore not truly a conceptualization of agency.

Two theoretically more interesting understandings of the lack of agency in Film Noir can be found in Pippin's work. Firstly, there is the relationship between agency and intentions and lack of self-knowledge, and secondly, the idea that we can understand agency as a *normative* concept. I will explain these ideas with the help of Pippin's own work on the movie *Vertigo* and commentary on Pippin by Lash.

To get a first understanding of what the relation is between an action and an intention, the following discussion between Pippin and Korsgaard serves aptly. It concerns the film character Tex (it is irrelevant here from what film the example is taken), who has a severe leg injury and whose leg must be amputated. At the moment of the operation, Tex can be seen begging *not* to be amputated. But, as Pippin argues, both the friends of Tex in the movie and the spectator, initially do not see the begging of Tex as a genuine reflection of what he wants (Pippin, 2008, p. 80). It might be argued that in this situation, the agent is incapable of expressing what he really wants. His true *intention* is different, as he knows that the amputation is the only option. In the spirit of the reflective model of agency, Korsgaard argues in this manner when she says: 'the right thing to say is that fear is making Tex irrational […] The government of reason, like any other, requires certain background conditions in order to maintain its authority.' (Korsgaard, 1997, p. 238).

What is suggested here is that there is an inherent connection between agency and rationality: genuine agency is the following up by an agent of his rationally acquired intentions (notice here that the idea of reason-responsivity comes back when considering rationality). In normal circumstances, reason maintains its authority and the protesting Tex is therefore not the *real* Tex. Pippin disagrees with this diagnosis of Tex's situation. He argues that the Tex we see is another side of his character. What we earlier called the motivation behind an action is, for Pippin, reflected *in* the action, regardless of the question of whether such motivation is rational or not. The two different stances of Tex, where the first can be summarized as: 'Before his injury, Tex might have believed himself to be the kind of person who would bravely and stoically accept the prospect of having his leg amputated', suggest that it is not always possible for agents to *know* what their intention is (Lash, 2023, p. 111). In screaming out before the operation, Tex is *learning* something about himself. Not what his true intention is, but that what he *thought* his true intention was, turned out not to be true. For Lash, the example shows that in Pippins viewing of Film Noir we 'have no uniquely privileged access to our own intentions (we can be wrong about what we intend), that it may well be only in acting that we find out what we actually intended' (Lash, 2023, p. 111).

This idea that agency is something we can either have or lack, as Lash puts it, as a 'a kind of on/off capacity' (2023, p. 116), has been hovering over my discussion of agency so far. It comes, I think, forth out of the reflective model of agency, which assumes that there is a certain ideal subject that, either at all times or at least under the right sort of circumstances, can be said to *have* agency. It also applied to the idea of giving up on agency. The actions of the Film Noir characters who gave up on their agency are seen as a *deviation*. The behaviour of these characters is not 'normal', something alarming is going on in their refusal to 'run the show'. It also shows in the Destiny Machine, which is portrayed predominantly as a *negative* influence. The almost inevitable idea that having full control over your life is the ideal, both theoretically and practically, comes back in these and other ideas on agency (and, partially, in my own desire for a conceptualization of agency that allows for acquirement).

In arguing for seeing our intentions reflected *in* our actions, Pippin does not engage with the on/off perspective on agency. He proposes a theory in which our access to self-knowledge has become irrelevant. Like Williams, we apply the term agency in retrospect, perhaps in cases where the image we had of ourselves aligns with our actions. There are two problematic aspects for this theory in the context of my research question. Firstly, it cannot consider the idea that we can acquire agency. A second problem lies in the specific example Pippin uses to make this point, namely Film Noir characters.

The Film Noir genre shows characters who embody a certain posture. According to Pippin, these characters both accept and understand their lack of self-knowledge *and* repeatedly appeal to it in justification of their behaviour. This posture of these characters, Pippin suggests, is a result of a well-considered self-analysis. He summarizes this problem in the following way:

> 'This leaves us with quite a complicated situation: not confident enough of our ability to know our minds well enough to count as the full-blooded, […] effective agents, but unable to adopt as any sort of credible practical posture the pose of *being fated*, determined, for that too-adopting such a posture-will still have to count as something we could do or not do.' (2012, p. 97)

The position Pippin sees these characters take on suggests, in a way, an *action* coming forth out of some sort of reflection, as '*submitting* to nature is something, however paradoxically, that we in some sense *do*' (Pippin, 2012, p. 97). The following elements are part of this conceptualization of agency.

Firstly, the *fact* (in these movies) that there is no such thing as autonomous decision making; there is an overarching 'machine that we suspect has its own programmed course of action' (Pippin, 2012, p. 97). Secondly, the specific action of characters of giving in to fatalism and the lack of self-knowledge, which is considered by Pippin as an autonomous action. Thirdly, the difficult situation that is the result of these two elements: in Film Noir, there is both an emphasis on showing the uselessness or impossibility of autonomous action *and* an emphasis on a subject who reflects on this and acts on it, perhaps by referring to a term I mentioned earlier, motivated irrationality. The idea that there is a certain freedom in their appeal to fatalism is supported by the *benefits* that befalls these characters because of this posture; it functions as a 'self-serving self-exculpation' (Pippin, 2012, p. 96).

There is another problem for this particular conceptualization of agency that applies specifically to our research question. Pippin himself namely sees the complicated situation of both accepting and rejecting autonomous action as 'our modern fate' (2012, p. 97). But he also asks himself what this means "practically, from the point of view of someone who must lead his or her life […] who must embody the acknowledgment and "live out" this acknowledgment or act in the light of its truth" (2012, p. 97). This brings us *back* to the chair-problem; the idea was that a conceptualization of agency must be an *answer* the chair-problem. Even though it is certainly philosophically interesting, I do not think such an answer can lie in putting forward two conflicting predicaments. Neither does this conceptualization suggest in any way what acquiring agency involves. I therefore deem this conceptualization of agency not useful. The question Pippin puts forward is a genuine one: what *does* the modern fate mean for those having to live in it? Seeing agency reflected in the moment of acting itself does not give us this answer (in the context of Film Noir, at least. In a different context I think it makes more sense). Pippin *does* give another, practical answer to his question in the form of seeing agency as *a collectively sustained social practice*. We will turn to that now to see whether that conceptualization of agency is more useful.

3. Agency as a social practice: our failure to understand others.

Seeing agency as a social practice means that having agency involves being acknowledged as a subject with agency by others. Pippin uses this analogy to give further explanation: 'one is a professor by (and only by) being taken to be one in ways that are relatively well settled and agreed on by a community at a time' (2012, p. 101). In the same way, having agency is meeting the conditions others set for that predicate. It is not only conditions, however, but also rules: there are certain things we expect of those we grant agency. As the discussions on moral luck and self-knowledge already suggested, agency understood in this manner raises the question of *responsibility*. What it means to have agency is asking when others (can) hold me accountable for my actions.

I want to further explore and problematize this idea by means of Pippin's work on Hitchcock's film *Vertigo*. Hitchcock's movies lend themselves for thinking about being recognized as an agent, as "There is something like a "Hitchcock world", a set of problems repeatedly faced by his characters, many having to do with the painfulness and the dangers of our general failure to understand ourselves or each other very well" (Pippin, 2019, p. 10). In *Vertigo*, interpreting whether others are, say, honest, or what the intentions are behind their actions, is the hardship of multiple characters. We have to ask ourselves the question whether these difficulties also affect the ability to hold people responsible, as this would undermine Pippin's idea that we should understand agency as a social practice.

In the movie, the main character Scottie gets entangled in a complex plot of a former acquaintance to get away with the murder of the acquaintance's own wife, Madeleine. Scottie is unaware of the true intentions of this plot, and thinks he is trying to *save* her. As it happens, he also falls in love with Madeleine *and* she commits suicide in front of him. Unknown to him for a long time is that the woman he was trying to save was long dead and that the woman he got acquainted with was hired by the acquaintance and faked her suicide. To avoid having to further explain this complicated plot, I want to zoom in on something like a side-plot: the relationship between Scottie and a character called Midge.

She is a long-term friend of Scottie, but actually seeks romantic affection from him, to no avail. As Pippin puts it, she is "so submissive to his needs that she cannot properly "see" him or be seen by him, wants only to be seen by him on whatever terms he requires […] *to be seen* as she wants to be, she must also *rightly see*, something she can't do." (Pippin, 2019, p. 41). Midge is one of the

characters in the movie who reflect what makes Pippin's idea of agency understood as social practice troublesome. To engage in this practice namely seems to *require* a type of knowledge that is absent both in Film Noir and for Midge in *Vertigo*: knowledge about the mental states of others.

Let's dive deeper into what sort of difficulties there are for Midge that lead to what Pippin calls 'unknowingness' by focussing on one specific scene. At a certain point, Madeleine develops a mysterious affection for a painting. Scottie, meanwhile, has developed far-reaching feelings for Madeleine, which is known to the viewers but unknown to Midge. He does not see the obsession with the painting for what it is, inexplicable, but as a crucial aspect of Madeleine's personality he *needs* to understand to save her. When Midge, who is an artist, finds out about Madeleine's obsession with the painting, she decides to *copy* the portrait and insert her own head on it:

(Hitchcock, 1958)

Scottie does not respond favourably to the painting, instead shaking his head and saying: 'That's not funny, Midge'. In this situation, what obstructs Midge's knowledge of Scottie's mental state and his motives is, for Pippin, *not* the emotional feelings she has towards Scottie (these feelings are not unimportant to Pippin: we will come back to their impact when considering Westerns in the next chapter). There was for Midge simply no reason to think that Scottie would react in this way, as it does not reflect his character as she knows it. Instead, his reaction shows for Pippin 'simply human finitude; our inability often to know what we need to know in a temporally fluid, changing existence in order to relate to others in ways we can understand and manage' (Pippin, 2019, p. 73).

There was, in this scene, no way for Midge to act in a way that would successfully lead to the fulfilment of her motivation (to entertain Scottie, to change the way he thinks about her). She simply lacks the knowledge to do so. Midge might be led to think that Scottie's reaction was unfair to her, she might hold him accountable for his action and have certain expectations (in this case,

apologies). Knowledge about developments in his life, regardless of how inexplainable Scottie's reaction to these developments is, might significantly alter her expectations of him; it might affect her judgment of Scottie as an agent.

Let's apply this scene to the original question then: what does this mean for our ability to see agency as a social practice? I argue that when it is the 'temporally fluid, chancing existence' that makes it difficult to engage with others as an agent (meaning: making sure the outcome of my interaction with someone else aligns with my purposes for that interaction), this surely also has implications for our ability to *grant* someone agency. When mutual understanding is out of reach, how can we hold someone responsible for his actions and how can we *know* whether to do so? We might argue here, I believe with Pippin, that it is not a question of *knowing* the developments in the lives of others or their mental states (as such an assertion takes on the assumptions of the reflective model) but more of a theoretical, even a historical, question. As Pippin argues, there *are* at any given time simply certain standards we use for deciding when to hold others accountable. Our actions will be a reflection of these (historical) standards that are, furthermore, reflected in film. In the case of Film Noir, and I think also of *Vertigo*, a lack of general understanding of ourselves, our surroundings, and others (due to the so-called The Destiny Machine) has significantly lowered these standards.

Where does this leave us in terms of usefulness? Again, I think that this conceptualization of agency is certainly theoretically interesting, but not particularly useful. The chair-problem is one that specifically demands an *individual* answer. This conceptualization does not situate itself somewhere between acceptance or rejection of the reflective model as it proposes a societal, almost objective account of who is and who is not an agent. Pointing to this societal standard is (ironically) somewhat fatalistic. For these reasons, I argue that understanding agency as social practice does not provide us with a useful conceptualization of agency. To summarize: problematic here is that the factors that influence agency are to a large extent unalterable and too confusing for the subject. Furthermore, Pippin does not show what it is to *act* knowing certain societal norms and limitations affecting our capability to act. He does do something like that in his work on Westerns, and I believe this provides way more useful conceptualizations of agency. Let us therefore turn to that work now.

4. The political passions: understanding agency by means of emotional connections

In *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth* (2010), Pippin puts forward what it is to have *political* agency. We will see that in these movies, there is a closer relation between motivations and actions. The latter occur in a political context as, Pippin argues, in these movies 'The question is whether there is […] a unique sort of social bond that links individuals, often strangers, in a distinctive ethical relationship' (Pippin, 2010, p. 12). We might wonder here what the connection is between this political question and individual agency. For Pippin, however, this question *is* an individual question. He reformulates it in the following way: 'Are there good reasons for individuals to form such a distinctive social relation, to obligate themselves to sustain it?' (Pippin, 2010, p. 12).

Answering the question of what it means for individuals to 'surrender' to formalized politics, to the state, is foremostly acknowledging that 'we are motivated in our political lives by quite a complex psychology, and we would not be doing justice to the questions of politics if we were to neglect the core political passions' (Pippin, 2010, p. 13). In this chapter, I will first put forward what I see as the two main aspects driving political agency for Pippin in his work on Westerns: the political passions and the political landscape characters move in, which I will later call the local context. Then, I will turn to one of the films Pippin talks about, *The Searchers*, to make these two aspects more concrete. Finally, I will argue that an interpretation of a specific scene in this movie by means of these two aspects leads us to a useful understanding of agency.

Let's first look a bit closer at the two factors affecting the agency of Western characters: the political passions and the political context individual action takes place in. Firstly, the political passions. In most examples of individuals I have used so far, their emotions did not seem to play a crucial role in what led them to their actions (at least, in the interpretation of Pippin). What affected their agency were primarily external factors. Political passions, on the contrary, originate from internal dispositions and relate to our relationships with others. They help explain 'what matters to people at a place and time, why it matters, what matters more than other things (more than anything in some cases), what they are willing to sacrifice for, what provokes anger' (Pippin, 2010, p. 15).

Pippin puts forward many different kinds of political passions: love, fear, desire, vanity, snobbery (2010, p. 13). As said, these passions should be understood relationally, meaning that in some way, our feelings for or affiliations with others affect what we do, and 'while it might not be rational, say, to love one person or group more than others and to act on that basis, such a differentiation

need not at all be a flaw or failure' (Pippin, 2010, p. 14). Comparable to his discussion on the film character Tex, Pippin treats the political passions as a genuine reflection of individual character, and as essential to understanding the motivation for actions. As was the case for Tex these passions significantly influence the decisions and positions taken on broad, life-defining questions; this will hopefully become clearer when we consider *The Searchers*.

Secondly, the political landscape. That the theoretical framework that comes forth out of Westerns is orientated towards politics is related to an inherent characteristic of the genre. Westerns usually feature characters navigating and acting in a terrain *devoid of* formal political institutions. Simultaneously, there is always the historical certainty that the time of unbounded living is ending, the so-called 'end of the frontier'. A certainty known to both the spectator and the characters. America is moving towards a political union, one where individuals are bound by citizenship and where a distinction has to be made between legitimate and illegitimate violence. Westerns portray this process of state-building, and the considerations of individuals in these circumstances relate to matters of authority and legitimacy.

Two further remarks need to be made about the impact of this changing political landscape. Firstly, these developments remind us here of the Destiny Machine: in both Westerns and Film Noir, there are pressing societal developments and higher forces that in some way affect the range of possibilities for characters, without them having a decisive say in these processes (this is, I think, also one of the weaknesses of the idea of the Destiny Machine: it can in some form be applied to every era). What we will see, however, is that in contrast to Film Noir, Western characters *do* act as a reaction to these circumstances, instead of being acted upon. And these actions can be said to be to a much larger extent reflections of themselves.

Secondly, there seems to be a conflict between the two main aspects of Westerns, the political passions and the developing political landscape. On the one hand, the complexity of the new formal state America is becoming, requiring 'cooperation, compromise, prudence, bet-hedging, and repression' (Pippin, 2010, p. 105). On the other hand, this state under construction is still very much an 'environment where the heroic and martial virtues are so important' (Pippin, 2010, p. 105, 20). These two aspects are often shown as conflicting, and this is one of the things that interests Pippin: what eventually motivates people to act, how *do* they act, when influenced by these two factors. Let's now turn to *The Searchers* to make this theoretical framework more concrete.

For our purposes, it is best to focus on the main character of the movie, Ethan, who in the first scene can be seen returning to the house of his brother, Aaron. The movie is set at the end of the American Civil War, and it becomes clear that Ethan has somehow been affected by it, but how remains unclear. In his persona, two standard traits of Pippin's analysis of the Western come together. Firstly, an individual on a quest that involves the political passions, in this case love and revenge. Secondly, the difficulty of understanding Ethan, for both the spectator and the other characters in the film (this is, of course, one of the general concerns of Pippin when analysing films). The respective quest concerns retrieving Ethan's abducted niece from a Native American Tribe, the Comanches.

In a violent attack on Aaron's house, Ethan's whole family gets murdered; only his niece Debby survives and is taken by the Comanches. The main part of the movie concerns Ethan's attempt to retrieve her. The ambiguities in Ethan's character that complicate an attempt to understand him are both a cinematic choice (namely not giving away his past) and in-film contradictions, mostly having to do with the relation he has and used to have with the Comanches. Throughout the film, Ethan shows the most abundant forms of racism in both word and (violent) deed towards Comanches. It suggests a rage that goes way further than the abduction of Debby. Simultaneously, there is the Comanche rifle he wears, the 'intimate knowledge and apparent acceptance of Comanche religion' and the acceptance and protection of his mixed-race companion on the quest (Pippin, 2010, p. 112).

The film does not put forward where his hateful feelings come from, leading Pippin to argue that 'we [the viewers] are called on to provide what Ethan cannot or will not' (Pippin, 2010, p. 117). We will see however that this is not a particularly straightforward endeavour, showing both how illuminating and complex the political passions work out in practice. Ethan's personal affiliations are too complex to allow for a one-directional, logical account of his actions. This most prominently comes to show in the most important scene of the movie, the moment Ethan finds out the whereabouts of Debby. I will here primarily give my own interpretation of both this and another useful scene in the movie, while relying on and working with Pippin's theoretical framework.

It has turned out that after her abduction, Debby has converted to the Comanche religion. Ethan learned about this fact in an earlier scene. There, after finding out what has become of Debby, he tries to shoot her, but fails as a Comanche stops him at a final moment. Coming into the crucial

scene where Ethan approaches the location where the Comanches and Debby are located, the earlier scene and Ethan's character suggest to the viewer all sorts of possibilities regarding his actions. To do so, we have to see some more of the plot of the movie. It allows us to reconstruct the set of motivations for Ethan's actions. It will show how both the political passions and political landscape serve as theoretically useful here.

Primarily, there is what Ethan says, namely that Debbie must be killed. Furthermore, there is his hateful and violent character (another scene showed him manically shooting at a herd of buffalo, only to diminish the number of livestock for the Comanches), which suggests an outrageous murder of the abductors and his niece, who is no longer on his side, as he perceives it. There is also his ambiguous stance towards the Comanches that suggests that he might in the end surprise the viewer (and, in the Pippin framework, himself) and show a different allegiance. But one should not forget the political pressure always present in Westerns, that of an upcoming state of equality and law order. This changing political landscape is captured fittingly in the picture below. It shows an earlier scene, when a young soldier representing the US army comes by to tell the news of the whereabouts of Debby. The manners and appearance of the young soldier on the right stand in strong contrast to that of Ethan in the middle:

(Ford, 1956)

It is symbolic that after a long and in the end unsuccessful search for Debby, it is someone representing the new state that brings the news of her location *and* that, as it turns out, the new state comes to join Ethan during the raid of the Comanche camp. The presence of the army in the movie adds something significant to the package of possible motivations we already constructed, as it suggests that Ethan has to restrain himself in the sight of the law.

We have thus all sorts of considerations making up what we could call the motivational package of Ethan going into the crucial scene. As I will come to show, it is these different motivations that are essential for this conceptualization of agency, not per se Ethan's decision. What happens eventually is, as Pippin calls it, 'conventional movie logic' for the reason that it is 'recognizable humanity' (Pippin, 2010, p. 125, 128). Ethan does not kill Debbie; he saves her. A reading of this action by means of the reflective model of agency would perhaps say that what Korsgaard called the 'government of reason' has won it in Ethan. It would be completely senseless, after all, to kill his niece after such a long search, to let his *passions* motivate him. This is of course not Pippin's reading.

His reading is in fact comparable to what he said about Tex finding out about his intentions *in* his action. In a similar way, what the viewer and Ethan himself 'discover is that he did not know his own mind, that he avowed principles that were partly confabulations and fantasy' and, more importantly, 'we also learn how extraordinarily difficult it is to provide the proper act-description of just what it was that was done, to describe properly the quest in the first place and its unexpected ending, to measure how many psychological or social factors are involved in trying to say what Ethan did' (Pippin, 2010, p. 131-132).

This analysis seems to lead us back to the conceptualizations of agency we saw before when considering *Vertigo*, namely those having to do with a lack of self-knowledge vis-à-vis our motivations *and* the difficulty of others to come to know these motivations. This is certainly a way to analyse the scene. We can easily add to this that Ethan's action aligns perfectly with The Destiny Machine: in some (unconscious) way, Ethan is already a transformed subject as the norms of the new world have come to dictate his actions. This is not the direction I will pursue, primarily because it neglects the usefulness of the two parameters, the political passions and political context, that are found in Pippin's work. Instead, I want to argue that Ethan's action and these parameters provide us with a more promising way of understanding what agency is. I would describe this conceptualization of agency as acting that occurs in and comes forth out of a local context. Agency is then, in this case specifically, acting that comes forth out of and responds to local alliances, to the relationships *with* others and attitudes *towards* others we have come to form or we are forced to form.

What Pippin brings to his analysis of Westerns that is lacking in his work on Film Noir is personal explanations for the actions of the characters. These reasons are the emotional bonds individuals have with other individuals that are close to them and the relations to those individuals who are strangers to them. It is important to stress the difference between these local circumstances and The Destiny Machine. An explanation by means of the latter is essentially *impersonal*: actions are not guided by any personal attachments (even when characters believe that to be the case that belief often turns out to be an illusion). An explanation of human action by means of local context is inherently *personal*: it comes forth out of emotional attachments to others.

This direct impact does, of course, not lead in any way to easy or predictable decisions or straightforward descriptions of human action. That is not what we should want from a conceptualization of agency. It might be argued that Ethan's decision (save her or kill her) is *not* a complicated decision when sufficiently thought through, but this idea is unhelpful; it relies on the reflective model of agency. It *is* a complicated decision without one obvious action as we have to acknowledge, as Pippin does, that what motivates individuals in their local context is primarily their *feelings* towards others, feelings that, as Ethan shows, come forth out of and align with complex (historical) developments.

This way of thinking does not *justify* a certain action in any way, which is another misleading path the reflective model can lead to. Conceptualizing agency does not consist of considering what actors *should* do (if only they were under the guise of the dictate of reason) but *what* they do and how that reflects their motivational package. Again, we return to the distinction between Film Noir characters and Western characters. The local context that motivates Western characters is a move away from the difficulties of understanding oneself and others that haunted Film Noir and *Vertigo* characters. What contrasts Ethan from, for example, Mitch, is that he acts on, is *capable of acting on*, his local context. It provides a necessary overview of the situation in which our actions take place, without suggesting that such an overview also provides us with clarity on what we should do or how others will behave. It only helps explain the possible motivations of their, and our, actions.

With this conceptualization, we are situating ourselves somewhere between rejection and acceptance of the reflective model. Let us remember here the key characteristics of the reflective model: purposeful, reflective, intentional, subject to deliberative control and flexibility. In explaining agency through local context, I think it is especially the *intentionality* that is reflected in, for example, Ethan's action. Not as a result of cognitive deliberation, but deriving from feelings

for others: the need to hurt them, protect them, teach them something. In Westerns, at least, human action comes forth out of those. The other aspects do not seem to apply that much: because of his unpredictability, it would be hard to argue that Ethan was in any way subject to deliberative control and neither is he, as I will argue now, (capable of being) a very flexible agent.

This conceptualization is, I think, more useful than the understandings of agency we constructed from Pippin up until now. It however lacks one essential aspect: the possibility to acquire agency. For that, the context Western characters move in seems too *static,* the characters lacking in flexibility. The circumstances that motivate actions are for the most part simply *there* and they shape the possibilities for action of the characters, without them necessarily engaging with these changes (think about the entrance of the American army I considered on p. 23: new circumstances simply presented themselves in this context and Ethan had to adopt). What we required from a useful conceptualization of agency was the possibility to acquire agency. For an explanation of how that works, I will now move over to the work of Geuss.

In the film-philosophy of Pippin, the world characters move in is dynamic and non-transparent and this is reflected in the characterization and actions of individuals. A similar thing can be said about the realist political philosophy of Raymond Geuss. What is however different in his work is a more explicit idea on how to *acquire* agency. For such an idea, we need two things. Firstly, we need to see the context we operate in as at least to a certain extent changeable, instead of merely present. Secondly, we need an understanding of the subject as not only influenced by the political landscape but also as a political agent himself. Both ideas are present in the work of Geuss. Reflecting on that work will build upon and expand the helpful conceptualization of agency we have reconstructed from the work of Pippin here that was focused on local context, so that let us proceed with that.

5. Geussian realist political philosophy: agency understood as 'real' motivation

So far, we have constructed three conceptualizations of agency by means of Pippin's film-philosophy. It was the last conceptualization that looked promising, as it allowed us to partially explain human action by a concrete, local influence, instead of the unfathomable or unreachable barriers we saw in Film Noir and *Vertigo*. This conceptualization of agency is useful as we can understand these influences in our own lives and the lives of others. What was lacking in that conceptualization was, however, the possibility for altering the situation at hand. Especially the political context characters moved in, *and* were influenced by, seemed static; it overcomes the characters. We therefore need to expand the conceptualization we have now to include the possibility of changing the political context and, thereby, acquiring agency.

In the work of Raymond Geuss, there can be no doubt about the relationship between politics and agency, while personal relationships remain mostly absent from his conceptualizations. Geuss considers agency in the context of the 'practical political agent' who, initially, finds himself in a situation that starkly reminds us of Pippin's Film Noir analysis, as he thinks that 'human agents most of the time are weak, easily distracted, deeply conflicted, and confused' (Geuss, 2008, p. 2). His theory of individual action that takes place in this situation is embedded in the realist strand of political philosophy. It is in that context that we can also start elaborating on two related ideas on agency that can be found in Geuss: 'real' motivation and acquiring agency by means of philosophy. Let us begin with the first of these by explaining a little more what his realist political philosophy entails. It will help us understand what acquiring political agency entails, which I will explain in the next chapter.

Geuss's political realism is largely a methodological theory, meaning in this case that it is concerned with the themes political philosophy should address and the starting point of philosophical theory. Geuss rejects what he calls the ethics-first account. The idea of such an account is the following. Political philosophers can 'take' a moral theory, or better said formulate a moral ideal, such as that one should 'strive to construct (an ideal) democracy' or 'build socialism' and subsequently "make a final claim that a "good" political actor should guide his or her behaviour by applying that ideal theory" (Geuss, 2024, p. 8). This explanation of the ethics-first account runs short of doing justice to what the specific debate Geuss is engaged in is is about and thereby runs the risk of turning the ethics-first account into a caricature. What is relevant here for us however is the alternative Geuss proposes.

Instead, political philosophy should namely be concerned with 'the way the social, economic, political, etc., institutions actually operate at a given time, and what really does move human beings to act in given circumstances' (Geuss, 2024, p. 9). What is realistic about this realist political philosophy is thus that it moves away from thinking about how, say, an ideal state or society looks like, and how individuals should behave to achieve such a situation (what their motivation for individual action *should* be). Instead, it looks at what motivates people to act at a certain moment and how this relates to the political context individuals already find themselves in. This latter sort of motivation is the so-called 'real motivation'.

According to Geuss, this 'real motivation' is a rather diverse package with all sorts of predicates relating to motivations. These motivations consist of individual 'imaginative life', our aspirations and ideals, the moral views we hold; they can be rational in nature, it might even be "of great benefit to them to be 'rational'", but they do not have to be so (Geuss, 2024, p. 9). It is, as we can see, not a complete step away from a sort of ideal thinking; it allows for the possibility of such ideal thinking to be what motivates actors. The important thing, however, is that whatever it *is* that motivates us, the political philosopher should inquire into and seek to understand, as it helps to understand the other task of political philosophy, the functioning of political institutions.

To understand this perspective a little better, consider the following political act: a terrorist attack based on religious grounds. Seen from Geuss's perspective, what we want to stay away from in considering this action in the context of thinking about agency is the idea that the actor has lost the government of reason or simply judge the action as morally illegitimate. What we *do* want to take from it is, primarily, the concrete political results of the action and the context in which it took place, but secondly, and relevant for us, what *really* motivated the action. That does not mean, of course, that 'cognitive or normative claims made by religious believers have any plausibility' (Geuss, 2024, p. 11). The credibility of these claims is not what is relevant for the realist political theorist. But the beliefs themselves, be it an illusory political threat or goal or an imagined divine command, are highly significant for Geuss.

So far, we have seen why Geuss rejects the reflective model of agency. He does not want to suppose that we can universalize the motivations, or better said pathways *towards* motivations, of individuals, as the reflective model does. Earlier (on p. 25), I remarked that the reflective model could lead us to consider how individuals *should* act, instead of an understanding of *what* drives their action. This

specific sort of act-description focused on an ideal sort of behaviour is also rejected in Geuss's emphasis on real motivation.

We have now seen the first idea on agency in Geuss: the motivations that lead to actions do not necessarily derive from one place and cannot be described in one particular way. They are diffuse and need to be studied in order to be understood. In studying them, we also learn something more about the context in which the action took place. In this we see the obvious theoretical closeness between Pippin and Geuss, for instance in that both assume we should study actions in *themselves* to find out what motivated the subjects who undertook them. Another similarity lies in the emphasis on local context: an action always comes forth out of a certain political structure in which an individual operates. In the next chapter, I will focus on Geuss's second conceptualization of agency, which is a theory of how individuals can acquire agency through an understanding of philosophical concepts. Remember that this is what was primarily lacking in the agency conceptualization of Pippin. Let's therefore look at the individual who seeks to alter his circumstances in order to be able to act differently, the practical political agent. Thereafter I will reflect on what both of these conceptualizations have brought us in the context of the research question.

6. The practical political agent: agency through an understanding of philosophical concepts

One of Geuss's major works is fittingly called *History and Illusion in Politics* (2001): both history and illusion are crucial for understanding the task Geuss sees for political philosophy in the possibility of acquiring agency. It is for that reason that I focus on that work for reconstructing this conceptualization of agency here. The individual in question, the practical political agent, exists somewhere on the distinction Geuss makes between practical philosophy, 'devoted to trying to understand the situation of human agents who are confronted with the need to act' and political philosophy, which 'turns its attention mainly to kinds of collective human action that involve co-operation with or aggression against other groups of human agents' (2001, p. 2).

The practical political agent is an individual who, for instance, wants to 'enlist (ideally) active support for projects they think important, and so on' (Geuss, 2001, p. 2). The latter 'and so on' might perhaps seem redundant, but I think it marks some problem for Geuss: he fails to explain explicitly what sort of individual we should think of with this predicate and what sort of actions this individual undertakes. Nonetheless, I think we can all be such agents in various situations: the politician, on any level, is clearly trying to gather support for his projects, but we ourselves might also be such agents in trying to talk friends or strangers into supporting a political movement.

The human action we are considering here does however not only extend to interactions with others; it is perhaps also relevant for acts such as voting or considering larger questions, such as deciding on whether we (continue to) abide by the rules of the state. Both our political interactions with others and the considerations we come to ourselves exist in a certain framework: there is an 'existing language and set of beliefs' that operates in any given time that influences our actions (Geuss, 2001, p. 2). We have already seen this perspective above, when considering 'real' motivations, only from a different perspective, namely as outsiders inquiring into the actions of others.

To make this idea less abstract, Geuss puts forward the straightforward example of the predicate democratic: "When I use 'undemocratic' as a reproach, part of the reason I do so is because I have been subjected to a barrage of speech and writing about 'democracy' and its virtues during all of my conscious life" (2001, p. 2). This is understandable and, to some extent, unavoidable. But it is also problematic, as Geuss thinks that there are certain 'prevailing assumptions about politics and

the good society' that are hurtful for the practical political agent (2001, p. 3). This is because our conceptions of 'liberalism, democracy, the state, the capitalist economy and the doctrine of human rights', and especially the idea that they go logically together in the Western state, remain unquestioned (2001, p. 3). The natural conjunction of these concepts is, however, to a certain extent an illusion, and Geuss wants to show by means of the different historical conceptualizations of these ideas (remember here what Geuss calls the 'open texture' of broad concepts, see p. 4) that their coming together is very much a historical contingency.

I am not so much interested here in the political and historical analysis Geuss provides when it comes to these concepts. What we want to know is how understanding them (or, for that matter, any political concept) affects the practical political agent and the possibility of acquiring agency. What Geuss sets out to do in *History and Illusion in Politics* provides this, as 'the various political conceptions that are under discussion in this text are not mere speculations, but rather tools for guiding action' (2001, p. 9). The most interesting and useful concept he discusses is the doctrine of human rights as it shows most strongly the usages of political concepts for individual political action.

Geuss opposes the usage human rights claims, but he is not per se against rights claims in general. In the same way we ought to examine real instead of ideal motivations, we should also refer to existing political arrangements. Understanding rights as *political* rights can therefore be to some extent acceptable, as 'using' these rights means something in practice. A right that is formalized by a political system and, thereby, enforceable by the state, is something a practical political agent can use to get something done. This simply example will do to make this clearer: 'I am said to have a (subjective) right to ownership of this house, this means that I have a deed which will be recognised in the right court *and* that there is a mechanism, the police, that will act to prevent certain things from happening' (Geuss, 2001, p. 136). This, I hope, makes clear that the rights we *do* have are context-dependent (meaning here: they depend on certain political institutions) and that understanding that context is necessary for our political agency.

The understanding of philosophical concepts has a function here. For Geuss, political and human rights are not only theoretical constructs that describe something in the world. They are tools: *if* we understand them correctly, they are of use for the projects of the practical political agent. In some situations, such as the one above, an appeal to rights will make sense. The problem for Geuss is however that, as said, such usefulness is context-dependent, and that human rights are usually

understood as anything but context-dependent. The existence of rights is a 'contingent, shifting conjunction of political expediency, institutional convenience', while its continued existence depends 'on a wider political and social framework, ideally one of economic prosperity, domestic and international peace, and stability' (Geuss, 2001, p. 150). In many times and places these necessary circumstances will be absent. Perceiving human action from the perspective of rights is, in those circumstances, not of use for the practical political agent.

As I said earlier, I am not particularly interested here in the political analysis Geuss uses when considering a concept like human rights. I believe that we do not have to find his pessimistic characterization of human rights credible to show what the understanding of philosophical concepts means for agency. On the contrary: we might be convinced of the *validity* of human rights discourse in many situations and still see the usefulness of Geuss's theory. Think of the following situation. A local politician advocates for the building of a new hospital in a certain municipality (we are using here the most straightforward example of a practical political agent who is engaged in a personal project). The situation this politician faces is a practical one: the money meant for this municipality can only be spent once and the decision is in the hands of, say, the mayor and other governing local politicians.

I do not think the circumstances Geuss deems necessary for the working of human rights need to exist here for us to imagine that for this practical political agent, an appeal to the human right for adequate healthcare can convince the local decision-makers in favour of building the hospital. We are still seeing the concept of human rights as a tool. Instead of seeing them as appeals to a legal mechanism that does not exist, however, we are using them as arguments in our discussions with others. Both cases, I think, demand in their own way an understanding of the concept of human rights, if only because for the political appeal to work the local politician has to explain why adhering to the human rights of citizens is important. This, of course, only shows the point Geuss is making continuously. The usefulness of concepts depends on the context they are used in, and the practical political agent has to understand these circumstances *and* the tools that are possibly of use in these circumstances.

We have reconstructed from the realist political philosophy of Geuss two different ideas on agency that build upon the work already done by means of Pippin. So far, we can say that the conceptualizations of non-reflective agency I deemed of interest see acting as taking place and formed by a local context. Those actions are, as we saw in Pippin and Geuss, motivated by all sorts

of reasons. Frequently, those reasons are misguiding for the goals we have in mind. Furthermore, when we understand political concepts as tools, we can acquire agency by using them in an effective manner. To bring this back to the research question, we now need to consider two questions: how does this accumulation of different conceptualizations relate to the reflective model of agency and to what extent is the conceptualization of agency we have constructed useful?

When considering the first question, we foremostly have to acknowledge that a conceptualization that is centred on acting by means of effective understanding of political concepts intuitively relates very much to the reflective model of agency. To make this more concrete, think about what we can say about our local politician. What that actor can rightfully be said to have is flexibility: he oversees what conceptual tools are of use and applies them to reach his goals. Furthermore, his actions are purposive: he acts in order to achieve a clear goal. Both are key aspects of the reflective model.

This picture is however slightly misleading, as we also have to take into account two other things. Firstly, the practical political agent operates in a context with certain prevailing notions about the meaning of concepts. This context can well work against him, for example when those making the decision on the budget like Geuss do not find human rights very persuasive. The functioning of the practical political agents' tools is only partially in his own hands. This does, however, not in itself take away the reflective aspects of the agent. Secondly, the practical political agent that is the local politician represents, similar to the reflective model, a sort of ideal when it comes to acquiring agency. This cannot do away with the idea that, according to Geuss, individuals simply do not always have the goal-oriented motivation that characterizes the local politician and, moreover, are characterized by weakness and confusion (see p. 27). Our motivations are wide-ranging, and it might well be that we make miscalculations regarding the right tools for the achievement of our goals. Following these considerations, I conclude that the conceptualizations of agency Geuss presents fall somewhere between rejection and acceptance of the reflective model.

Regarding the second question, I want to argue that there is something missing in what we have seen from Geuss so far. I namely doubt whether, as stated right now, it *is* a conceptualization of agency we have reconstructed. What is namely missing is a concrete theory of the relationship between subject, action and motivation. It is especially the motivation of our actions that remains slightly underdeveloped at this moment. We know that these motivations are diverse (we cannot universalize them) and reflected in actions themselves. But these are primarily external

qualifications. We want to know how and why motivations belong to, relate to individuals, which is not captured in the external qualifications listed above. Or as I said in chapter 1: we want a conceptualization of agency to relate to a subject on a psychological level. I believe that this requires more elaboration on the relationship between subject and motivation that Geuss can give in *History and illusion in politics*. The specific explanation we are looking for can be found in Geuss's usage of non-philosophical means, which is the *bricoleur*. There, I think, we will be able to reconstruct a conceptualization of non-reflective agency that combines all the constructive answers we have found so far. Let us therefore turn to the *bricoleur* now.

7. The *bricoleur* as practical political agent

The practical political agent in Geuss is in his acting benefited by attaining an understanding of political concepts and the functioning of institutions as this helps him in achieving his goals. How Geuss thinks this works in practice is not something he develops explicitly in *History and Illusion in Politics*. He acknowledges that what is necessary as a follow up to that work is 'an account which located these conceptions firmly in the world of the contemporary practical agent, connecting them with issues of motivation, subjective perception, real power, and valuation' (2001, p. 161). I believe the account Geuss sees as building upon his theory has major resemblances with a theory that brings together ideas on subject, action and motivation, i.e. a conceptualization of agency. As said, Geuss does not put forward such a conceptualization himself, but he does put forward a useful framework that will enable us to do it. He argues:

> 'One can grant that the practical political agent is generally something of a *bricoleur*, using the means that are to hand, conceptual and practical, modifying them for the purposes at hand, occasionally (very occasionally, perhaps) trying to construct something new, perhaps very occasionally stepping back to ask more general questions.' (Geuss, 2001, p. 161).

Let's unpack this perspective. Earlier we saw what the practical political agent did: a combination of seeking support for his own political projects, which I tried to make more concrete with the example of the local politician, and making up how he should act politically, for example in his relationship with the state. These last activities we could, I think, put under the category of stepping back and asking more general questions. Furthermore, we see coming back the usage of concepts in a practical manner. What is new here however is the *bricoleur*. I believe we can construct a conceptualization of agency from both the original usage of this concept and the theoretical work that has been done with it. I will come to focus primarily on the motivation of the *bricoleur* and seek to put forward a conceptualization of agency that fits within Geuss's framework. Let's us begin with the concept's original usage. This will show us *why* this concept can be interpreted in so many ways and what it means for the research question.

Since its first usage in Claude Lévi-Strauss's *A savage mind* (2021), the term bricoleur has become a 'universal concept' (Johnson, 2012, p. 358)[2]. In the book, it serves as a way to explain the functioning of mythological thought, but we do not have to be concerned with what that means here. After its introduction, the concept has namely been used in many different non-anthropological contexts.

In a certain way, we can compare Levi-Strauss's run-up to that explanation with Williams's project in *Shame and Necessity*: setting right the mistakes of other anthropologists. In this case, it concerns the idea that so-called primitive languages *did* contain words such as oak, beech and birch but lacked a *concept* (tree) that all these words belonged to (Lévi-Strauss, 2021, p. 3). Together with this conviction came a certain misguided depiction of the speaker of these languages, namely that he was 'governed exclusively by his organic or economic needs', and did not have the intellectual curiosity to schematically describe his world (Lévi-Strauss, 2021, p. 3). Similar to Williams, Lévi-Strauss argues that the differences between what these anthropologists thought of as the Western way of individual orientation in the world, the scientific way, and that of so-called primitive man, mythological thought, were much smaller than they assumed. He saw a primary resemblance in the 'requirement for order' that 'lies at the basis of the kind of thought we call primitive, but only to the extent that it lies at the basis of all thought' (Lévi-Strauss, 2021, p. 12). Furthermore, there was another similarity in working method:

> "Moreover, a form of activity still subsists among us that, on the technical plane, gives a fairly good idea of what, on the plane of speculation, might have represented a "first science" rather than a primitive science: it is what is commonly designated by the French term *bricolage*. In its earlier sense, the verb *bricoler* is applied to ball games and billiards, hunting and horseback riding, but always to indicate a movement off the expected path: that of a rebounding ball, of a dog that strays, or of a horse swerving off the straight course to avoid an obstacle. And in our own days, the *bricoleur* remains someone who works with his hands, using means that are skewed in comparison with those of the professional craftsman" (Lévi-Strauss, 2021, p. 20).

[2] The term *bricoleur* can be translated as a handyman, or a person practicing do-it-yourself, but these descriptions do not seem to cover what Lévi-Strauss meant: in my translation of *A savage mind* and the secondary literature I consulted, it remains untranslated. The following note on the meaning on *bricolage* by the translators of *A savage mind* might help*:* '*Bricolage* is the practice of making something new out of odds and ends, that is, the remaining elements of old assemblages. It is something people indulge in, in many places, for profit, for economy, or as a hobby, but in French there is a word for it' (p. 325)

There is a lot to unpack here, and a lot that I will leave as it is. I will do so partially by means of an article of Johnson (2012) on this concept. He is particularly focused on the distinction Lévi-Strauss makes between the *bricoleur* and the engineer. I think it makes sense here to see them as two types, or descriptions, of agents. What I then want to do is, of course, connect these types of agents to Geuss's theory of the practical political agent. We want to complete the picture that Geuss put forward of such an agent and see if we can turn it into a more substantial conceptualization of agency.

The engineer has a large range of options and means to realise his projects; he 'cross-examines the universe' (Lévi-Strauss, 2021, p. 23). He demands more from his world too: 'the engineer always seeks to open a way through and situate himself *beyond* the constraints that make up a given state' (Lévi-Strauss, 2021, p. 23). One way to interpret Lévi-Strauss's engineer is as a sort of scholarly figure who 'starts from an abstracted and theoretical knowledge of the material world, and a project — or programme — for its transformation.' (Johnson, 2012, p. 362). The bricoleur, on the other hand, is best characterized by his limitations. His "universe of instruments is closed, and the rule of his game is always to make do with "whatever is at hand" – that is to say, a set of tools and materials that is finite at each moment, as well as heterogeneous, because the composition of the set is not related to the current project" (Lévi-Strauss, 2021, p. 21).

We can relate these two types of agents to what Geuss saw as the goal of *his* practical political agent: engaging in certain political projects and achieving political goals by means of these projects. Further on, we saw that a certain understanding of political concepts, a practical understanding primarily, is essential for engaging in these projects. In the light of this discussion, we can see these concepts as the tools that the *bricoleur* and the engineer are working with. Johnson puts forward a useful way of understanding their different approaches to these tools when he describes the project of the engineer as 'a Promethean one: his goal is always to move beyond (*au-delà*) the particular constraints of the natural and material world in order to achieve a total mastery of them'; he is 'indifferent to the contingent (substitutable) tools and materials that are constructed to achieve its ends.' (2012, p. 367).

I think it becomes clear that the engineer is clearly *not* the practical political agent as Geuss portrays him in *History and Illusion in Politics* because it is not an agent who acts in a specific and especially in a *restricted* context. The way politics is conducted (the constraints that an understanding of a certain political concept come with) does not affect him. Furthermore, this Promethean actor seems to act

in isolation, unbothered, unaffected, by the projects and aims of others. Finally, this actor does not seem restricted in his action by the inherent human weaknesses Geuss sees as essential to understanding human action (see p. 24). We should, instead, look more closely at what characterizes the *bricoleur*.

For Johnson, the 'science' of the *bricoleur* is 'Epimethean', he is both forced but also *chooses* to "work within (*en deçà*) the closed set of elements which are already at hand, and deals, aporetically, with the resistances inherent in these elements. If the engineer works with concepts which 'aim to be wholly transparent with respect to reality', the *bricoleur* works with signs which retain a degree of human depth" (2012, p. 367). What becomes clear from these abstract character descriptions of the *bricoleur*-type is that we have to understand his actions as *shaped* by his tools (instead of, in the case of the engineer, a method wherein the tools are *chosen* to perform the task). These tools already exist; the *bricoleur* is occupied in 'the constant re-use of the old in order to make the new' (Johnson, 2012, p. 369).

What this suggests is, I think, a conception of action and agency that we have not yet seen before, but that flows quite naturally from what has been discussed thus far. Being an agent in the sense of acting in and responding to the limited context you find yourself in and *have* to work in is a *creative* process (and one that takes place in a sort of permanent chaos, 'aporetically'). Lévi-Strauss himself suggests such a thing when he says:

> "the poetry of *bricolage* also, and above all, comes from the fact that it does not only limit itself to accomplishment or execution: it "speaks," not only with things, as has already been shown, but also by means of things: recounting, through the choices it makes among limited possibilities, the character and life of its author. Even if he never completes his project, the *bricoleur* always puts something of himself into it" (2021, p. 25).

What we need to do now is make even clearer what conceptualization of agency we can construct out of this discussion on the *bricoleur* by relating it to the practical political agent. As I argued in the last chapter, it is especially the connection between subject and motivation that is of interest for us. We thus have to ask ourselves what it is that makes the *bricoleur* act. I think we can fill this in by means of the aspects we have seen above, primarily by focusing on the usage of a limited set of tools. I think there are three related aspects that characterize the motivation of the *bricoleur*.

Firstly, and primarily, it is both a necessity and a choice of the *bricoleur* to use already existing tools. Secondly, using these tools, due to the limitations in the number and sort of tools available, is in itself a creative endeavour. This is ingrained in how Lévi-Strauss sees the process of bricolage (see p. 31): 'a movement of the expected path'. It suggests that the activities of the *bricoleur* are rarely planned; he has to anticipate at the moment when action is required. Thirdly, the *bricoleur* is motivated to act in a way that reflects himself. We can say here: what motivates the *bricoleur* is his creative capacities, his desire to express those capacities, himself in his actions. This suggests a rather strong connection between the action and the subject and the desire to make his project his.

I think that contrary to what characterizes the engineer, we can relate these three aspects to the practical political agent. The realist political philosophy Geuss advocates assumes that the limitations of the current (of *any* current) political landscape heavily affect the options the political actor has, just like the limitations the *bricoleur* faces (and the aporetic situation that might be the result of these limitations). However, this does not mean that there is no leverage in those limitations to change things. These limitations cause the *bricoleur* and practical political actor to be creative, to improvise. He does this, for example, by reinventing and criticizing the current meaning of political concepts or their configuration or by finding out what conceptual tools are of the best use in a certain situation.

With this, we have supplemented the work done by Geuss on the practical political agent with a broader conceptualization of agency that particularly explains the relationship between subject and motivation. The concept of the *bricoleur* shows not per se *what* motivates an agent but something about *how* that motivation relates to him and his circumstances. The key characteristic of his acting lies in the wish *and* necessity to use the available means in a creative way. Furthermore, besides the achievement of a certain goal, his actions also *express* the character of the agent himself. As Levi-Strauss put it in the citation above: he speaks *by means of* working with his tools. Both characteristics fit right with Geuss emphasis on 'real motivation' and Pippin's analysis of Western characters, for two reasons. Firstly, because it shows that considering agency is best done by looking at what actions themselves say about the subject undertaking them. Secondly, because what characterizes the motivation in all three cases relates to local circumstances. To conclude here, we have to ask ourselves the two familiar questions: how does this conceptualization relate to the reflective model? To what extent is it useful?

Regarding the first question, I think this conceptualization of agency can be seen both as embracing and rejecting the reflective model of agency. In its creativity and aporetic nature, most worth lies in the acting itself (even though the *bricoleur* will always try to achieve something). The *bricoleur* does not seem to have the necessary overview of his situation that characterizes the reflective agent. Or more accurately: he seems incapable and unwilling to get such overview. But the actions of the *bricoleur* do, however, seem intentional: he is determined to use the available tools (he is, therefore, reason-responsive).

Furthermore, the *bricoleur* is certainly a flexible agent. Think back here of the following characteristic (on p. 37): "the rule of his game is always to make do with "whatever is at hand" – that is to say, a set of tools and materials that is finite at each moment, as well as heterogeneous". The *bricoleur* and the practical political agent have to use whatever tools they can find and apply them in a specific, often new context. They have to understand and interpret these circumstances in order to be successful and cannot fall back on previous methods - they must be flexible in their acting. In conclusion, in the rich way this conceptualization relates to the reflective model I think we have found the best possible description of what we can call the semi-reflective agency.

Regarding the second question, I have tried to show how the *bricoleur* as a character description combines and builds upon the useful theoretical explanations of Pippin and Geuss. Furthermore, the answer lies partially in the paragraph above. The *bricoleur's* flexibility should be seen as a skill that can also be described as acquiring agency, which was one of the key characteristics of a useful account of agency (see p. 4). We wanted our actions to reflect ourselves in some way *and* allow for the possibility to let our actions be more genuine reflections of ourselves. This capability fits right with the flexibility *and* the creative side of the *bricoleur*: while circumstances might be ever-changing, the *bricoleur* can get better at configuring his tools, as any creative skill can partially be acquired by practice. Does this conceptualization, then, answer the chair-problem? Yes, as it shows that, naturally, there is no possibility for us to stay seated. We need to act, as we are driven, motivated, by an internal urge to act, to make something of the limited possibilities we have. Not only because we have specific, personal goals to achieve, but also because we are confronted with an external, local context that demands our action. We are, despite our inherent shortcomings and the difficulties of the context we operate in, motivated to do so in our own, creative way. We are acting, and the *bricoleur* shows how.

Conclusion

I started out this essay by putting forward the following research question:

> *What is the most useful non-reflective conceptualization of agency?*

I presented my answer to this question in the final chapter. But it was not simply *an* answer. The conceptualization of non-reflective agency that is the *bricoleur* is a culmination, a combination, of the different ideas on agency I found convincing and useful. The answer to my question consisted of steadily building upon this conviction I took away from the Western analysis of Pippin: a useful conceptualization of non-reflective agency consists of studying and understanding the specific context action takes place in and the limitations of that context. With that in mind, we found out what sort of actor and what sort of action characterize this conceptualization. I, also, have in answering this question operated in a specific context. It is only natural, then, to reflect on the limitations of the context of *my* research. That is what I want to do here: reflect on the limitations of using non-philosophical sources and question the general scope of my research.

Let's first think about what I think has proven to be one of the downsides of using non-philosophical sources. In the introduction, I put forward that a conceptualization derived from a non-philosophical source simply focuses less on contrasting itself with existing ideas (thus, it engages less with the existing philosophical debate on agency) and instead focuses on interpreting the non-philosophical source in such a way that a somewhat credible theory can be reduced from it. Practically, that has led to a situation wherein I have not taken the space to compare these ideas to other theories on agency. I had to use that space to explain film plots and anthropological character types. More interaction with existing debates and secondary literature would certainly have enriched my findings, especially in the case of my work on Geuss.

Another more stressing, even though related, problem lies in the *incomparability* of the often self-contained ideas I discussed, incomparable both with each other and with other theories. Think here of the difference between the agency in retrospect conceptualization of Williams and the *bricoleur* conceptualization. There are, of course, ways to relate the two to each other, especially when you assess them by means of certain criteria, such as answering the chair-problem. The question is however whether a critical evaluation, a judgment on the philosophical merit (of one compared to another) is also feasible, whether a comparison between them *makes sense*. I am

sceptical of that possibility. What a conceptualization by means of non-philosophical sources leads to is, in the end, what I wanted from my research (see p. 6): showing *a* way to understand agency. Whether that is a useful way of engaging with the existing philosophy on a certain topic will depend on what you hope to achieve with that engagement.

It is perhaps naïve however to expect anything other than merely *a* way of understanding a topic as broad as agency. From the beginning, it was not my intention to present one conclusive answer to the research question; it was in thinking through, comparing and building on these different ideas that I was figuring out what I deemed a useful conceptualization of non-reflective agency. This multiplicity of answers as an outcome of my inquiry relates to my perspective on the reflective model. Primarily, with Williams, I reject the idea that the outcome and the path towards that outcome of any planned action can be pre-conceived. Instead, I argued that it is best to conceive action as taking place in aporetic circumstances *and* involving on-the-spot creativity, i.e. improvisation. I did, however, not completely reject the reflective model of acting, insisting on seeing agency as something we can acquire: as the capability to have the result of our actions align more closely to our motivation. In this regard, I think the rejected conceptualizations of agency show how this works: in acting, we build upon preceding efforts, regardless of whether these efforts were successful or not. In this sense, I believe the rejected conceptualizations were oftentimes necessary, simply because they showed what was still missing for answering my specific question. Especially the idea of seeing agency reflected *in* actions is something I initially rejected but later saw as helpful in a different context.

There is another thing that the conceptualizations of agency differ substantially in. Compare the following actions: Gauguin leaving France, Ethan saving Debbie, the local politician arguing in favour of a local hospital. All of these are, simply, actions, just as making a cup of tea is an action. I think however that the latter is a totally different *sort* of action than the other three. Once again, one can wonder whether one explanation of these concepts can adhere to all these different instances. A conceptualization of agency of, say, more mundane action would be different on at least two grounds. It would, firstly, be more straightforward (think only about the limited set of possible motivations or the possibility to successfully align motivation with action). Secondly, it would be more closely related to our daily experience of what action is. As said before, our daily experience is primarily that there are actions to be undertaken and decisions to be made and most of these are smaller rather than larger. By continuously returning to the relationship between action and motivation, I left open the possibility to explore different sorts of actions.

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