

Defining Agency

CHAIN Winter School, Lecture 1

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Outline (First half)

Anthropocentric approaches to agency

Biogenic approaches to agency

What we want from a (biogenic) definition of agency

How we define agency —> how we build a theory of agency

How we define agency —> how we explain agency

Agency

Everyday Usage

- Legal Agency
- Moral Agency
- Free will & ethics
- Agency in psychology & development
- Human practices:
 - Acting on one's own volition
 - Decision-making capacities
 - Goal-oriented



Example: Types of agency discussed in philosophy

- Three types of agency (Vukov 2017)
 - i. Phenomenological agency: the **feeling** of being in control of one's actions
 - ii. Agency in means: the extent to which one is **actively involved** in realizing one's ends
 - iii. Agency in ends: the ability to **set and achieve one's ends**
- These all seem to touch on discussions of agency prevalent in ethics, mind, and the philosophy of action, where the focus is often on the human case. This is the agency referred to as being guided by practical reasoning, and for which we might think we can hold others (and ourselves) morally accountable (Velleman 1989; Korsgaard 2008).
- In these latter literatures, agency can often be more simply defined as something more akin to “engaging in purpose driven **action**”

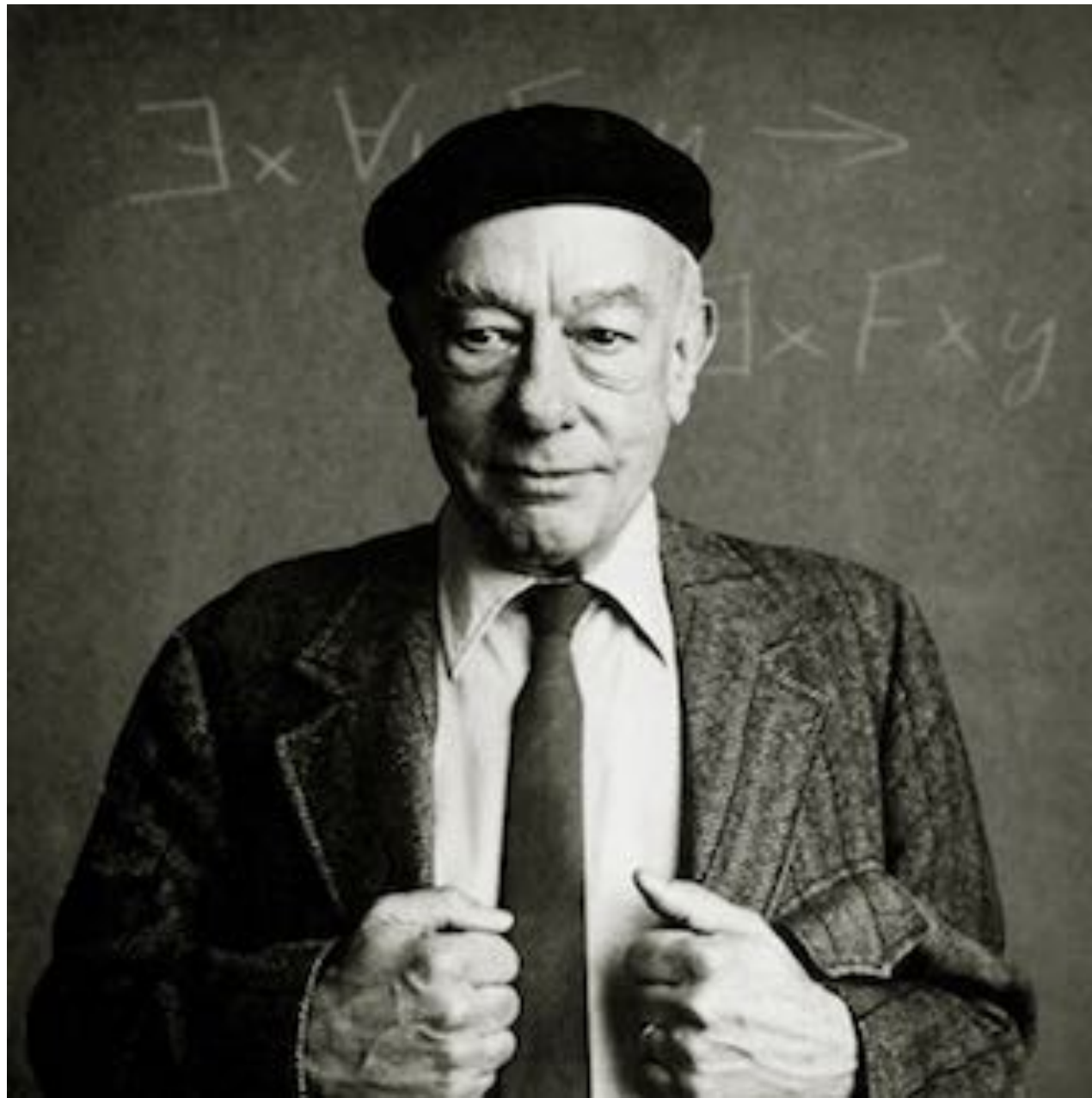
Anthropocentrism and Agency

- **Anthropocentric approaches:**
- Use human agency as a standard
- Define all agency using the idea of what agency is *for humans*
- Use human-based definition & criteria to decide whether other life forms or systems are agents
- Generally **psychological** explanandum/explanans
 - Explanatory target - robust decision making-processes
 - Explanatory target - *sense* of agency (being the origin of one's actions)
 - Mode of explanation - psychological mechanisms

Issues with Anthropocentrism

- Reasoning about human agency and agential capacities —>
 - Reasoning about agency of other organisms/systems
- Problem: treating the cognitive resources that we use to explain human agency as the ONLY resources that CAN explain agency
- Representational content, complex behavioural flexibility (many options for behaviours rather than perhaps a few), etc.

Issue with Methodological Naturalism



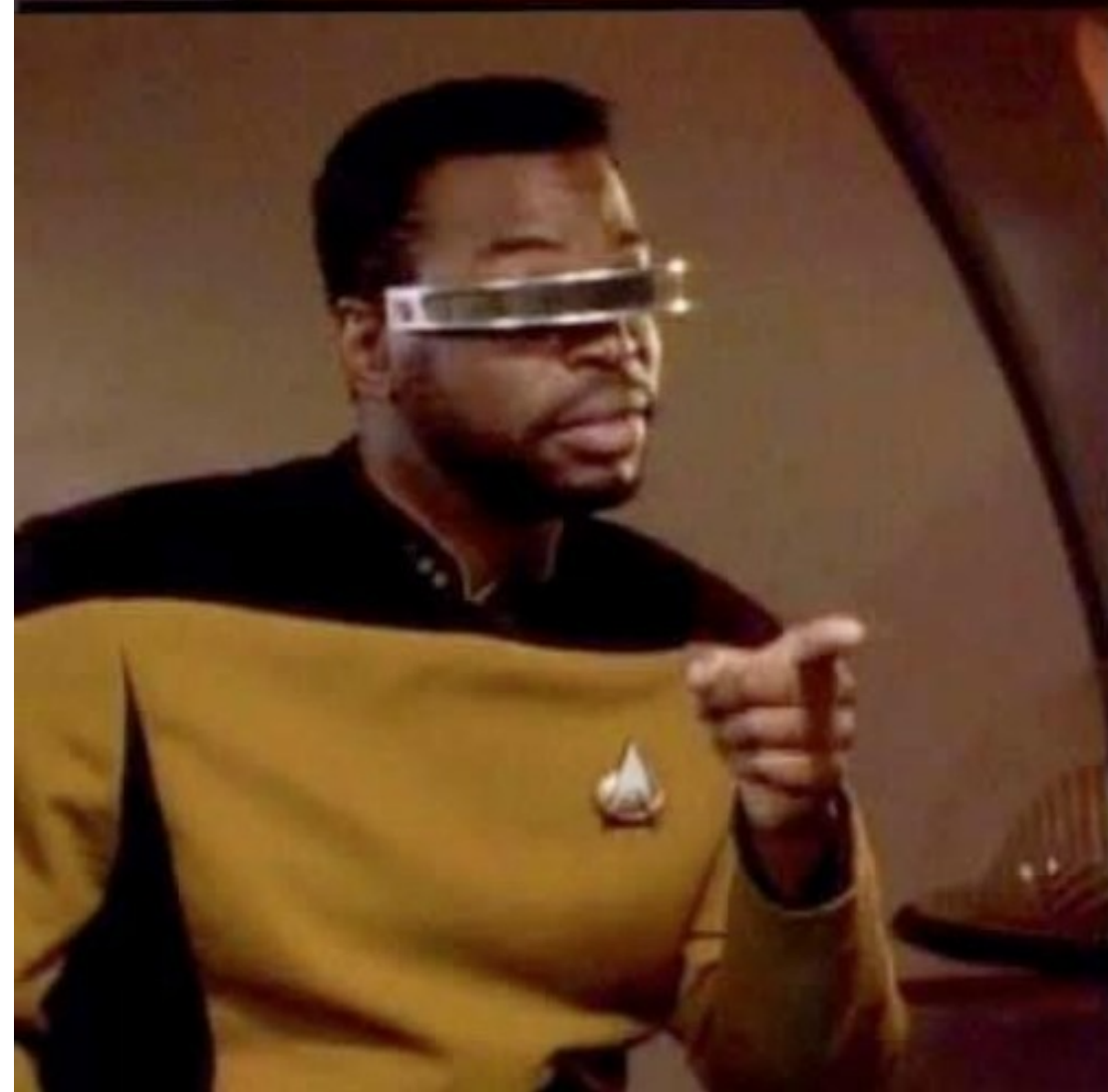
- This is a problem if one is concerned about using a methodologically naturalistic approach; to use a theoretical explanatory posit to carve out a category for investigation already assumes the outcome of that investigation.





(1) Demarcate the explanatory criteria

(2) Demarcate the phenomena



(1) Start from the phenomena

(2) Figure out the explanatory resources needed

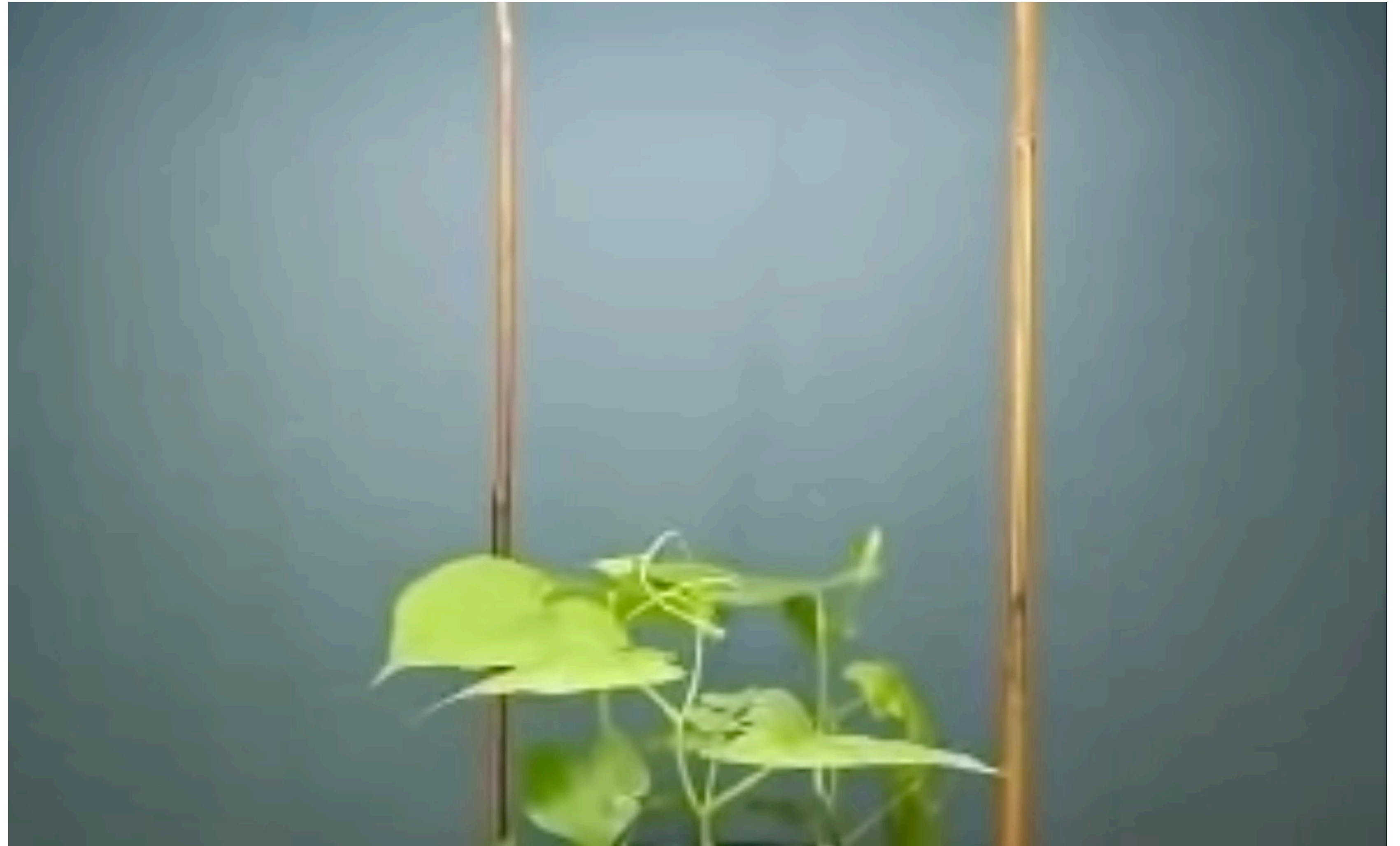
Starting from the Phenomena...



- Decision-making
- Directed action
- Goal-orientation
- Self-defined goals

Plant Agency

- Directed action
- Goal-orientation
- Self-defined goals
- Purposeful response to environment/
affordances



“Minimal Agency” - Biogenic Approach ?

- Biogenic approach to cognition (Lyon 2006) —> Basal cognition (Lyon et al. 2020)
- “[A]n investigator adopting a biogenic approach assumes that **the principles of biological organization and the requirements of survival and reproduction** present the most productive route to a general understanding of the principles of cognition. Cognition, whatever else it may be in the future, is **naturally a biological process and a biological function**. Functional biological processes—such as nutrient circulation, respiration, ingestion, digestion, and elimination—**cannot be understood, apart from the context of living organization**.” (Lyon 2006, p. 12)

Biogenic Approach to Agency

- The biogenic approach gives us a principled way to think of the “purposiveness” of behaviour - in terms of its biological function for the organism
- The explanandum —> The explanans
 - (We’ll come back to this in Lecture 2)

A “minimal” definition of agency

- “...in order for a system to be an agent, there must be a **distinction** between the system and its environment” (Barandarian et al. 2009)
 - In some way specifies who/what is the agent
- “A **theory of agency** must account for **why responsibility for an action is allocated to the agent** rather than the environment, it must explain what constitutes asymmetric relations between the agent and its environment.” (De Jesus 2018)
 - Specifies the agent as the causal source (at least asymmetrically) of its own activity

A “minimal” definition of agency

- “When actively exploring the environment, the agent is **attracted or repelled** by some of its affordances, and the ensuing behavior is partly the result of these invitations. ... the inviting character of affordances should be taken central, implying that the **animal–environment relation is the proper unit of analysis in understanding agency**. ... agency **emerges** in an animal–environment system.” (Withagen et al. 2012)
 - Involves activity in relation to an environment
- “An essential feature of autonomous adaptive agency is that a system behaves according to an **intrinsic norm**.” (Egbert and Barandarian 2011)
 - Relation to the environment involves norms set by the agent (valence)

Biogenic Definition of Agency

- “Agency, minimally, is the **ability to engage in action to further system-determined goals...**” (Lyon 2006)
- “The capacity to infer relations between external circumstance and internal need to facilitate agency may be, to a first approximation, **what cognition is**. In my view, this is the direction in which a general theory lies.” (Lyon 2006)



Discussion Questions, Part 1

- Try out a few ways of defining agency with your groups. Can you come up with one that is specific about the phenomena of interest but broad enough to cover many cases?
- Can a biogenic definition scale up to form the basis of a theory of human agency? (Why or why not?)
- Is the *biocentrism* of the biogenic approach to agency a problem?