Abstract: Despite the consensus that global governance increasingly becomes more complex, convoluted, and intricate, questions of agency, (i.e. which actors can become global governors and hence should be studied) are for the most part still framed in substantial terms. Whether it is states, institutions, or individuals, we ‘locate’ agency in particular entities which then exist, act, and influence outcomes as global governors qua definition. In other words, global governance lacks a social-theoretical grounding that allows us to go beyond empirical anecdotes of agency diffusion. After reviewing how agency has been framed in global governance and beyond, the paper reverses the dominant ontology and conceptualizes agency in world politics in relational terms. As such, it discusses three requirements of agency – efficacy, corporeality, and intentionality – and assumes that each is established in social relations between rather than situated within actors. Such a perspective, it is then argued, can better capture dynamics and ambivalences of global governance and its inherent complexities since it compels researchers to not just assume specific sets of discrete actors but to focus on relational processes through which their agency emerges in the first place and sustains over time. In particular, understanding agency as a relational disposition allows one to reconstruct and normatively engage with processes of agency diffusion to determine when, how, and why this happens in world politics instead of simply stating the emergence of new global governors. Reconstructing these processes reveals their political nature and allows us to discuss who should govern the world. In a broader perspective, theorizing agency then helps us (a) to develop more elaborated and social-theoretically grounded claims about world politics in order to (b) reconstruct the foundations of current manifestations of global governance and reveal its normative commitments. This potential of theorizing agency in relational terms for global governance is briefly illustrated by outlining how one could study multinational enterprises and their seemingly changing role.

Keywords: global governance, agency, relationalism
Introduction

Arguably, the main contribution of global governance, both as a framework to study and make sense of world politics as well as a policy notion (Dingwerth/Pattberg 2006; Hoferberth 2015, 2016a), has been to make scholars and practitioners aware of the fact that it is no longer provided exclusively by states. Rather, the provision of public goods at the global level today involves a plethora of different actors (Avant et al. 2010a; Weiss/Wilkinson 2014b; Karns et al. 2015 (3)). Interestingly enough, however, while revisiting constitutive debates from earlier years – in his essay on ‘The Actors in International Politics’, Wolfers (1962: 3) already stated that “[e]ven the identity of the ‘actors’ – those who properly can be said to perform on the international stage – is a matter of dispute which raises not unimportant problems for the analyst, for the practitioner of foreign policy, and for the public” – global governance for the most part only states the outcome of diffused agency away from the nation state as a fact without providing much insight into the process itself. In other words, global governance research, in order to justify its focus on other actors than the state, answers the question whether agency diffused in affirmative terms to then study its implications without providing much discussion on how and why this diffusion occurred in the first place (Finnemore 2014: 223).

The emphasis on outcome rather than process, I argue, echoes a conceptual preference of structure over agency, of substance over relations, which ultimately leaves global governance in a peculiar spot. Not realizing its full potential in conceptual, intellectual, and also normative terms, the paradigm, if it ever constituted one, arguably has lost much of its original momentum in recent years (Pegram/Acuto 2015; Barnett/Sikkink 2008). More specifically, focusing on outcomes and implications of multiple actors involved, and in particular the management thereof, in the provision of public goods has created a normative-functionalist bias confirming the very notion of global governance, leaving scholars and practitioners with the task how to accommodate and arrange different actors without raising more foundational questions of who should be involved in the first place (Sinclair 2012). Put differently, taking the diffusion of agency for granted and being concerned only with the consequences that follow from it has stripped away the political and contested character of global governance, providing the notion with an

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1 To be somewhat more balanced and less provocative in this opening statement, quite a few pieces written from a global governance perspective have been providing historically informed explanations for its emergence (Murphy 2014; Mitzen 2013; Ferguson 1999). However, even in those pieces, we often find rather vague and open-ended explanations, simply linking global governance for example to “that other meta-phenomenon of the last two decades, globalization” (Weiss/Wilkinson 2014b: 208).
‘there-is-no-alternative’ logic despite the fact that the legitimacy and accountability of global governors remain problematic in many ways (Sell/Prakash 2004; Barnett 2015).\(^2\)

Against this background, I argue that focusing on the processes of how new actors emerge in current manifestations of global governance rather than discussing how to accommodate them, could provide new momentum to the research agenda. In other words, how and why matters and should be discussed before one simply assumes the whether to advance research from there. None of this is to deny that we have seen an immense amount of agency diffusion ever since and even before the notion has been entertained in the report of the Commission on Global Governance (Commission on Global Governance 1995). However, as openly admitted in this very report, we need to consider it as a politically motivated commitment to put into context and challenge it instead of taking it as an empirical reality to ground problem-solving research on. Put differently, against staggering evidence that we have truly experienced the emergence of new global governors in recent years, global governance arguably has to engage in a different mode of theorizing agency, provide a more elaborated account of the dispositions needed to qualify as and be(come) an actor of world politics in the first place, and commit to the reconstruction of processes in which agency became dispersed. Without such discussions, we are confined to anecdotally report new instances of agency but are otherwise unable to engage in normative discussions such as who should govern the world.\(^3\)

In other words, theorizing how agency diffuses in global governance promises to advance the notion in conceptual terms and reveal its normative commitments at the same time. Conceptually, we would be in a better position to understand when, how, and why new actors emerge or fail to do so in certain contexts.\(^4\) In normative terms, we would be able to reveal and reflect commitments that have accompanied and justified the emergence of new actors to engage in discussions of who should ‘sit at the table’. In order to contribute to this discussion, the paper is structured as follows. First, I review how agency has been discussed in IR and global governance to reveal both the shortcomings in these debates and the apparent need for further theorization. Second, focusing on

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2 Consider for example the assumed lack of alternatives often advanced in the discourse on Corporate Social Responsibility which, given their increased numbers and resources, sees no other option than integrating multinational enterprises into global governance (Whelan 2012).

3 The distinction between problem-solving and critical theorizing is taken from Cox (1981). However, while Cox himself situated his critical theory in a Marxist-inspired paradigm, in this paper I advance criticism more in conceptual rather than substantial reasoning. For a substantial critique on global governance, see among others Overbeek (2005).

4 By doing so, we would also ground IR and the current manifestation of global governance on more solid historical grounding (Ferguson 1999; Murphy 2014; Mitzen 2013).
efficacy, corporeality, and intentionality, I discuss and relate three dispositions of agency from a relational perspective (Emirbayer 1997). Third, I outline how this perspective can help us revitalize global governance and improve our understanding not only whether new global governors emerged but also fill in the blanks on how and why this occurred. This argument is illustrated by a short discussion on corporate agency and its emergence in global governance.\(^5\)

**Approaching Agency in IR and Beyond**

Despite (or maybe precisely because of) the fact that philosophers of agency, political theorists, sociologists, and other social scientists have engaged with the subject at hand in many ways, the concept of agency, for the most part, remains elusive and ill-defined. Emirbayer/Mische (1998: 963), for example, argue that it has become “a source of increasing strain and confusion in social thought” while Meyer/Jepperson (2000: 100) attest an “unspecified core of actorhood [out of which] utilities and preferences said to produce the entire social world” emanate which, in other terms, remains undefined. More specifically to IR, it has been argued that “[r]arely it is clear what agency is, what it means to exercise agency, or who and what might do so” and that the subfield “has not grappled, in a systematic manner, with the concept” (Wight 2006: 178). In fact, whether such a (meta-)theoretical discussion is needed at all or not in a subfield defined in substantial terms (i.e. a focus on potentially global cross-boundary encounters with difference) remains contested (Jackson 2015: 942-5).

Arguably, one of the reasons for the unwillingness to engage with agency in theoretical terms is the assumingly obvious nature of the concept. As such, both IR theory and global governance have framed their debates on agency, for the most part, in substantial terms and the reifications which we can make based on this commitment have “commonsensical appeal [as] we look around our world and apparently see substances everywhere” (Jackson/Nexon 1999: 299). More specifically, it also provides justification for what we do and whom we study. Put differently, in need of demarcating their subject areas and in order to develop a collective academic identity, IR theory and global governance translated questions of agency into debates on which actors mattered in world politics to claim relevance for their work. Reproducing the state-centrism ingrained in Political Science and the inside/outside logic of domestic vs. foreign policy that follows from it, early accounts for example discussed whether agency resided exclusively within or also beyond

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\(^5\) This illustration was chosen simply because it resonates with my other research interest.
nation-states (Haas 1964). The fact that agency was simply ‘located’ in this early stage and that no one challenged this, reveals a discipline committed from the beginning to a substantialized understanding of agency. Despite different answers which entities should be considered, the idea that individual actors held and exercised agency and that these actors were to be considered as such *qua* their ontological nature prevailed and ingrained itself into our thinking of world politics (Epstein 2013: 290-6).

Albeit in different ways and arguments, later proponents of IR theory and their contending paradigms perpetuated this substantialized notion of agency. Speaking broadly, these paradigms continued to locate agency in particular entities without providing (meta)theoretical arguments to justify their respective focus on nation-states (Gilpin 1984: 301), institutions (Keohane 1989: 6), or societal actors (Moravcsik 1997: 516). As such, agency was derived from ontological assumptions about the nature of world politics relative to your preferred theory. At the same time, all paradigmatic contenders conceptualized “actors in international relations [as] those entities capable of putting forth demands effectively” (Haas 1964: 84). In other words, different theories advanced different claims about relevant determinants of international relations and used those, albeit relative and challenged by others, to specify which actors one should consider. Case studies based on these assumptions revealed how the agency of these actors indeed mattered and were then used to retrospectively justify theoretical claims made in the first place. As such, different IR theories disagreed on which actors one should consider but shared the same substantial notion of agency. Not surprisingly, the question of which entities determine world politics became one of the major staging grounds for paradigmatic and hence lasting disagreement in the field (Jackson/Nexon 2009: 917).

Ironically, the contribution of Wendt (1999: 193-237) and his attempt to provide a more solid social theory foundation for agency did not solve the problem since it ultimately remained committed to the very same notion of agency. In order to distinguish actors from structure to then relate both, he maintained that agency is “a function of certain inherent, ‘given’ properties of the agent” (Epstein 2013: 296), which he understood to be located within and limited to nation states. This move allowed Wendt to restate the state as the main actor in world politics, relay his theory to Waltz and others, and present his approach as a serious contender in IR theory. In terms of an advanced discussion of agency, though, both Wight (2006: 181-6) and Epstein (2013: 297-9) rightfully point out that Wendt’s contribution fell short in terms of developing a full-scale alternative to theorize agency in alternative ontological terms. As such, committed to the same substantialism advanced by those theories he challenged, Wendt’s approach rather fueled
the paradigmatism haunting discussions on agency in IR until today instead of solving or at least significantly advancing them (Kratochwil 2000).

Against this backdrop, scholars of global governance came in during the 1990s and argued in favor of broadening IR’s notion of agency to include actors other than the nation-state (Weiss/Wilkinson 2014b; Barnett/Sikkink 2008). Revisiting Keohane/Nye (1973), they argued that a significant amount of governance on the global scale was provided by non-state actors. Within the newly emerging paradigm of global governance research, the activities of these actors were described in detailed case studies, in which international organizations, NGOs, multinational corporations, think tanks, and epistemic communities all made a difference and hence were framed as ‘global governors’ (Avant et al. 2010a). Other than their alleged influence in world politics, though, there was no further theoretical discussion why one should engage with particular entities. Thus, while greatly expanding our empirical understanding of world politics, global governance also did not provide a discussion of agency in theoretical terms as it merely advanced anecdotes of diffused agency previously not considered. Instead of providing theoretical answers to questions of agency, then, global governance’s empirical emphasis on non-state agency only aggravated the issue. Ultimately, the question “which actors truly have agency – which actors are agents of global governance” still remained unanswered as plethoraus of different case studies on particular actors were advanced (Hoffmann/Ba 2005: 255).

Arguably, the reluctance both in conventional IR theory and in the global governance paradigm to engage with agency in theoretical terms and their persistent reliance on substantial notions of the concept can be explained in two ways. On the one hand, mundane, intuitive notions of agency exist and influence our thinking. As an “everyday concept”, we do not see the need to reflect and theorize it even though its structure and dispositions must be made explicit in order to go beyond simplistic accounts of particular entities making a difference in particular situations (Gilbert 1989: 3-5). As Fleming (2016) elaborates, this is specifically true in IR theory which has to come up with more sophisticated notions of agency. While we easily connect to action-sentences such as ‘country X / NGO Y / company Z did so and so’ and thereby take their agency for granted, there seems to be little theoretical reflection on the concept itself. On the other hand, the belief in individual human agency supporting substantial notions is deeply rooted in Western philosophy and our culture of modernity. Against the overwhelming forces of socialization and social structure, we like to reassure ourselves that individuals, including us, can make a difference, if only to give meaning to our existence which, otherwise looks rather somber and bleak (Meyer/Jepperson 2000; Archer 2000).
Whatever the precise reasons may be, IR’s reluctance to theorize agency and its habit to substantialize it has consequences for how we study world politics. At least since Waltz (1959) if not earlier, we conveniently agree to locate agency on different levels and frame it in individual or aggregated terms. While studying agency at the individual level might be richer and more authentic, we contend that the collective level provides more comprehensive and ultimately more important answers for a discipline interested in global issues (Singer 1961: 89). Further theoretical debates whether and how such an aggregation of agency is possible (List/Petit 2006; List/Pettit 2011; Rovane 2014) are sometimes referred to in IR but for the most part are solved on pragmatic and/or paradigmatic grounds: As the study of world politics, in its different theoretical approaches, it has long been decided that IR has to engage with collective actors and the respective ones are determined by the theoretical framework advanced (Verba 1961: 95). In other words, once defined as making a difference and located in a particular entity, it is the consequences and not the dispositions of agency that IR scholars are interested in as we continue to ascribe agency to all sorts of different entities without considering what constitutes their agency in world politics in the first place. By doing so, we sidestep theoretical discussions on agency as we conveniently treat it as a definitive capacity of actors (individual or collective) to determine outcome (Jackson/Nexon 1999: 296-301).

Once reduced to this truism of making a difference, we locate agency in diverse phenomena, ascribing the ability, among others, to “[states], corporations, unions, charities, provinces, intergovernmental organizations, rebel groups, drug cartels, the global market and the international community” (Fleming 2016: 18). In the end, we base agency on semantics as we contend that any “entity that is able to serve as the subject of a sentence with an active verb – an entity constituted as the author of a particular action or set of actions that is performed ‘in the name of’ the actor” can exercise agency (Jackson 2003: 55). In order to approach agency in theoretical terms, the next section will introduce and discuss three general dispositions of agency – efficacy, corporeality, and intentionality – that define discussions outside (Giddens 1984; Emirbayer 1997; Archer 2000; Meyer/Jepperson 2000; List/Pettit 2011) and within IR (Ringmar 1996; Cederman 1997; Jackson 2004; Wight 2006; Franke/Roos 2010; Epstein 2013). Arguing that a relational ontology has the potential to best capture the dynamics of global governance (Qin 2016; Jackson/Nexon 1999), these dispositions will be introduced and discussed as products of social interaction rather than fixed properties or essence.

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6 Obviously, this list is not exhaustive as never will be. The lack of referring to individuals in his list can be explained by Fleming’s deliberative focus on collective entities.
Three Dispositions of Agency in World Politics – A Relational Take

With different labels floating around in the discourse, as well as different traditions and intellectual sources referenced to support its claims, it is fair to say that relationalism as an alternative ontological framework recently gained recognition and momentum in IR and beyond.\(^7\) Described as an “ontology of entanglement” (Zanotti 2017), hailed as the “new [and improved] constructivism” (McCourt 2016), and even proposed to serve as the new core for Political Science in general (McClurg/Young 2011), it seems that more and more scholars in IR and beyond either explicitly draw on relationalism (Qin 2016; DeMars/Dijkzeul 2015; Sending et al. 2015) or at least connect to it through its roots in American Pragmatism as they engage in substantial debate on agency on global governance (Hofferberth 2017; Avant 2016). While diverse in the topics covered, scholars with an affinity towards relationalism seem to agree that IR would benefit from an ontology in which world politics and agency therein are conceptualized in processual and dynamic terms since this potentially offers a way forward for an otherwise substantially confined discipline caught up in its own paradigms (Jackson/Nexon 1999, 2013).

Following these broader remarks, scholars drawing from a relational ontology stress the social and hence dynamic character of human existence. More specifically, in a terminology first advanced by Dewey/Bentley (1949), agency is framed in trans-actional rather than self-actional or inter-actional terms. Whereas self-action and inter-action reflect ontological stances “where things are viewed as acting under their own powers”, trans-action argues that “our very capacity to act in the first place originates in relations” (Dewey/Bentley 1949: 108). As such, in a trans-actional framing, “[t]here is no pure ‘individual’ action (or agency) outside, beside, or prior to social relations” (Dépelt- teau 2008: 63). Relations are more than just mere “link[s] between structure (situation, context, condition) and social actors (with their dispositions, motivations, reasons, intentions)” as they are considered to have ontological primacy and come first to constitute both structure and actor (Donati 2011: 31). In other words, it is “interactions between the social actors and the polity [which] are mutually constitutive all the way through, right down to the actors’ core selves” (Epstein 2013: 289). Relating this perspective to the three dispositions of agency – efficacy, corporeality, and intentionality – I argue that

\(^{7}\) Anecdotal evidence for this momentum is that other references than those below could have been used to advance the argument that relationalism has been recognized, discussed, and applied more frequently in IR in recent years. I am hesitant to call this new focus on relations a turn, though, because, (a) its contours are not quite delineated and spelled out just yet, and (b) one could argue that IR already experienced too many turns recently.
each of them originates in and is reproduced through relations instead of preceding those (Meyer/Jepperson 2000: 106-8). Consequentially, agency is granted, not possessed – it is constituted in relations as “the very terms or units involved in a transaction derive their meaning, significance, and identity from the (changing) functional roles they play within that transaction” (Emirbayer 1997: 287). 8

First, efficacy as Wirkmächtigkeit in this perspective can still be closely associated with the notion ‘to make a difference’. More specifically, this dimension of agency separates actors from structure because the latter is passive whereas the former performs action and triggers change. In other words, agency “‘breathes life’ into passive, inert substances […] that otherwise would remain perpetually at rest” and reflects the potential to intervene in the world out there (Emirbayer 1997: 294). In order to exercise agency, we thus need to be capable, at least in potential terms, to influence other actors, the social structure around us, and the processes we are involved in. 9 This direct, agentic capacity, though, stems from interaction and cannot be reduced to instances in which actors successfully ‘made a difference’. Rather, we can obviously fail in our attempts to exercise efficacy which is ultimately based on relational recognition.

Following this train of thought, efficacy in relational terms rests on potentiality. While we presume actors “to be able to deploy (chronically, in the flow of daily life) a range of causal powers, including that of influencing those deployed by others to ‘make a difference’ to a preexisting state of affairs”, this only happens if said others accept and recognize the causal power of a particular entity (Giddens 1984: 14). Hence, if we are interested in agency, “[w]e should not look for boundaries of things but for things of boundaries” (Abbott 1996: 857). For such things of boundaries, the primacy of relations does not limit but constitute efficacy since the very ability to make a difference plays out relationally. In other words, efficacy does not reside in pre-defined entities nor represents an inherent, self-contained actor disposition. Rather, actors develop efficacy as nexi of relations and only appear to us as actors if they become stabilized for a certain duration of time. In other words, efficacy emerges and exists only in relational configurations. 10

8 This emphasis on the dynamic nature of human existence should not be confused with the notion of permanent change, though. Stabilized agency can equally well translate into long-term stasis, as Jackson/Nexon (1999: 314) elaborate.
9 Note that efficacy in this vein represents a gradual and not an either/or disposition. For example, students arguably have less agency in the process of grading than faculty yet they persistently influence grades in their favor through negotiation.
10 Granted, due to prior processes of ‘yoking’, most if not all social interaction, already features a “soup of preexisting actors and actions”. However, the efficacy of these actors “ford it with difficulty and
Second, agency is a function of being anchored and located in time and space. Without such a connection to the here and now, the possibility of making a difference is not perceivable. This anchoring in the present is provided through corporeality (Körperlichkeit) which constitutes the “complex of physio-chemical interactions” between an individual body and its environment (Dewey 1931: 306). In other words, actors must be able to relate to others and this ability is endowed through the relational quality of corporeality. Through it, actors establish connections to other actors and their respective environment and engage in interventions into the world-out-there (Emirbayer/Mische 1998: 970-93). In other words, we can consider agency only when it becomes physically perceivable instead of representing ‘merely’ a mental act and that transition depends on being able to connect to the world out there (Franke/Roos 2010: 1069).

At the same time, though, corporeality should be understood in metaphorical rather than literal terms since the latter imply a voluntaristic moment of independent agency above and beyond the relational existence of things. As such, instead of committing the crime of reification and turning social phenomena and their bodies into ‘things’ which assumingly do not require further explanation, corporeality also has to be thought of something that is being granted and hence originates in relations (Cederman 1997: 20). In other words, the very subjectivity of any actor is defined through social formation (Joas 1996: 167-83). As such, individuals as well as collective actors continuously develop their corporeality in social terms and in interaction as they experience a resistant and rigid reality to respond to. Once legally, socially, or otherwise incorporated – literally “embodying” an entity through a “process of personation” (Jackson/Nexon 2004: 281) – “the parties of ongoing transaction [considered in the ontological perspective of relationalism] can just as well be communities, firms, or states as they can be individual persons” (Emirbayer 1997: 289). In other words, it is the ‘idea of acting’ and the emergence of an ‘internal decision structure’ which can serve as a substitute for the individual body and its physiological connections to the outside world. As such, developing a ‘body image’ as a notion and acting in awareness of one’s body in relation to others, together with the

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11 in it [may] disappear” as “new actors, new entities, new relations among old parts” establish their efficacy and thereby emerge out of interaction (Abbott 1996: 863).

12 This distinction between mental and physical acts is different from IR’s distinction between ‘real action’ and rhetoric or ‘cheap talk’. Uttering a promise or a thread, for example, represents a physical act in this perspective. Mental acts, on the other hand, refer to action solely carried out “in foro interno” (Rescher 1996: 50).

12 Considering the semantics of Organizational Studies for a moment, it is revealing in this vein that we refer to individual parts of hierarchical structures as ‘organs’.
capacity to activate it, constitutes corporeality, both for ‘primary actors’ (i.e. individuals) as well as collective actors (Joas 1996: 175-6).\textsuperscript{13}

Third and finally, relationalism also reconsiders the notion of intentionality and argues that it must be further unpacked. Speaking broadly, intentionality, in some form or another, captures and reflects the “common-sense notion of purposive action” (Coleman 1990: 13). Without such motivation and alleged purpose, actors would not become active in the first place as agency reflects more than mere behavior. In other words, “[i]n full-fledged action – unlike mere behavior – the motivational aspect must always play a role, since some element of volition will always be present here” (Rescher 1996: 54). As such, actors actively “exercise control” and this becomes meaningful in the sense that the author of the action is not motivated by instinct or reflex, but rather pursues a certain goal (Gilbert 1989: 24). In other words, agency essentially includes the ability to associate meaning to an action, however subjective and ‘wrong’ in the eyes of others. Instead of reducing it to the rational maximization of interest (i.e. the logic of consequentialism and the homo oeconomicus) or the normative adherence to certain standards of appropriate behavior (i.e. the logic of appropriateness and the homo sociologicus), agency in relational terms reflects the intentional pursue of aims through meaningful action rather than reflexive, instinct-driven, and stimuli-generated behavior. The nature and the origin of these intentions, however, are cast in relational and hence open-ended terms as actors are considered to represent something more than calculating automatons or ‘norm dopes’ (Joas 1996: 145-66).\textsuperscript{14}

More explicitly, motivation, interest, and purpose, so the argument goes, remain indeterminate until they are discovered in relations. Such discoveries are made possible because of actors-in-the-making constantly reflect upon them. Drawing on Mead’s distinction between ‘I’ and ‘Me’ (Mead 1967 [1934]: 173), the conceptual notion of intentionality is supplemented by the idea of reflexivity understood as the aptitude to relationally consider one’s own actions as objects in the eyes of others and thus adapt them in the light of interacting with others (Franke/Roos 2010: 1069). Put differently, intentionality in relationalism is not derived from fixed interests held by actors prior to interaction. Rather, actors constantly reflect on what they want and how they can achieve it in social

\textsuperscript{13} The students in their attempts to negotiate grades mentioned above, for example, are far more likely to influence faculty if they act collectively as a larger student body. To do so, they need to organize and ‘speak with one voice’.

\textsuperscript{14} Consider for a moment the Latin origin of ‘interest’ in this context, which literally translates into ‘being in-between’ and hence arguably cannot logically be perceived as a fixed disposition of individual actors (Hellmann 2017: 18).
situations which implies that their motivation and purpose continue to change in said interaction. Interaction in this perspective thus reflects more than just the exchange of preferences. Rather, interaction represents contested sites of determining otherwise indeterminate boundaries of meaning and feasible action (Hofferberth/Weber 2015: 84-9). Instead of following pre-defined scripts, whether rational or normative, the outcome of actors engaging in reflexive processes are never predetermined with agency representing open-ended probing rather than stimulus-driven scripts. In other words, agency in its intentional, purposive dimension “involves defining that which is as yet undefined, rather than simply making a different selection from a reservoir of situation components that are either already defined or have no need of definition” (Joas 1996: 133). Therefore, the intentions associated with an action are not independent from said action but evolve in the process thereof:

"[A]ction [can] not be perceived as the pursuit of preestablished ends, abstracted from concrete situations, but rather that ends and means develop coterminously within contexts that are themselves ever changing and thus always subject to reevaluation and reconstruction on the part of the reflective intelligence." (Emirbayer/Mische 1998: 967-8)

Advanced in order to debunk its ontological counterpart of substantialism, relationalism offers a different take on efficacy, corporeality, and intentionality. Taken together, agency emerges from relations and is always ‘performed’ within loose and ever-changing configurations in which temporarily stabilized entities recognize or challenge each other’s ability to influence outcomes (Avant et al. 2010b: 8-9). While not providing any substantial answers as to which entities can be considered as actors in any particular instance of world politics, this discussion can still be applied to the study of world politics and global governance and, arguably, contributes to the theoretical elaboration of agency in these contexts. Put differently, discussing these dispositions help us consider agency in potential, theoretical rather than in actual, substantial terms. More specifically, considering its dynamic, processual nature, relationalism allows the scholar to approach her or

15 Going back to our student example from above, we can only assume the motivation of students approaching faculty to reconsider their grades because they might not be fully aware of it either or it will change in the interaction of talking to the faculty and further reflecting upon it. Whether it is getting into law school, pleasing one’s parents, or simply feeling treated unjustly, we can conclude, however, that grades matter to them and that they pursue the intention to receive better ones.

16 Obviously, different social situations feature different degrees of stability and hence involve different degrees of reflexivity on behalf of the actor. This is reflected in the prominent conceptual distinction between routine and crisis situations in American Pragmatism which is introduced to capture how much we (have to) reflect upon our interests. However, said distinction is gradual and situations of both types have to be consciously reflected upon in order to clarify and adapt what we hope to achieve. In the end, both in routine and crisis situations, it is through changing our intentions while acting by which “we surprise ourselves by our own action” as we as the author of our action also remain subject to it (Mead 1967 [1934]: 174).
his research with no *a priori* assumptions on the substance of agency. This and other implications for the study of global governance are spelled out in the following section.

**Contributions and Implications for the Study of Global Governance**

More so than any other paradigm of world politics, global governance is concerned with “who governs the globe” and advances the claim that different entities have become global governors (Weiss/Wilkinson 2014a; Avant et al. 2010a). As such, the diffusion of agency can easily be considered as one if not the most axiomatic claim of global governance, which, as a research agenda, significantly expanded empirical studies into world politics (Barnett/Sikkink 2008). At the same time, as argued above, the paradigm lacks a theoretical discussion on the dispositions and qualities these actors share. As such, in its efforts to overcome IR and provide alternative answers to who governs the world, the framework ironically reproduced the subfield’s substantial notion of agency: Whether it is the UN or other international organizations, NGOs, think tanks, or multinational enterprise, global governance, given its abstract and indeterminate nature, for the most part *post hoc* reports on and thereby substantializes agency. Arguably, this is one of the reasons the first generation of global governance research lost its momentum. To regain it, the paradigm has to develop its own conceptualization of agency. Relationalism in particular has the potential to reinvigorate debate and provide new insights, just as Jackson/Nexon (1999) argued almost 20 years ago:

“We hold that in many circumstances, a focus upon processes and relations rather than substances will enable scholars to formulate better theories of world politics, explaining phenomena – for example, globalization, interdependence, and other areas [such as global governance] which involve unit-change – that fit uneasily into substantialist frameworks.” (Jackson/Nexon 1999: 292)

To unpack and substantiate this claim as well as spell out its implications, it is worthwhile to consider the notion of governance and its inherent complexity for a moment. Just as Rosenau/Czempiel (1992) argued, it is categorically different from government since it is not (only) organized and provided in any formal or hierarchically fashion. As such, new actors indeed become involved constantly but may perform their governance activities only episodically. In other words, providing public goods or engaging in the setting of rules does not constitute their main commitment. Rather, it might be a side-effect of being engaged in other activities (e.g. economic activities and the ensuing self-regulation enterprises have initiated recently). Given that efficacy, corporeality, and intentionality can be established in different ways and do not only reside in formally recognized actors,
previously unrecognized entities might become global governors in one instance (assuming they meet the requirements to exercise agency by being recognized as such) to then retreat to the back again and no longer engage in the provision of public goods (Avant et al. 2010a).

In addition to the dynamics that follow from different entities becoming involved and disengaged in governance over time, consider the broad range of different activities, both formal and informal, that can be included under this broad label. Since governance “encompasses a variety of cooperative problem-solving arrangements and activities that states and other actors create in an effort to resolve conflict, serve common purposes, and overcome inefficiencies in situations of interdependent choices”, we can imagine diverse contributions such as generating information and knowledge, agenda-setting, the negotiation, creation, implementation, and enforcement of rule systems, compliance monitoring, and many more particular activities (Karns et al. 2015 (3): 25-35). As different entities perform their different activities, they advance different assets, resources, and capacities and hence justify their agency in different ways. While some actors find their agency recognized through setting the agenda and through moral authority (e.g. civil society and advocacy groups), others hold the means to ensure compliance and enforcement (e.g. states and supranational organizations) while others bring particular resources to the table (corporations). To essentialize any of these qualities or the agency of involved, though, seems to do injustice to the indeterminate and situational nature of global governance and the diversity of entities and activities involved (Porter 2009: 87-9).

Against what has been discussed so far, global governance can be understood as the sum of myriads of configurations of actors engaging and disengaging on different issues and we need to develop conceptual tools to consider the dynamics of agency diffusion. Instead of relying on a priori assumptions which actors matter in general terms, a relational perspective helps us go into our empirical investigation unbiased and reconstruct when, how, and why actors emerge or fail to do so. Relationalism, in other words, offers an ontology that allows us to focus on processes in which agency emerges without substantializing their outcome. The main rational behind assuming a relational perspective on agency then is simply that we cannot know for sure which entities become involved in any particular governance configuration for any particular issue until after our studies. More specifically, since interaction in governance arrangements remains indeterminate as

\[17\] Note the functional-normative bias in the quote. If one expands the notion of governance beyond the provision of public goods to also include public bads, the range of activities would equally expand significantly.
they unfold (Sabel/Zeitlin 2010), it is rather likely that agency between different entities shifts over time. As such, the liberating move to open up the notion of governance to include a larger diversity of activities beyond legal-formal ruling carried out by a larger range of actors with different constituencies, resources, interests, and world views, pushes us towards considering agency in its relational dimension – after all, “governing globally is never a solo act” and one can reasonably assume that the line-ups of the bands as well as their members keep changing (Finnemore 2014: 223). Put differently, since “governance involves the creation of new issues, new interests, new communities, and new modes of action by creative agents”, as well as the ongoing sustainment of their agency (Avant et al. 2010b: 9), relationalism’s most important contribution to the study of global governance is to make us aware of and enable us to understand its dynamic and processual nature, reconstruct processes in which agency emerged and diffused, theorize them in terms of their implications for governance, and ultimately assess them in normative terms.

Focusing on dynamics and process should not be confused with permanent change, though. To be clear, stable lineages of agency exist in global governance just as they exist elsewhere in social interaction and human existence. States obviously still matter and global governance advocates are keen to admit this upfront (Karns et al. 2015 (3): 8-9). However, global governance plays out in evolving social contexts whose boundaries and opportunities as well as normative commitments and foundations are not fully established yet. The political dimension of contesting, negotiating, and, for the time being, defining these boundaries and foundations remains poorly understood if we only apply substantial frameworks of ontology (Jackson/Nexon 1999: 296-9). In other words, agency as the ability to engage in global governance remains an “essentially contingent phenomena, resulting partially from historically specific combinations and configurations” as well as from situational enactments (Cerny 1990: 27). Consequentially, we have to think of global governance configurations as moving targets, simply because their constituting elements (i.e. the actors involved) and their modes of (inter)action are likely to change over time. Instead of predefining which actors to consider and thereby substantializing their agency, interests, motivations, and reasons, relationalism allows us to study whether and how entities became recognized in specific contexts. Whether it is Germany in the informal arrangement of the P5+1 (Litwak 2015), 41 Muslim-majority nations engaged in the Islamic Military Alliance to fight ISIS (Jenkins 2016), or Royal Dutch/Shell becoming involved in Nigerian human rights policies (while holding on to economic rationales) (Hofferberth 2017), we need to understand how these new actors emerge and how they relate to established entities. In other words, against the backdrop of the very assumptions
that drive global governance, “what we call ‘actors’ is something to be explained, not something to be assumed” (Abbott 1996: 863) and an engagement with the requirements of agency from within a relational ontology offers tools to do so.\footnote{Translating this into a language of variables, Cederman (1997: 213) argues that “whenever technically feasible, actors in world politics should be modeled as dependent rather than independent variables”.
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In more specific research terms, relationalism encourages us to engage with the foundations and not the outcomes of global governance. Whatever governance issues one might be interested in, such an ontology encourages us to approach it with an open mind and not with a list of predefined actors to be checked off in terms of how they influenced the provision of governance for said issue. In other words, to do justice to complex and ever-changing patterns of agency, rather than championing a particular group of actors, we should allow our research to determine which relations of entities we consider. Since there can be no finite answer to who governs the globe, we should study in particular the claims and justifications advanced to become global governors instead of outcomes of dispersed agency. Such claims have to be justified since they need to resonate with actors established in prior relations (Avant et al. 2010b: 17-25). Studying world politics in this fashion would make our contributions to global governance less affirmative and more challenging since they would reveal that the very recognition of entities as global governors is subject of contentious political debate (or at least has been at some point in the past). While global governance is often framed in functionalist terms which explain the dispersion of agency as a logical consequence of untapped resources, capacities and expertise, who should be engaged in world politics reflects deeply-held cosmologies about politics in general which constitute the normative if not ideological foundation of the project (Murphy 2000).\footnote{Considering the practical dimension of global public policy for a moment, one can argue that not reflecting but rather reproducing the normative foundations of global governance severely limit our “debate about the range of strategic choices open to us in the present and future” of global governance and regulation (Zeitlin 2007: 135).}

**Relationalism & Corporate Agency in Global Governance**

To at least briefly illustrate the potential of relationalism for the study of global governance for a particular research theme, consider the intellectual engagement with multinational enterprises and discussions on their agency, social responsibilities, and public roles for a moment. Just like many other subthemes of global governance, this engagement for the most part has been framed in substantial terms (Hofferberth 2017: 139-44). As
such, corporate actors, have been established as legitimate research objects within IR and important studies have been advanced on their role in and contributions to global governance based on the notion that they have become global governors (May 2015; Hauffler 2010; Ougaard/Leander 2010). While doing so, their agency, interests, and modes of actions have all indeed been substantialized as we spent more time and energy to ‘prove’ that enterprises have become global governors rather than challenge the normative foundations of this development in the first place. In other words, including my own work, we take corporate agency for granted and champion enterprises before we begin our work to conclude that they now matter more in global governance than before. Whether it is Nike negotiating labor standards for the apparel industry or Royal Dutch/Shell engaging in human rights in Nigeria by providing training in riot control to police forces (Litvin 2003: 227-73) – both activities that fall under a broader perspective of governance activities –, we do not, for the most part, challenge the legitimacy of these involvements but, assuming that these actors matter in their respective contexts, consider the outcome (i.e. do we see improved governance in labor standards or human rights because of corporate involvement?)

A relational perspective would advise us not to focus too heavily on outcome. Rather, research on multinational enterprises interested in the origin and implications of their agency would first determine how precisely corporate entities established their agency. More specifically to what has been discussed above, such research would look into how enterprises present themselves as capable of (political) action and thus advance claims on their efficacy in realms outside their core business. It would also look into corporate action to derive at motives instead of subsuming everything these actors do under the paradigm of rational profit maximization. Obviously, profit holds a large influence on enterprises but it remains too vague of an objective to guide or let alone determine corporate agency. In other words, by considering how enterprises attempt to establish their efficacy and specify their intentions in relation to other actors and how and whether these narratives are accepted allows us to reconstruct their actual role in global governance instead of having our theoretical assumptions (and hopes) determine this role.

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20 In my own research, I found both Royal Dutch/Shell and ExxonMobil rather reluctant to do so as they continue to advance foundational beliefs of limited responsibility despite the fact that they engage in activities beyond their economic core. In other words, by separating politics from business and by claiming responsibility only for the latter and limited influence for the former, both enterprises limited their own political agency (Hofferberth 2016b: 390-6).

21 Given their existence as a legal network of contracts and the notion that an act of incorporation is needed to create an enterprise in the first place, the requirement of corporeality seems to be met rather easily for corporate actors and hence might not be the most exiting research topic.
Arguably, the non-consideration of corporate agency in this foundational yet dynamic and open-ended fashion has led the discourse on multinational enterprises in global governance into a conceptual dead end with two competing narratives. On the one hand, those who advance rationalist frameworks claim that any commitment of enterprises will always remain superficial and triggered by social pressure. In other words, as we advance strong assumptions on their intentions, we assume that corporate agency cannot change and hence their alleged role of becoming more involved in CSR and global governance remains limited (Whelan 2012; Lim/Tsutsui 2012; Haufler 2001). On the other hand, for those who essentialize corporate agency based on normative assumptions, we often find confusion between actual deeds and normative hopes. Based on the rather strong believe that enterprises eventually respond and adhere to broader corporate social responsibilities and social expectations, we see conclusions that it has assumingly already happened. In fact, based on necessity and the potential that enterprises change ‘for the better’, calls for further integrating these actors into global governance have been advanced (Ruggie 2013; Holzer 2010; Scherer/Palazzo 2006). Obviously, these race-to-the-top arguments clash with the race-to-the-bottom narrative, leaving the discourse undecided and questions on the origins and legitimacy of corporate agency unanswered. Arguably, neither captures the complexity of corporate realities in global governance nor allows us to engage in an advanced discussion understanding how these actors respond to social expectations and normative change.

More specifically, a relational take on corporate agency in global governance would not assume it as an *a priori* given but make it the very subject of study by focusing on their historical and contingent emergence as global governors. Instead of taking for granted that enterprises easily transition into new roles as global governors, one could reconstruct and challenge the narratives that first advocated and then later sustained corporate agency in global governance. In other words, one would look at the boundaries which define corporate actors at any particular moment in time and how these are being determined in social relations (Morgan 2001: 9-12). Furthermore, instead of charging research with assumptions on the nature of the firm – whether rational or normative – a relational framework would consider corporate agency in its social dimension. This would allow one to reconstruct how and along which socially shared meanings corporate agency has been established in global governance and whether there is normative ground to challenge those. Methodologically, one would engage with corporate documents and consider those as an “indispensable […] source of information about the range and robustness of the constraints faced” by enterprise in their struggle to establish and maintain agency rather than
discount those as cheap talk or take them as evidence of a changing role (Sabel/Zeitlin 1997: 15). Put simply, one would allow enterprises to voice their own thoughts on their agency. Debates during the 1970s when the UN Centre on Transnational Corporations failed to develop global mechanisms of regulating corporations arguably mark a critical juncture in the story here. This failure plus the ensuing commitment to neoliberalism created the foundation for a discourse which asserts that cross-border economic regulation can only be provided through or at least together with corporations. Gaining momentum over the years, the discourse culminated in public-private partnerships such as the UN Global Compact and others in the 2000s which only further established corporate agency in global governance (Kinderman 2012). Revealing the contentions and ambivalences in these processes seems to be a promising addition to research on corporate agency otherwise focused on the implications and design of governance arrangements. The following conclusion brings these and other considerations together.

**Conclusion & Outlook**

This theoretical note began with the concern that global governance, due to its substantial focus, so far has not contributed to theoretical discussions on agency. Put bluntly, the motivation to write this paper lies in the fact that the paradigm, even after years of influencing and opening IR, seems to be a lacking social-theoretical grounding. As such, global governance as a new contender did not solve but only further aggravated the problem of (not) studying agency in IR: While the discipline moved above and beyond its narrow focus on states, for the most part it only expanded the list of actors considered in empirical terms without theorizing the dispositions for and dynamics of their agency. As such, unfortunately, we still rely on substantial answers derived from anecdotes of actually exercised agency instead of theoretically considering potential agency in global governance. In other words, in the absence of one world government, we still trivialize the non-trivial question who governs the globe (Finnemore 2014: 223).

Against this shortcoming, I approached the notion of agency in theoretical terms by specifying three dispositions and spelled them out in a relational framework. I argued that each disposition should be thought of in terms of the ontological primacy of relations. According to this perspective, the ability to purposefully make a difference and act in the world out there in a meaning-oriented fashion does not reside in but rather between entities. Such a take on agency, I further argued, is useful since it allows us to raise new questions and consider the indeterminate nature of global governors and their agency in
world politics. Various challenges remain to be addressed, though, to establish a relational ontology as a meaningful and viable alternative in the study of world politics. For one, its real value cannot be determined through programmatic articles such as this. Rather, it must be shown in more detailed applications in which one would have to elaborate how to do relational research ‘all the way done’. There certainly is a challenge to find the balance between necessary abstraction and fixation on the one hand and the impetus to deessentialize all social phenomena and concepts due to their contingent nature on the other hand. More precisely, it remains unclear how to prevent substantialism from coming in through the back door while trying not to get lost in infinite regression. Put into methodological terms, if global governance is indeed a collection of processes, how can we justify bracketing parts of those, both time-wise as well as thematically? In terms of further theorization, one would also need to elaborate how the three dispositions relate to each other, how they reflect gradual rather than absolute qualities, and whether one can substitute for the other (i.e. do we already have agency if only two out of three are given?). More specifically, one would have to specify how to determine whether any given entity features them in the first place and how precisely they originate in relations (i.e. what does corporeality of global governors, for example, entail and how is it granted).

These open questions and challenges aside, theorizing agency in global governance at least helps us become aware of its inherent complexity, think of it in new ways, and question some of its established truths (e.g. effective governance and regulation of enterprises depends on the involvement of these very actors). In this light, paraphrasing Jackson/Nexon (1999), global governance has yet to learn to study relations before global governors. In other words, questions of who governs the world cannot be satisfactorily discussed let alone theoretically concluded through illustrations of anecdotal influence in particular empirical instances. Even in a discipline which defines itself with its substantial focus on world politics, a socio-theoretically informed discussion of agency thus seems unavoidable to move forward. Whichever ontological framework one advances in such a discussion, theorizing agency would make individual research more transparent and intersubjective and thereby more accessible, communicable, intelligible, and ultimately oriented towards dialog in the sense of engaged pluralism instead of reproducing paradigmatism (Sil/Katzenstein 2010; Lapid 2003). Questions of agency, when discussed as such, bring with them the challenge and the potential forward towards a post-paradigmatic, self-conscious, and theoretically reflective field tasked with nothing less than coming to grips with most complex and convoluted interactions otherwise known and described as world politics.
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