

Agential Capacities in Context Workshop: Keynotes

Santiago Amaya

Beyond Individualism

Philosophical accounts of human agency tend to abstract away from context. Standard answers to questions about what makes certain behaviors count as actions, or certain abilities count as agentic, tend to be stated in terms of internal psychological facts of agents; they are often silent of the circumstances in which those facts obtain, or in which the agents are required to act. Our understanding of human agency, in a sense that needs further explication, is somewhat solipsistic.

In this talk, I argue that we should reconsider this framework and, instead, look outwards. In short, human agency requires the exercise of certain context-dependent abilities, abilities whose successful exercise depends upon agents occupying a certain, often socially defined, context. Focusing on these abilities results in picture that recognizes our agency as fundamentally fallible. In turn, this fallibilism is what recommends the outward-looking approach defended here.

I begin the talk by situating standard “solipsistic” accounts of human agency within the traditional doctrine of methodological individualism. Then, I turn to the main argument, which centers around performance mistakes. I take this kind of mistakes, as contrasted to mistakes in our attitudes (what we believe, desire, etc.) to be staples of human agency. The hypothesis is that careful consideration of our performance mistakes and their pervasiveness in our lives goes hand in hand with a contextually grounded account of agency.

The first step in the argument is to see that our performance mistakes are evidence of our limitations as agents. These limitations are best understood in terms of a mismatch between the external pressures that demand us to act and the architecture of human minds. The second step is that these limitations make our capacity for agency imperfect. Our performance mistakes are, on this view, not imperfect exercises of our capacities, but exercises of imperfect capacities, which is something different. Finally, to the extent that imperfect capacities can be reliably exercised only within contexts with specific features, explaining our successes as agents requires taking into account these contexts. Only in so far as we occupy them, exercises of those capacities show the distinctive marks of agency.

With the argument in place, I conclude the talk with two observations. The first is that a contextually grounded account of agency is general enough to accommodate different specific instances of human agency, for instance, habitual, intentional, and autonomous agency. The second is that, even though the account requires resisting some basic injunctions associated with the doctrine of methodological individualism, it does not require abandoning commitments that have been central to successful approaches to human agency, in particular, their reliance on a causal picture of it.

Denise de Ridder

Turning on the we-mode: Collective agency boosts the capacity to act together

Autonomy is considered critical for wellbeing. Although often interpreted in classic terms of freedom of choice, the alternative notion of agency is growing in popularity. Agency, defined as the

subjective feeling of control over one's actions and their consequences, aligns with important self-regulation components including self-efficacy, motivation to act, and taking responsibility for one's actions. However, in most studies the focus lies on individual agency, ignoring the social context of many personal and communal goals. In view of this omission, I reintroduce the concept of collective agency, already coined by Albert Bandura in the early 2000s. I will present a series of studies examining how collective agency promotes engagement with pressing societal issues requiring collective effort. I will also discuss how collective agency can be strengthened by working on tasks requiring coordinated action within a group of people. Finally, I will discuss why and how collective agency outperforms individual agency when communal goals are at stake.

Veronika Job

The intrinsic value of effort

Current models of mental effort in psychology, behavioral economics, and cognitive neuroscience typically suggest that exerting effort is aversive, and that people avoid it whenever possible.

However, in a series of studies we document that there is substantial variation in people's effort avoidance (as indicated by effort-related behavioral choices), in their willingness to mobilize effort (as assessed by cardiovascular measures), and in self-reports of effort enjoyment. A substantial group of people does not experience effort as inherently costly and rather seems to seek and value effort. In three lines of current research projects, we explore processes through which effort can come to be perceived as valuable and intrinsically rewarding.

First, within specific contexts, a learning history of effort-contingent reward can promote demand seeking and preference for exerting cognitive effort on a transfer task via mechanisms of associative learning. Second, generalized effort-enjoyment contingency beliefs seem to be influenced by base-rate trends across contrasting contexts, like other types of pseudocontingencies documented in social-cognition research. Finally, culturally shaped beliefs (implicit theories) about willpower as either a limited or nonlimited resource affect people's effort-related attitudes and decisions. Taken together this research suggests that the cost or value of effort may not be an inherent feature of effort itself, but rather the result of various types of learning experiences. Thus, when modelling behaviour as the result of a cost-benefit analysis, effort may not contribute exclusively to the costs but can also add value to a course of action.

Marina Milyavskaya

Agency in goal pursuit: How motivation shapes self-regulation

Setting and pursuing personal goals is the hallmark of self-regulation. Yet people do not pursue all goals in the same way: some goals feel personally meaningful and volitional, whereas others are internally or externally imposed and feel pressured. In this talk, I will address the role of motivation in personal goal pursuit, showing evidence that when we are agentic, we pursue goals differently. I will first distinguish between different types of motivations, highlighting how autonomous motivation is especially agentic. I will then present research from my lab that shows how autonomous motivation affects both the pursuit and the perception of goals.

When people are autonomously motivated, they view goal pursuit as easier and more rewarding, and experience fewer obstacles. Autonomous motivation also shapes the way that people regulate their emotions and inner experiences during goal pursuit. I will then touch on the sources of

autonomous motivation, discussing why some goals and some people are more autonomous than others. Finally, I will highlight outstanding questions and directions for future research, including a focus on how motivational processes unfold over time. I will also discuss the interesting conundrum of controlled motivation.

Agential Capacities in Context Workshop: Other Talks

David Barack

Zetetic Agency

Inquiry involves planning, deliberation, search, consideration, and a host of other psychological processes that we perform and for which we are responsible. Despite the appeal of this intuition, many philosophers reject any role for agency in inquiry. In this talk, I define and defend a sufficient condition for agency during inquiry, what I call zetetic agency.

Inquirers exercise agency when deciding what to inquire about and in the conduct of inquiry itself—which steps to take, when to stop, or when to diverge. My sufficient condition for zetetic agency is motivated by a constellation of features that are hallmarks of agency, including the roles of inquisitive and transitional reasons. Zetetic agency in particular requires control over the transitions during inquiry; I illustrate how transitional control is influenced by inquisitive and transitional reasons and distinguish it from other concepts of control.

Zetetic agency is essentially sensitive to differences in viewpoints and values, which result in different inquisitive conduct. These differences are manifest in different inquisitive and transitional reasons: different reasons for engaging in inquiry, different aims of inquiry, and different ways of controlling our inquiries, including the way we transition between attitudes during inquiry.

Juan-Pablo Bermúdez

The effects of poverty on planning agency

How does poverty affect the types of personal goals people set for themselves, or the way they plan and pursue them? In this talk I will report the results of a series of studies with participants across the socio-economic spectrum in Colombia in which we assessed how poverty affects goal-setting, planning, and goal-pursuit. We show that low-SES agents set longer-term personal goals, which they perceive as more ambitious. Lower-SES agents are also less likely to report self-regulation conflicts, reporting instead more circumstantial conflicts in which ‘life gets in the way’ of goal pursuit. However, they are also significantly less likely to have a plan to pursue their goals. In short, lower-SES agents pursue goals perceived as more ambitious and taking longer to achieve, despite facing more external obstacles and having less-defined plans. Collectively, these findings suggest that the challenges of poverty to agency are not primarily related to self-regulation, but to the pressures of having too few opportunities for goal advancement, which may lower the agent’s propensity to turn abstract goals into concrete plans.

Anssi Bwalya

Experiencing Agency in the Context of ADHD

Agency and related constructs, such as action control, self-efficacy, and autonomy, are widely studied topics in psychological and philosophical research. Existing literature points to the importance of experienced agency in health, wellbeing and social participation. However, different

theoretical and methodological approaches highlight different factors underlying agency, from neurocognitive mechanisms to societal structures.

We propose an integrative perspective, according to which the subjective experience of agency is shaped by one's agential capacities, such as self-control and decision-making, as well as by one's position in the society. People's experience of agency, or lack thereof, builds on their individual capacities and their subjective perceptions of those capacities – in dynamic interaction with their immediate environment and broader structural conditions.

In the present study, we combine questionnaire measures and a sustained attention task to examine agential capacities and the subjective experience of agency in the context of ADHD. We will study the relationships between self-efficacy and a sense of agency, self-reported ADHD symptoms, sustained attention, psychiatric symptoms, socioeconomic background, and gender. In addition to more nuanced theoretical understanding of how different psychological and sociodemographic factors relate to agency, this work may eventually provide valuable information for interventions aimed at supporting people's agency in disadvantaged circumstances.

Samuel Delorme

Learning can make it harder to do the right thing

Learning is usually understood as something that enhances our capacities. It allows agents to navigate familiar environments more efficiently by informing what we expect, attend to, and value. Yet it can also have the opposite effect: learning can make it harder to do the right thing by attuning agents to patterns of salience and response that are poorly suited to the situations they later face. This possibility has important implications for how we think about moral difficulty and the effects of adverse circumstances on agency.

A growing body of empirical work on learning, attention, decision-making, and cognitive control points to two important features of the capacities that underlie our ability to recognize and respond to reasons. First, the performance of these capacities is constrained by cognitive costs. Second, an agent's learning affects the cost of achieving a given performance level. Most relevantly, learning often improves performance by reducing the cognitive effort required to detect relevant features of a situation, select an appropriate course of action, and sustain motivation over time. In familiar environments, this kind of attunement underwrites skill. But when an agent's learned expectations and practical habits are poorly suited to a new context, learning can instead make appropriate action more difficult: it increases the cost of seeing what matters, alters what feels salient or rewarding, and makes certain responses harder to initiate and sustain.

Consider an agent raised in a hostile environment in which others are threatening, deceitful, or exploitative. In such a setting, it may be rational to learn vigilance, suspicion, and defiance. These habits reflect a successful adaptation to that environment. But if that same agent later finds herself in circumstances in which what is called for is openness, trust, patience, or care, her learned posture may now be a liability. She may find it harder to notice opportunities for warmth, harder to interpret others charitably, and harder to make herself vulnerable in the ways the situation demands. The difficulty here need not consist in a global deficit or incapacity. It may instead reflect a mismatch between a practical orientation shaped by one environment and the demands of another.

This framework, I argue, helps illuminate how conditions such as poverty, violence, and instability affect our agency without assuming that those who endure them are thereby simply less capable agents. What such conditions often shape is not capacity in the abstract, but the calibration of attention, valuation, and response. More broadly, the account identifies a neglected but normatively important way in which environments can impair performance: they can teach us the wrong lesson for the task at hand.

Mohsen Forghani

Contradictory affordances and the contextual structuring of agentic capacity

Agentic capacities are often discussed as abilities possessed by individuals, such as the capacity to deliberate, inhibit action, remember relevant information, or revise one's practical orientation. Yet such capacities are never exercised in a vacuum. They are exercised in environments that present structured possibilities for action. This paper argues that one fruitful way to understand the contextual shaping of agency is through the contextuality of affordances, and in particular, through a distinctive class of cases I call **contradictory affordances**.

The starting point is a question about the unit of affordance attribution. In ordinary cases, we often speak as if affordances belong to object-types: a chair affords sitting, a door affords opening, a path affords walking. But many practically important cases suggest that the relevant unit is not the object in isolation, but the object as situated in a neighborhood or configuration. A chair at the edge of a cliff, for example, does not simply inherit the ordinary affordance profile of a chair considered on its own. Likewise, an emergency exit marked by a glowing EXIT sign but chained shut generates a practical situation that cannot be captured by attributing a single affordance to a single object. In such cases, the broader configuration reorganizes the local action landscape.

I argue that these cases are best understood as instances of practical contradiction rather than semantic inconsistency. The contradiction does not primarily concern what is believed or represented, but the structure of action-readiness generated by a local configuration. An object-type may carry a familiar or default invitation to act, while the surrounding configuration introduces a contrary practical orientation by blocking, discouraging, or destabilizing that invitation. The result is not mere multiplicity of options, but a structured tension within the field of action itself.

On this basis, I outline a typology of contradictory affordance configurations, including cases in which an action is simultaneously offered and blocked, cases of approach–avoid tension, cases in which a goal-directed sequence is locally initiated but defeated downstream, and cases in which contradiction emerges only when contextual scope is widened. The broader claim is that these are not peripheral oddities. They are illuminating cases for understanding how context shapes agency.

The relevance to agentic capacities is that contradictory affordances make visible the practical environments in which agency becomes strained, unstable, or effortful. Capacities such as reasoning, self-regulation, memory, and communicative uptake are often recruited precisely when ordinary object-guided action is disrupted by a conflicting configuration. Contradictory affordances therefore offer a way of analyzing not merely whether an agent can act, but how context structures the practical field within which agentic powers are exercised, sustained, or undermined.

Andrea Hiott

Constitutive caring: Towards a care-first account of agential capacities

One of the primary questions at the heart of any debate about agential capacities is the question: where does an agent begin or end? Another way of asking this is: what is an agential body? Though it may seem the most obvious question to ask, it is also the most important, as how it is answered will affect our understanding of from motivation to memory and beyond. This question is also directly related to what role we give to the structural context and background when we address agency. The usual answers towards determining agency are matters of membranes, Markov blankets or various forms of operational closure. This way of framing agency leads us to the ‘selfish gene’ view whereby individuals are assumed closed systems that have to compete to survive. But through work such as that of Lynn Margulis, Paul Griffiths and Karola Stotz, we now understand that many developmental systems are more symbiotic or participatory than closed, and that whatever we might choose to focus on as a developmental system, there will be a matrix of resources indistinguishable from that system. This causes trouble to the competition framing of agency as well as to what can really be meant by self-creation and regulation (or even autopoiesis). Clearly there are differences between systems, and we need ways to distinguish between agential bodies, but our current assumption that those are closed (even only operationally) and competitive may no longer be a helpful frame. Rather, we may want to consider more participatory ways of framing what we mean by bodies, and also how we model them computationally.

Towards this and building on literature in both science and philosophy, I propose we reorient through a frame of care: We know something is a body by way of modeling it as constitutive caring: something is considered part of an agential body if that part and the body are constitutively caring towards some shared goal. This means that the caring is itself the development, thus distinguishing it from temporary desires or attractions. In other words, it is ontological activity not only functional. This allows our understanding of ‘body’ to remain ambiguous (in the sense of *bonne ambiguïté* via Merleau-Ponty) such that we can understand that bodies are themselves always overlapping and nested tensions of caring, and that whatever we choose to model is made up of (and making up) numerous other potentially modellable bodies. This helps us to understand how cells, human bodies and social groups can be modeled simultaneously as different and irresolvable even as they share the same parts or even are the same parts. Through examples, I show how this allows us to be more precise but also non-reductive. I also explore how framing through caring rather than competing allows us to better deal with the tensions of our shared existence while still respecting their potential irresolvabilities.

Frederik T. Junker

Beyond deliberation: How memory shapes intentions

Consider an agent who forms an intention to pursue a particular career. Over time, their commitment gradually weakens, even though they never explicitly reconsider it. Remembered disappointments grow more salient, imagined futures less appealing, and when the intention is later retrieved it no longer feels compelling.

Standard accounts treat intentions as stable commitments that change primarily through practical deliberation. I argue this picture is incomplete. Because intentions must be encoded, stored, and

retrieved to guide future action, they are subject to memory dynamics – offline replay, semanticization, reconstructive retrieval – that gradually alter their strength, accessibility, and content. Even though single replay events typically do not alter our intentions dramatically, memory-based changes can accumulate into significant changes to our intentions.

How does the cognitive system allocate between memory-based updating and deliberation? I propose that metacognition performs cost-benefit computations regulating both, monitoring memory-based outputs for signals – affective markers, conflict, value shifts – that warrant explicit reconsideration. The resulting picture is one of complementary processes: deliberation handles discrete, high-stakes revision; memory-based updating handles gradual adaptation between deliberative episodes.

Angelica Kaufmann

The practice of personhood: A social-epistemic account of animal personhood

Under what conditions human or non-human animals count as persons remains controversial, in part because there is little agreement about what personhood is. We propose a relational account of metaphysical personhood — the Practice of Personhood Account — on which being a person consists in participating in a social–epistemic practice of mutual recognition, seeking to understand others’ attitudes and mental states, and norm sensitive response open to adjustment. Applying the account to African elephants and sperm whales, we show how personhood can be realized in non-human animal species without appeal to fixed cognitive thresholds. We argue that this practice is grounded in biological vulnerability and dependence, and we distinguish styles and modes of personhood to capture both intra- and inter-species variation.

Marina Trakas

Mnemonic agency?

While we often have control over certain mental states, such as our emotions, imagination, and even the process of belief formation, memories seem, in principle, to be more passive, as if they simply happen to us. But do we have any agency over our memories? In this talk, I explore the extent to which we can exert control over memory processes, the limitations of such control, and the implications this has for our understanding of responsibility.