Abstract: International Relations theory conventionally frames questions of agency (i.e. which entities possess the capacity to act in world politics and thus are to be considered by the studies thereof) in substantial terms by referring to particular actor groups. Whether it is states, institutions, or individuals, and whether this conceptual move is made implicit or explicit, we ‘locate’ agency through our ontological commitments that these actors exist and act in world politics qua definition. Global governance, with its emphasis on other actors beyond the nation-state, only continued with this practice and did not provide a theoretical discussion on the qualities needed to be(come) an actor. As such, both conventional IR theory and global governance, only tell us whom to study based on claims on their respective relevance vis-à-vis others. Such claims allow us to sidestep any further debate or justification for our consideration of particular actors and, unsurprisingly, lead to research which will only confirm and sustain the relevance of the actors that we study. Against this backdrop of conceptual tautology, the paper contents that questions of who governs the world cannot be determined through illustrations of exercised influence and impact in particular instances, at least not if these illustrations are motivated by and advance substantial assumptions on agency in the first place. Rather, a more advanced discussion is needed which theorizes dispositions of agency in world politics (i.e. what does it take to be(come) an actor). Drawing on discussions between substantialism and relationalism, after reconstructing both perspectives, this paper ultimately argues that agency in global governance should not be considered as an inherent disposition but rather as the product of social interaction and recognition. Such a framework compels the researcher to not just assume a specific set of discrete actors but to focus on the relational processes through which agency emerges and becomes sustained. Considering these processes in detail reveal their political and contested nature and thus allows us to be more considerate and critical about who governs the world.

Keywords: global governance, agency, relationalism, International Relations theory
1. Introduction

Given IR’s substantial focus on world politics, the concept of agency is seldomly discussed in theoretical terms (Wight 2006: 178). Rather than theorizing the dispositions and qualities which constitute an actor as such in the first place, discussions often appear in the form of which actors matter in world politics. In these discussion, speaking broadly, different frameworks simply assume(d) the agency of different actors – be they state or non-state – as ontologically given. Informed by formal international law and everyday images of the ‘global’, (neo-)realists, for example, had no problems with framing states as the sole actors simply because they constitute the international system (Wolfers 1959: 105ff). And while (neo-)institutionalists soon began to question this monopoly of state agency by discussing international organizations as actors as well (Archer 1983), Wendt’s social constructivism reinstated the state as not only one but the main actor of world politics (Wendt 1992: 424). Each of these frameworks gave substantial answers to the question of who governs the world and thereby conceptualized agency as some form of constitutive and definitive essence (Jackson 2004: 285). Given the foundational character of these ontological assumptions, together with the inability to justify one’s particular focus on certain actors and not others, agency in IR unsurprisingly became yet another staging ground for disciplinary “paradigm battles”, organizing the intellectual engagement with agency in world politics along the lines of different and presumably irreconcilable schools of thought (Sil/Katzenstein 2010; Jackson/Nexon 2009).

Against this backdrop, global governance and its emphasis on agency beyond the nation-state entered the disciplinary stage. Within this framework, scholars began to advance and discuss a plethora of different actors and, against a discipline perceived to be too state-centric, presented them as influential and therefore as legitimate research objectives in order to transition from international relations to global studies (Barnett/Sikkink 2008). While this clearly expanded our knowledge of world politics and made the field more exciting and lively, global governance, just like conventional IR theory which it challenged, also did not theorize dispositions and qualities of agency. Instead, the contending paradigm continued the troublesome practice of essentializing agency by tracing

\[1\] Arguably, this initial observation is somewhat simplified and stylized due to a deliberative focus on mainstream IR theory debates. It does not do justice to more advanced discussions such as the so-called ‘agent-structure debate’ during the late 1980s and early 1990s (Wendt 1987; Dessler 1989; Hollis/Smith 1991). However, according to my reading, as well as the summary provided by (Wight 1999: 109ff), this debate in particular was not interested in theorizing agency above and beyond its conceptual relationship to structure. As such, while referred to throughout the paper, there is more to be said on agency than what has been discussed in this debate.
it within specific instances of world politics in which different entities exercised influence and ‘made a difference’. In other words, global governance significantly expanded our list of ‘global governors’ through well-crafted, empirically dense illustrations. However, these illustrations, motivated by rebutting and broadening a discipline’s understanding of agency otherwise limited to nation-states, continued to treat agency as a substance and simply located it elsewhere with other actors (Finnemore 2014). As such, while advancing convincing evidence that we are indeed witnessing wide-spread diversification of agency in world politics, global governance lacks a theoretical account of the dispositions needed to become a global governor in the first place. This is problematic because it confines us to anecdotesly report on new instances of agency but does not allow us to explain or critically assess who is authorized to govern the globe and provide public goods (Avant et al. 2010). More explicitly, global governance fell into the same trap of “process-reduction” just as conventional IR theory did and, in order to state their relevance, framed its actors under consideration as bounded “things” with a defined substance, separated from their social context (Porter 2009: 87f).

In order to initiate theoretical discussions on the concept of agency within IR – not in absolute terms (which is better left to philosophers of action and political theorists, anyway), but with specific contexts of world politics and global governance in mind – I propose in this theoretical note to theorize agency by considering the qualities needed to be(come) an actor. In a first step, the paper discusses three characteristics that seem to be shared – at least in general terms – between different approaches. Following this, the dispositions of agency are specified by discussing them respectively from within a substantial and a relational perspective. In a third and concluding step, I argue that IR, in order to avoid essentializing agency, has to consider and elaborate its commitment to the relational framework. This perspective, in particular, allows to study and assess processes of global governance in which agency emerges. While lacking in-depth empirical illustrations to sustain the argument, the paper nevertheless contends that considering these processes allows the scholar to embark on a normative discussion as to which actors should exercise agency in world politics.

---

2 For an early version of the same critique to IR theories focused mostly on states, which can, however, easily be expanded to include any expanded list of global governors, see Jackson/Nexon (1999).

3 In this vein, the paper connects to Zeitlin (2007)’s discussion on change and transition based on a historically informed perspective aware of the contingencies of social life. Put simply, considering the emergence of agency is one way of applying this mindset to global governance to reveal the thoroughly political nature of who governs the world.
2. Approaching Agency in IR and beyond

Despite the fact that philosophers of agency, together with 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, still remains elusive. Emirbayer/Mische (1998: 962), 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 but 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). Debates on agency in the subfield, at least during its early stages, were framed in substantial terms and considered whether it resides exclusively within (Wolfers 1959) or beyond (Haas 1964) nation-states. Albeit in different ways, later proponents of IR theory and their different contending paradigms perpetuated this essentialized notion of agency as they continued to locate it in particular entities without any further discussion, justifying either an exclusive focus on nation-states (Gilpin 1984: 301) or adding institutions to the picture (Keohane 1989: 6). And while Wendt (1999: 193ff)’s more reflective, theoretically informed discussion on the state and corporate agency helped in some way, it still remained rather limited in its overall contribution how to conceptualize and discuss agency in world politics (Jackson 2004).

Against this backdrop, but from a different angle, scholars of transnationalism and global governance during the 1990s came in and argued in favor of broadening IR’s notion of agency to include actors other than the nation-state (Barnett/Sikkink 2008; Weiss/Wilkinson 2014). Revisiting Keohane/Nye (1973), it was argued that a significant amount of governance activities on the global scale were provided by non-state actors (Risse-Kappen 1995). For obvious reasons, given IR’s historically ingrained focus on the state, their main impetus was to ‘prove’ the relevance of other actors vis-à-vis the nation-state. As such, in detailed case studies, single non-state actors – whether international organizations, multinational corporations, NGOs, pressure groups, think tanks or epis-

---

4 Wendt’s Social Theory obviously in this regard is a continuation of his early writing on the agent-structure debate (Wendt 1987). As mentioned above, proponents in this debate engaged with the task of defining agency in theoretical terms but did so mostly in relation to structure (Wight 2006: 178). Noteworthy exceptions within IR theory, which directly engaged with agency in theoretical terms, are, among others, Ringmar (1996b), Cederman (1997), Jackson (2003), Wight (2006), and Franke/Roos (2010) and are referred to below.
emic communities – were framed as ‘global governors’ (Avant et al. 2010). Other than their relevance for world politics, though, there was no theoretical justification provided why one should engage with these particular instances and study them in the first place. Thus, while greatly adding to our understanding of world politics, the introduction of global governance during the 1990s and its consideration of new actors did not provide the much needed discussion of agency in theoretical terms. Rather, if anything, the emphasis on agency beyond the nation-state and the consideration of transnational actors in particular only aggravated the issue by further essentializing agency in world politics without an elaborated discussion on the dispositions and qualities that constitute the ability to make a difference on the global scale in theoretical terms (Finnemore 2014: 223). As such, the question “which actors truly have agency – which actors are agents of G[lobal] G[overnance]” remained suspiciously unanswered, at least in theoretical terms (Hoffmann/Ba 2005: 255).

Arguably, the subfield’s reluctance, both in conventional IR theory and more recently in the global governance paradigm, to engage with agency in theoretical terms and the confusion and unspecificity surrounding the concept following from the lack of engagement can be explained in two ways. On the one hand, very mundane and intuitive notions of agency exist and influence our thinking of world politics so that we do not feel a pressing need to reflect and theorize on it. Among other social science concepts, Gilbert (1989: 3ff) rightfully describes agency as an “everyday concept” and argues that its structure must be made explicit in order to go beyond simplistic and limited accounts of it. As Fleming (2016) elaborates, this is specifically true to IR. While we can easily connect to action-sentences such as ‘country X / NGO Y / company Z did so and so’ and thus implicitly take the agency of certain entities for granted, there seems to be little theoretical reflection on the concept. On the other hand, beliefs in the capacity of the individual human being who is able to act are deeply ingrained into Western philosophy and our culture of modernity (Meyer/Jepperson 2000; Archer 2000). Whether it is rational, instrumental action of the homo oeconomicus, or the normatively-oriented homo sociologicus, agency in political philosophy and social theory is simply taken for granted and, as such, is discussed more in terms of its consequences and not its dispositions (Joas 1996: 7ff). Put differently, “modern men distanced themselves from the world in order to reflect upon it in a cool and objective fashion” and we take this distance for granted since it allows us to argue in favor of and sustain the emancipated and free individual liberal-democratic societies depend on (Ringmar 1996a: 65).

Taken together, we assume agency to be obvious and not in need of further discussion.
As a consequence, we tend to think of agency simply as the capacity of an actor (individual or collective) to act and do not further contest this truism (Strauss 1993: 22ff). Once defined in this convenient manner as the competence, condition, or state of acting, IR scholars take the second step before the first and locate agency in diverse phenomena, ascribing the ability to act in world politics, among others, to “[states], corporations, unions, charities, provinces, intergovernmental organizations, rebel groups, drug cartels, the global market and the international community” (Fleming 2016: 18).\(^5\) In semantic terms, we thus 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” exercises agency (Jackson 2003: 55). As such, we distinguish between actions and impersonal processes — the former represents “something done by an agent” whereas the latter happens as a consequence of otherwise inert processes (such as evaporation of water, for example) (Rescher 1996: 48f). At the same time, we remain rather unspecific as to which entities can be(come) actors. Hence, with this distinction in mind, we need to specify the qualities which constitute the ability to act in the first place. Across the board of different theories, three particular characteristics stand out that offer a useful first approach to agency in theoretical terms.\(^6\)

First, as was already touched upon above, we closely associate agency with the ability to make a difference. In structuration theory, for example, agency differs from structure because the latter is passive and inert whereas the former is associated with action and change (Giddens 1984: 6ff). In this sense, agency implies the power and efficacy (Wirkmächtigkeit) to intervene in the world out there based on certain representations and perceived images of one’s environment (List/Pettit 2011: 20). In other words, in order to realize agency, we need to be capable of at least attempting to impact another actor, the social structure around us, or the processes we are involved in. Agency thus “presumes […] 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 [in order] to ‘make a difference’ to a preexisting state of affairs or course of events” (Giddens 1984: 14). As Emirbayer (1997: 294) puts it, it is our agency through which we “‘breath[...] life’ into passive, inert substances […] that otherwise would remain perpetually at rest”. At the same time, we tend to think of agency simply as the capacity of an actor (individual or collective) to act and do not further contest this truism (Strauss 1993: 22ff). Once defined in this convenient manner as the competence, condition, or state of acting, IR scholars take the second step before the first and locate agency in diverse phenomena, ascribing the ability to act in world politics, among others, to “[states], corporations, unions, charities, provinces, intergovernmental organizations, rebel groups, drug cartels, the global market and the international community” (Fleming 2016: 18).\(^5\) In semantic terms, we thus 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” exercises agency (Jackson 2003: 55). As such, we distinguish between actions and impersonal processes — the former represents “something done by an agent” whereas the latter happens as a consequence of otherwise inert processes (such as evaporation of water, for example) (Rescher 1996: 48f). At the same time, we remain rather unspecific as to which entities can be(come) actors. Hence, with this distinction in mind, we need to specify the qualities which constitute the ability to act in the first place. Across the board of different theories, three particular characteristics stand out that offer a useful first approach to agency in theoretical terms.\(^6\)

\(^5\) Obviously, this list is not exhaustive and no list will ever be. The lack of referring to individuals in his list can be explained by Fleming’s focus on collective entities.

\(^6\) Note that List/Pettit (2006: 87) list different ‘conditions of agency’ in their discussion. I believe they do so because they slip a particular ontological stance into their framework by discussing rationality as one of the prerequisites. In their later work (List/Pettit 2011: 11ff), they drop this item and refer only to representational and motivational states as well as the ability to intervene in the environment.
time, we should not limit agency to those instances in which we are indeed successful in ‘making a difference’ as we can fail in our attempt to exercise agency at any particular point in time. However, we cannot think agency without an agentic component to it and that component is grounded in the theoretical potential to exercise influence and have an impact on others and the world out there (Clegg 1989: 187ff).

Second, agency is a function of being somehow anchored and located in time and space. Without such a connection to the here and now, even the theoretical possibility of making a difference is not perceivable. For Dewey (1931: 306), this anchoring is provided through corporeality which marks a “complex of physico-chemical interactions” between an individual body and its environment, connecting “processes which are going on outside the body” with those happening inside. In other words, to make a difference, any entity must be able to relate to others in a physical sense and this ability is, in many theories of action, endowed through the quality of corporeality defined as the individual actor’s connection to her or his environment (Franke/Roos 2010: 1069). In other words, instead of only being pursued as a mental act, we can consider agency only when it becomes physically perceivable and that transition demands being able to connect to the world out there. Corporeality as the quality to do so, however, does not have to be taken literally as we can image both physical and corporate bodies relating to each other. Whether it is individual or collective, though, it is the anchoring in the present that allows actors to perform actions with an iterational, as well as, a projective element in mind (Emirbayer/Mische 1998: 970ff).

Third, virtually all theories of action consider the existence of some sort of intentional-ity, motivation, and purpose as a prerequisite for agency (Giddens 1984: 8f). Independent of further specification, agency, in some form or another, has to represent the “commonsense notion of purposive action” (Coleman 1990: 13). If not, why should actors decide to become active in the first place? In other words, agency does not refer to mere behavior but rather refers to occurrences in which the agent actively “exercises control” through pursuing particular aims or objectives with the action, independent whether the action is

7 The distinction between mental and physical acts is different from the distinction advanced in IR within the rationalist logic of consequentialism between ‘real action’ and rhetoric or ‘cheap talk’ since a physical act can be the uttering of a promise or a thread without any immediate, substantial real-world consequences while mental acts refer solely to actions that are done “in foro interno” (Rescher 1996: 50).

8 Obviously, whether we are considering an individual or a collective implies significant differences in how to further theorize agency. For the time being, though, we can imagine both types of actors developing agency in world politics and there is no need to reduce agency, at least for the discussion at hand, to individuals writ large.
Consciously reflected or happens habitually, as well as whether she or he succeeds in realizing the original purpose or not (Rescher 1996: 49). One way or another, an actor needs to first perceive and then relate to a prior state of affairs, though, and this perception is guided by her or his intent to intervene and make a difference. This intervention, in order to qualify as action, must be meaningfully in the sense that the author of the action is not motivated by instinct or reflex, but rather pursues some goal with the action (Gilbert 1989: 24ff). Whether we describe and conceptualize such goals as purposefully and intentionally maximizing one’s interests within a rational-instrumental framework or in a normative fashion where actors are motivated by norms and other standards of appropriate behavior (Joas 1996: 145ff) – among other concepts, Emirbayer/Mische (1998: 962) add self-hood, will, choice, initiative, freedom, and creativity to the list – agency essentially represents the ability to associate a certain meaning, however subjective and in this sense ’wrong’ in the eyes of others it might be, to an action and then intentionally pursue aims through meaningful action on this basis instead of mere reflexive, instinct-driven, and stimuli-generated behavior:

“In 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: 49)

Taken together, these three characteristics of agency by themselves do not suggest any finite, essential conclusion as to which entities can be considered as actors in any particular field of study. However, we can follow up on this theoretical prelude by now considering how each of them are spelled out within different approaches, whether reflected or implicit. Within IR, in order to provide finite answers as to who governs the world and to motivate and sustain substantive research, this is commonly done in two related yet analytically separate steps. First, at least since Waltz (1959), if not earlier, we locate agency on different levels and frame it in individual or collective terms. While discussing agency at the individual level might be richer and ‘more authentic’, we content that the collective level provides more comprehensive and general answers (Singer 1961: 89ff). Obviously, this entails certain assumptions, as well as certain decisions of how the ability to make a difference, how corporeality, and how intentionality is being thought of, conceptualized, and discussed within one’s research. Second, we can distinguish between two different ontological stances in terms of how the characteristics are spelled out in detail. Locating agency solely within the individual actor (whether literally individual or collective), we can perceive of agency as substance. Alternatively, we can locate agency originating between entities and hence in relational terms (Emirbayer 1997). Combining these two dimensions and their manifestations, we can conceive a 4x4 matrix of idealtypes of agency. Given that
### Table 1: Ideal types of Agency on Different Levels and Within Different Ontological Stances

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Different Levels of Analysis</th>
<th>Different Ontological Stances</th>
<th>self-actional / substantial</th>
<th>trans-actional / relational</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>individual</td>
<td>individual humans</td>
<td>individual humans</td>
<td>individual humans as nexi of relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>all the way down</td>
<td>all the way down</td>
<td>as nexi of relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>collective</td>
<td>corporate actors</td>
<td>collective entities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>all the way up</td>
<td>as nexi of relations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
much has been written on the level of analysis-question, the next two sections will focus on the implications of framing agency either in substantial or relational terms. While the paper contents that the relational perspective offers promising insights, in particular on the question how agency emerges in world politics, each perspective will be reconstructed in their own terms. As such, instead of arguing in favor of always privileging one over the other, it is in the spirit of ‘engaged pluralism’ (Lapid 2003) through which the paper hopes to provide a new view on some of the old and vexing issues of agency in world politics and advance the discussion.  

2.1. Just be it – Agency as Substance

In his blistering critique of structural functionalism, Homans (1964: 809ff) outlined a notion of agency that was firmly grounded in an ontology that assumed the independent and autonomous existence of individuals. The autonomy of these individuals, so they argument, rested in the idea that each of them was motivated by clearly defined interests that they advanced whenever they interacted with others. Connecting to actor images in economics and in order to argue against social predetermination, their agency was framed as a “proposition of psychology” and was ultimately owned by the individual (Homans 1964: 814). In order to realize their interests, individuals were assumed to be able to engage in inward reflection framed as cost/benefit calculations. Such individual, pre-social reflection, considered as the quintessence of agency, occurred prior to situational perception, sensations, and impressions. While taking the preferences of others into consideration, agency thus was located exclusively within the individual. It was the existence of an actor qua themselves that constituted their agency conceptualized in absolute, substantial terms. Scaling upwards from the individual, it was the social sciences and their larger interests that extrapolated this stance on individual agency (in the literal sense) to other collective actors to conceptualize them within a framework of methodological individualism as autonomous entities (Ringmar 1996a: 53ff).

Homans (1964)’s contribution, albeit an important one, obviously is not the first in this stream of thought. Drawing from various key thinkers, this tradition connects, among others, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, John Stuart Mill, Adam Smith, Max Weber, Karl Popper, and Friedrich Hayek, and thus represents a mode of thinking, as well as an image of agency, that is deeply rooted in Western philosophy (Joas/Knöbl 2009: 27ff). More specifically, as early as the turn of the eighteenth century, the idea of a ‘modern

---

9 With this in mind, it is only fair to admit as a disclaimer that in my own work, I am leaning towards the relational perspective and hence will not be unbiased in the following accounts.
self’ situated in the individual actor and her or his ‘inner nature’ emerged. Frameworks of theorizing agency that connect to and sustain this inner nature have interchangeably been described and discussed as individual, individualist, atomistic, substantial, or self-actional (Taylor 1989: 185ff). For the discussion at hand, the different frameworks converge on the notion that the characteristics of agency discussed in the prior section are spelled out by separating actors from their environment. In fact, as will be shown below, their efficacy, their corporeality, and their intentionality all originate in their independent existence, giving each absolute quality and thereby constitute agency as a substantial disposition of the individual actor (whether an actual individual or a collective entity) (Emirbayer 1997: 283ff). Oftentimes inspired by economic thinking, the “individualist science” per se, this perspective advances a notion of agency that can be read as a rebuttal of social holism, as well as a defensive mechanism against the overarching force of socialization and predetermination and thus embodies certain commitments, images, and everyday notions familiar to those socialized in societies and political systems stressing the importance of the individual (Udehn 2001: 228ff).

In terms of efficacy, it comes as no surprise that this is exclusively reserved to the acting individual. In fact, agency is derived from the separation of said individual and its social context. In other words, the assumed efficacy of the individual lies in his or her ability to ‘take a step back’ and then act against the context from which the actor, by definition, remains separated. Efficacy, in other words, is an individual disposition. Taken to the ontological extreme, it has been argued that the only causes of social change are the actions of individual actors (Lukes 1990: 110ff). In other words, it is “individual properties, their goals, their beliefs, and their actions” that ultimately constitute and explain social dynamics and phenomena all the way down (Elster 1985: 5). This is not to argue, though, that the only real actors are individuals (see below). Connecting the individual to the collective level, List/Petit (2006: 90) argue that collective agency can be treated as the “framework within which individual contributions – paradigmatically, judgments and actions – are made and a framework in virtue of which the group-level judgments are formed”. In other words, while ‘primary efficacy’ rests with individual individuals, this framework can also be applied to collective actors which, for all intents and purposes, can also be conceptualized as separated from their context and hence as aggregated “site[s] from which actions proceed” (Rovane 2014: 1670).

Following this train of thought, corporeality in this perspective is also spelled out in absolute terms while being located on different levels of aggregation at the same time. In a literal sense, the individual obviously ‘owns’ a body and hence can use this body to
interact in the world out there. Through acts of incorporation, though, this corporeality, out of the necessity to also be able to consider larger social phenomena, is also granted to collective actors. In IR, this instigated the state-as-actors theory, which inherently features an anthropomorphic view of agency as it is commonly presented in unitary, coherent terms. Framed in methodological terms, collective actors in this perspective receive their corporeality by considering them as ‘black boxes’ – just as the individual makes decisions and thereby exercises agency through his or her bodily connection to the world, so do collective actors, independent of their internal set-up, processes, and potential conflicts prior to the decision (Singer 1961: 81ff). More importantly, in either case, whether it is individual or collective corporeality, corporeality as a precondition for agency is perceived as static and objectified in the sense that it has a lasting, independent existence. More explicitly, it is hard-wired into the respective theories drawing from this ontological stance and thereby provide ‘facticity’ to the assumed agency of social phenomena to the point that we do not challenge it anymore (Cederman 1997: 19ff). Thinking corporeality in this vein in both literal and metaphorical terms, while not being the ultimate panacea to the level-of-analysis impasse, at least perpetuated countless research agendas in IR and gained acceptance throughout the field (Fleming 2016: 17f). Abbott summarizes this stance most emphatically when he argues:

“The prototypical entity in modern social thought is the biological human being. We think about social entities as overgrown versions of such biological individuals, and, thus, have become accustomed to think that social entities have essences like biological individuals, that they have some internal plan or thingness or Aristotelian substance.”(Abbott 1996: 860)

Just as with efficacy and corporeality, intentionality in this framework is also substantialized and located in different entities ranging from the individual to collective actors. More specifically, it is framed in absolute terms, whether it is rational self-interest or norm adherence. Coleman (1986: 1312), for example, argues that “actions are ‘caused’ by their (anticipated) consequences”, giving ontological primacy to the intentions and motivations of actors. In fact, intentionality, and more importantly the autonomy needed to make your own free choices, becomes a key element in this perspective since the conceptual notion of fixed interests determining our action depends on (a) locating the ability to foresee consequences with the individual and (b) conceptualizing this as being independent from

---

10 Those critical of the substantial framework refer to this practice of granting corporeality to different actors as reification by which we turn social phenomena into ‘things’. We thereby not only grant them “an unproblematic status, implying that they do not require any explanation” anymore (Cederman 1997: 20), but also face the ‘embarrassment of changes’ which we cannot explain nor assess in normative terms (Jackson/Nexon 1999: 296ff).
the actual acting (Donati 2011: 22f). In other words, intentionality becomes an absolute disposition of agency. Other than reordering our predefined, asocial preferences every now and then, “one acts as a singular agent in so far as one acts in the light of one’s goals” (Gilbert 1989: 12, emph. in original). Void of any social predetermination, actors possess intentionality by virtue of their existence and engage in interaction with others based on their hierarchy of preferences. Agency itself, as well as the intentionality by which it is constituted, thus exist prior to interaction and motives, interests, and reasons for acting are just as static as is the existence of autonomous actors in the world out there (Ringmar 1996a: 60ff). The act itself merely becomes the ‘follow-through’ of a script defined in absolute terms, whether it is rationally informed or driven by normative expectations (Joas 1996: 4f). Such differences aside, we all follow the same mode of action and only differ in our intentions and preferences:

“The agent is always already a ‘self’, having all the necessary morals and beliefs within it. All acts are caused by the agent, who is, as it were pre-formed (i.e. having no causal history”(Donati 2011: 23)11

Taken together, the substantial take on agency provides nothing less than a “modern orthodoxy” based on the “corresponding notions that people, but also collective entities like states ‘act in their interests’; and that actions can be explained by reference to the interests that brought these actions about” (Ringmar 1996a: 63f). As indicated in table 1, different actors on different levels are imagined to hold and exercise agency. While individuals literally represent “modernity’s man” (Archer 2000: 51ff), collective actors are treated as-if within the same framework. For both types of actors, interests serve as reason to act as well as a precondition for agency. As such, it is inconceivable to meaningfully apply this perspective without a priori defining interests and thereby relying on supplementary theories such as rational choice or normative action. Specifically the former has been charged with essentializing otherwise unspecified interests in a narrow fashion, whether it is national interests (Ringmar 1996a), the interests of an organization or bureaucracy (Barnett/Finnemore 1999), corporate interests (Hofferberth 2017), interests advanced within NGO networks (Sell/Prakash 2004), or individual’s interest (Homans 1964). In each instance, interests define agency and precisely because of this logical shortcut, the framework allows researchers to engage in vernacular reasoning

11 Once we discuss the inherent creativity of agency proposed within the relational perspective, the scope and consequences of framing intentionality as an independent and individual disposition will become more obvious. For the time being it is suffice to say that action in this perspective is best described as choosing between ready-made, alternative actions from a list of options available to the individual actor.
targeted at the world out there (Cederman 1997: 20).\(^\text{12}\)

To conclude this section, consider the study of multinational enterprises in global governance as an illustration of both the potential and the limitations of this perspective on agency. Corporate actors, among others, have clearly been established as legitimate research objects within the subfield (May 2015; Ougaard/Leander 2010). Through this effort, though, their agency became substantialized and is now taken for granted. In other words, once we assume that enterprises indeed ‘sit at the table’, we spend more time and energy on understanding the implications of this than challenging the facticity of the assumption in the first place. More specifically, under the label of Corporate Social Responsibility and Corporate Governance, the integration of corporate actors into global governance has mainly been studied in terms of consequences and implications for the quality and structure of the provision of public goods. We discuss to a lesser extent, however, where corporate agency in global governance comes from in the first place and how it is enacted by the enterprises themselves. More specifically, from within a substantial framework, it is impossible to consider political deliberation and processes in which corporate agency became recognized and whether we should welcome or challenge the functional logic behind this (Hofferberth 2017: 25ff). As will be shown in the next part, such themes can only be discussed once the notion of corporate agency is considered in its historical and contingent emergence in relations rather than taking it for granted to consider its implications.

2.2. How to Be(come) an Actor – Agency in Relations

With different labels floating around in the discourse, as well as different sources referenced in order to bolster its validity, it is fair to say that the framework of relationalism overall recently gained momentum and recognition in IR and beyond. Described as an “ontology of entanglement” (Zanotti 2017), hailed as the “new 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 explicitly draw to relationalism (Qin 2016; DeMars/Dijkzeul 2015; Sending et al. 2015) or at least connect to it through its roots in American Pragmatism (Hofferberth 2017; Pratt 2016; Avant 2016).\(^\text{13}\) While diverse in

\(^{12}\) Despite their strong critique on reification, their preference for processual relationalism, and their ultimate judgment that substantialism only provides the “illusion of agency”, even Jackson/Nexon (1999: 294 & 299f) recognize the need to fixate certain entities in one’s research program in order to get anywhere.

\(^{13}\) One anecdotal indicator for this momentum is that other references could have been used to underscore the same argument since the one used are only illustrative and do not represent all work recently
the particular topics covered, scholars with an affinity towards relationalism seem to agree that IR would benefit from such an ontology in which agency is conceptualized in processual, dynamic terms. Rather than assuming agency to represent a static disposition of actors in world politics as such, it is the emergent properties of those entities that scholars in this perspective are interested in (Avant et al. 2010; Finnemore 2014).

Speaking broadly, scholars drawing on the relational perspective stress the social character of human existence and language. More specifically, in a terminology first advanced by Dewey/Bentley (1949: 107ff), this translates into a framing of human agency as *trans*-actional. In this framing, as Dépelteau (2008: 63) argues, “[t]here is no pure ‘individual’ action (or agency) outside, beside, or prior to social relations”. Instead of presenting agency as *self*-actional “where things are viewed as acting under their own powers” (Dewey/Bentley 1949: 108), our very capacity to act in the first place originates in relations. As (Donati 2011: xi) makes it his motto to underline the foundational character of this approach, “in the beginning is the relation”. According to this perspective, then, efficacy, corporeality, and intentionality as dispositions of agency are all culturally constructed and reproduced in interaction (Meyer/Jepperson 2000: 106ff). Consequently, agency is granted, not possessed – it originates in relations and does not rest in the individual actor 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). Agency thus cannot be reified in or confined to particular instances but rather has to be considered as a dynamic and moving target. Based on these preliminary remarks, we can now in greater detail ‘decline’ the *trias* of agency as outlined in the last section from a relational perspective.

First, in terms of efficacy, ontological primacy is obviously given to relations. Instead of reducing those to mere “link[s] between structure (situation, context, condition) and social actors (with their dispositions, motivations, reasons, intentions)” (Donati 2011: 31, original emphasis), relations are considered to come first and constitute both structure and actor. In other words, interaction is foundational and whatever enters it might fundamentally change through it. Hence, if we are interested in the social dynamics, “[w]e should not look for boundaries of things but for things of boundaries” (Abbott published in this vein. I am hesitant to call it a turn, though, simply because, (a) its contours are not quite delineated and spelled out just yet, and (b) IR already experienced too many turns. Rather than a turn in the sense of a new and wide-spread interest articulated collectively, it might just that we perceive those arguments that we are biased towards in the first place to appear more frequently and confuse them with a majority position that probably does not exist anymore in a specialized, fragmented field (Jackson/Nexon 2009).
For such things of boundaries, the primacy of relations does not limit but constitute efficacy. Again, the very ability to make a difference originates in relations and plays out relationally. In other words, efficacy does not reside in pre-defined entities nor represents an inherent, self-contained actor disposition. Rather, entities develop their efficacy as a nexus of relations once those become stabilized enough temporarily. In other words, it is through virtue of particular configurations and social embeddedness through which actors emerge as such and exercise influence. Granted, due to prior processes of ‘yoking’, for most if not all social interaction, there is always a “soup of preexisting actors and actions”. However, their efficacy “ford it with difficulty and in it [may] disappear” as “new actors, new entities, new relations among old parts” emerge out of it (Abbott 1996: 863). All in all, given that relations themselves are “preeminently dynamic in nature [and represent] unfolding, ongoing processes rather than [...] static ties among inert substances”, efficacy has to be considered in its relational and dynamic dimension (Emirbayer 1997: 289).

Second, corporeality in a relational perspective should also be thought of in figurative terms. In fact, emphasizing the corporeality of individuals in a literal sense would imply a voluntaristic moment of independent agency above and beyond their relational existence and sneak in notions of substantialism through the back door. Rather, in addition to physiological connections to the outside world, which, depending on the type of interaction, can be considered as a strong ‘yoking’ process, the very subjectivity of any individual is at least equally defined through her or his social embeddedness and formation (Joas 1993: 73ff). Radically speaking, we as individuals discover and continuously develop our own corporeality in social terms and in interaction as we continue to experience a resistant and rigid reality.

The same can be argued for collective actors since the effects of relations are logically not confined to the individual. As such, very different social phenomena can develop corporeality if granted in relations. Once legally or socially incorporated – literally translating into “embodying” an entity as a ‘process of personation’ (Jackson 2004: 281) – for all intents and purposes, “social actors, the parties of ongoing transaction, 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 an ‘internal decision structure’ which can serve as a substitute for the individual body and

---

14 The principal dynamic nature of relations should not be confused with permanent change, though. Relational reproduction of agency in configurations can also translate into long-term stasis, as Jackson/Nexon (1999: 314) convincingly elaborate.

15 Those familiar with the discourse on gender theory obviously might not consider this to be a radical argument to begin with (Weber 1999).
its physiological connections to the outside world (Wendt 1999: 218ff). As such, developing a ‘body image’ as a notion and awareness of one’s body and the capacities that come with it and making this “subjectively present for the actor”, together with the capacity to activate it, determines corporeality, both for individual human beings considered as ‘primary actors’ and collective actors (Joas 1996: 175f). 16

Third and finally, intentionality also has to be reconsidered. First, in order to unpack complex notions such as motivation, interest, and purpose which remain indeterminate until they are discovered and refined in social relations, relationalism adds reflexivity to the picture. Drawing on Mead’s distinction between ‘I’ and ‘Me’ (Mead 1967 [1934]: 173ff), this quality is understood as the aptitude to relationally consider one’s own actions as objects and thus adapt them in the light of emergent interaction (Franke/Roos 2010: 1069). In other words, relational intentionality is not based on fixed properties and changes in interaction as we stabilize relations by ‘putting ourselves in their shoes’. It has to be adapted and modified as relations and interaction unfolds. As such, against such an indeterminate nature of social reality, relationalism replaces the notion of intentionality with creativity and self-consciousness of acting (Joas 1996: 70ff). 17

Meaning-oriented action towards others can only be sustained by creatively reflecting upon “ends-in-view”. Instead of following a particular script, whether it is rational or normative, outcomes of such reflexive processes are by no means predetermined. Rather, any action “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). As such, it is through changing our intentions in acting by which “we surprise ourselves by our own action” (Mead 1967 [1934]: 174). In other words, relationalism advances an active and dynamic notion of intentionality since the purpose associated with a particular action is not independent nor separated from said action and keeps evolving in the process thereof (Giddens 1984: 281ff). It is important to emphasize that this is not a rejection but a modification of intentionality: derived from our embeddedness in particular configurations and interaction in the first place, we are intentional in our actions precisely because we continue to reflect on them and thereby change associated purposes:

“In response to the utilitarian model of rational action, pragmatist thinkers such as John

16 Considering the semantics of organizational research, it is revealing in this vein that we refer to individual parts of hierarchical structures as ‘organs’.

17 Obviously, some social situations appear to us as rather stable which is why American Pragmatism distinguishes between routine and crisis. However, said distinction is gradual and situations of both types can be consciously reflected upon in order to clarify what an actor tries to achieve.
Dewey and George Herbert Mead, as well as social phenomenologists such as Alfred Schutz, insist that action 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: 967f)\textsuperscript{18}

Advanced in order to debunk substantialism and its core assumptions nested in Western philosophy, the relational view on agency in general and its particular understandings of efficacy, corporeality, and intentionality can be read in juxtaposition to what has been discussed in the previous section. Taken together, agency is granted in relations and always ‘performed’ within loose and ever-changing configurations of different actors who recognize or challenge each other’s ability to influence outcomes (Avant et al. 2010: 8f). Being the contender against an assumed orthodoxy where “the majority of IR theories are substantialist” (Jackson/Nexon 1999: 293), relationalism, at least in its IR pick-up, resonates with a certain corralling strawmen rhetoric of self-marginalization. Independent of this, though, there is clearly an important message to be considered as relationalism challenges both structuralism, individualism, and any co-determining theories such as structuration theory in between (Donati 2011: 168ff). More specifically to world politics, emphasizing its openness and the dynamic, processual nature allows the scholar to approach her or his particular subjects with less theoretical baggage and no \textit{a priori} assumptions on the substance of actor dispositions (such as states having national interests or corporations acting rationally, etc.). On the downside of this, relationalism appears rather counter-intuitive and thus faces a larger burden of proof, at least within a subfield for the longest time informed by substantialist accounts of agency (Jackson/Nexon 1999: 299ff).

More specifically, the potential and limitations of a relational view can again be further illustrated by considering how one could study multinational enterprises in global governance. For the most part, from a relational perspective, one would not assume their agency \textit{a priori} as given but made the subject of study. Instead of taking for granted that corporate actors in recent years, and in particular through the notion of corporate social responsibility, easily transitioned into becoming global governors and now represent ‘political actors’ (Holzer 2010; Scherer/Palazzo 2006), one could question the narratives that first advocated for and then later sustained corporate agency in global regulation. These narratives can be retraced to the 1970s when the UN Centre on Transnational Corporations failed to institutionalize global mechanisms of regulating corporations. Adding insult to injury, this failure laid the foundation for an emerging discourse, further strengthened

\textsuperscript{18} Those socialized in IR theories might recognize an affinity in this position to social constructivism. While clearly there, it can be argued, though, that the position advanced here is more comprehensive and certain aspects to it have been lost in the IR-specific turn (Barder/Levine 2012).
through the global turn to neoliberalism, which extended the argument that regulations could only be provided together with corporations. Gaining momentum over the years, this discourse culminated in public-private partnerships such as the UN Global Compact and many others in the 2000s (Sagafi-nejad 2008). Instead of charging research on these narratives with assumptions on the nature of the firm – whether rational or normative – a relational framework would discuss corporate agency and sense-making in its social embeddedness and in interaction with others. It would thus allow one to reconstruct how and along which meanings corporate agency has been established in global governance and whether there is normative ground to challenge it (Hofferberth 2017). Based on this short illustration, the respective value of relationalism in IR is further elaborated in a comparative perspective in the following conclusion.

3. Concluding Thoughts on Relationalism and Agency

This theoretical note began with the concern that IR, due to its substantial focus, has a limited interest in agency in theoretical terms by definition. Given that ontological assumptions on actors and their agency are foundational (and as such unavoidable), not engaging with and reflecting on them has lead to paradigmatic incommensurability between different approaches (Jackson/Nexon 2009). The introduction of global governance as a new contender in this vein did not solve but only further aggravated the problem: While the discipline moved above and beyond its narrow focus on states, it only expanded the list of actors considered without theorizing the requirements for and dynamics of their agency (Finnemore 2014: 223). Against this backdrop, the paper approached agency by specifying three components. These components were then, in the main section, related to two different ontological perspectives. While substantialism thinks efficacy, corporeality, and intentionality as belonging to individualized actors and thereby allows the researcher to include necessary abstractions to discuss implications and consequences of agency, it was argued that relationalism advances for each of the components a non-literal understanding derived from the ontological primacy of relations. According to this perspective, the ability to purposefully make a difference and intervene in the world out there in a meaning-oriented fashion does not reside in entities but rather between them.

As with any foundational distinction on the ontological level, choosing between these two frameworks is based, at least to some extent, on personal experiences, world views, and (potentially non-academic) understandings of how the world hangs together – in the best sense, they remain ‘philosophical wagers’ which we have to take independent of whether we
are aware of their implications and potential alternatives. As such, a dialogical approach of engaged pluralism that recognizes differences is to be preferred over any implicit orthodoxy or outright denying scientific validity to one or the other by unreasonably raising the burden of proof out of social convention and ‘established practices (Jackson 2016: 26ff). However, above and beyond becoming aware of the differences between these frameworks, I believe the respective research subject should also be considered when placing our wagers. More specifically, if we assume that global governance is defined by its absence of legal-formal rule and characterized by the interaction of a plethora of different actors exercising authority in different ways (Weiss/Wilkinson 2014; Lake 2010), this paper contents that notions of substantial agency seem to be conceptually limited. Relationalism, on the other hand, appears to be better suited to consider the dynamics of agency which establish(ed) the foundations of current manifestations of world politics in the first place. With this in mind, what remains to be done is to spell out the respective value of relationalism in the study of world politics. This is done by first considering the relative limitations and shortcoming of substantialism facing the complexity and dynamic nature of global governance. Second, in a more positive twist, relationalism’s potential of studying new actors and new modes of governance is considered.

To begin with the limitations of substantialism when studying global governance, this position is arguably more a continuation of commonsensical assumptions on agency than a full-fledged and self-reflective theory of it. Obviously, throughout the centuries, theorists added layers of sophistication to it. In the end, though, it originates in the foundational belief in the individual and hence reflects deep ideological commitments (Archer 2000: 51ff). Ever since the Enlightenment, against the need of social sciences to explain collective actors and large-scale phenomena, these assumptions have been extended and applied beyond the individual to consider collective actors as well. However, these debates remain far from being settled and the substance that might consist within the individual surely does not travel well to collective actors. As documented, for example, in the state-personhood debate (Franke/Roos 2010; Jackson 2004; Ringmar 1996b), the fact that states could be treated as individuals remains contested. Furthermore, organizational studies have long questioned the assumption that collective actors act just as rationally as individuals (Brunsson 1989) and argued that the incorporation of agency in organizations significantly changes its dynamics (Clegg 1989: 193ff). More importantly, substantialism, in its opposition to social holism and determination of the free will, completely disregards

19 Similar arguments have recently been advanced, among others by Qin (2016), Sending et al. (2015), and Porter (2009).
Matthias Hofferberth – “Theorizing Agency in Global Governance”

social embeddedness and replaces the social dimension of agency with either rational and stable preferences held within calculating automatons or by reducing it to following certain normative scripts pursued and realized by ‘norm dopes’ (Granovetter 1985; Beckert 2003). As such, substantialism ultimately translates into stimulus-driven behavior and cannot sustain any real notion of action, at least not in the sense of open-ended, meaningful probing through which the very author of the action (i.e. the actor) is affected by it instead of just conducting it (Abbott 1996; Rescher 1996).

These general concerns in particular matter when studying global governance. Given its abstract and indeterminate nature, it is tempting to post hoc report on and thereby rationalize agency – whether it is states acting through the UN or corporate actors in private governance (Zeitlin 2007). However, in the end global governance main feature is its complexity and the fact that different actors find themselves sitting together at a new table. We do not know about these configurations for any particular issue until after our studies. Nevertheless, we tend to start our research because we are motivated by a particular research interest in one actor group (such as what is the role of multinational enterprises in world politics). Against this backdrop, we need to be very careful not to substantialize their agency because we are otherwise running the danger of being caught up in our own tautology: We assume the relevance of particular actors first to then advance empirical studies to find these actors to be relevant and our initial assumptions confirmed and vindicated (Shapiro 2004: 19). In other words, as outlined in the paper, substantialism assumes agency dispositions to then study their implications. If interaction, however, remains indeterminate as it unfolds which arguably is the case in many governance initiatives, our theories and conceptual tools must be equally open. In fact, if anything, the liberating move of global governance to open up the notion of governance to include all sorts of activities carried out by a plethora of different actors with different constituencies should push us towards considering the processual dimension of agency. In a nutshell, within the substantial framework, there seems to be a lot of unnecessary confining in terms of relying on theoretical a priori assumptions on the relevance and nature of specific actors simply because it provides convenient, ready-made answers about (a) which actors should be considered and (b) their respective motivations, preferences, and intentions. Neither are reconstructed in research, though (Jackson/Nexon 2004).

Adding to this in a more positive fashion, one can argue that the very nature of global governance lends itself to relationalism (Qin 2016). Since “governance involves the creation of new issues, new interests, new communities, and new modes of action by creative agents”, as well as the establishment of their agency in the first place (Avant et al.
Matthias Hofferberth – “Theorizing Agency in Global Governance”

2010: 9), relationalism’s most important contribution to our studies could well be the awareness and consideration of its dynamic and processual nature. Governing globally, it has been argued, “is never solo act” (Finnemore 2014: 223), and we could add that the list of band members keeps changing, too. More specifically, considering both formal and informal governance, as well as its multilevel nature, for each respective governance issue, different actors become global governors in different stages throughout the governance cycle. While doing so, they advance different assets, resources, and capacities and hence justify their agency in different ways. While some actors find there agency recognized through setting the agenda with moral authority (e.g. civil society and advocacy groups), others hold the means to ensure compliance and enforcement (e.g. states and supranational organizations). To essentialize these qualities, though, seems to do injustice to the idiosyncratic nature of specific interactions and their respective configurations in specific contexts. To consider these in detail, the global governors involved in the specific issue, both recognized and aspiring, need to be determined in the first place (Avant et al. 2010: 17ff). Or, as Cederman (1997: 213) attempts to translate this into the language game of variables, “whenever technically feasible, the actors in world politics should be modeled as dependent rather than independent variables”.

In addition, relationalism reminds us that any configuration of agency remains a moving target and constituting elements (i.e. entities involved) will change over time. More specifically, in global governance, it is the reconfiguration of actors for a particular problem that matters. In other words, against the backdrop of the “soup of preexisting actors and actions” which on a global level obviously is global, it remains to be seen which entities, independent of whether their agency has been established in other contexts or not, are recognized and brought in to new situations and contexts. Put differently, instead of predefining which actors one should look at, relationalism offers a perspective to study whether specific entities (which might have prior agency elsewhere or not) become recognized as actors in specific contexts. Whether it is Germany’s membership in the informal arrangement of the P5+1 negotiating with Iran (Litwak 2015), 34 Muslim-majority nations creating the Islamic Military Alliance to fight ISIS (Jenkins 2016), or Royal Dutch/Shell becoming recognized as a political actor in the context of Nigerian human rights violations (Hofferberth 2017), the list of who is involved in global governance keeps expanding (which is rather unsurprising, given that we conceptually expand our notion of governance). Requirements for creating and sustaining agency thus have to be thought of in relational terms as they are both situational as well as discursively manufactured: Claims towards agency have to be justified and need to resonate with established
actors and relevant others against the backdrop of specific situations characterized by the real or perceived need for new governance input (Bang 2003).

The added value of a relational ontology hence lies in the potential to reconstruct dynamics of agency emergence and diffusion, theorize them in terms of their implications for governance, and ultimately assess them in normative terms. Against this background, substantializing agency marks not only an ontological issue. Rather, disregarding processes through which agency emerges makes our research unnecessarily affirmative since the recognition of entities as global governors and the invitation ‘to the table’ that follows from this obviously is subject to contentious political debate (or at least has been in the past). While global governance is often framed in functionalist and technocratic terms explaining the diversification of agency as a consequence of untapped resources, capacities and expertise, in these very debates, we find deeply-held cosmologies about politics which constitute the normative if not ideological foundation of the project (Avant et al. 2010: 6-9). By no means representing anything natural or a logical consequence of living in a globalized world, taken anyone’s agency on a global level for granted significantly confines our engagement with these debates. More importantly, considering the practical dimension of global public policy for a moment, one can argue that it severely limits our “debate about the range of strategic choices open to us in the present and future” of global governance (Zeitlin 2007: 135).

In conclusion, drawing on relationalism allows the researcher to raise new questions and consider the indeterminate nature of agency in world politics. Obviously, various challenges remain to be addressed to further establish this ontology as a meaningful alternative for the study of global governance and world politics. For example, as with any abstract ontological notion, its real value cannot only rely on programmatic papers such as this one but has to be shown in empirical analysis. In such analyses, one would have to elaborate how to conduct relational research ‘all the way done’ while maintaining an appropriate balance between (necessary) essentialization and (unnecessary) theoretical assumptions. More specifically, it remains unclear how to ensure that one does not sneak in substantialism through the back door while not getting lost in infinite regression of deessentializing everything at the same time. In other words, if global governance is indeed a process, how can we justify bracketing parts of it, both time-wise as well as thematically, to meaningfully study it? These open questions aside, paraphrasing Jackson/Nexon (1999), IR yet has to learn to study relations before global governors, considering that their agency emerges from interaction and matters for today’s world politics. Even in a discipline which defines itself through its substantial focus, a socio-theoretically grounded
discussion of agency seems unavoidable, at least if one wants to go beyond the practice of simply assuming which actors are relevant. More importantly, whether in substantial or relational terms, theorizing agency could make individual research more transparent and intersubjective and thereby more communicable, intelligible and oriented towards dialog in the sense of engaged pluralism (Lapid 2003). Agency, when discussed as such, offers another way forward towards a post-paradigmatic, self-conscious, and theoretically reflective field engaged in understanding world politics.

References

Bang, Henrik 2003: Governance as social and political communication., Manchester: Manchester University Press.


Hofferberth, Matthias 2017: “And of Course Our Major Contribution Remains to Run a Decent Business.” Making Sense of Shell’s Sense-Making in Nigeria During the 1990s, in: Business and Politics (published online first).


Holzer, Boris 2010: Moralizing the Corporation. Transnational Activism and Corporate Accountability, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd.


Joas, Hans 1993: Pragmatism and Social Theory, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.


Litwak, Robert 2015: Iran’s Nuclear Chess: After the Deal, Woodrow Wilson International
Center for Scholars.


Ringmar, Erik 1996a: Identity, interest and action. A cultural explanation of Sweden’s intervention in the Thirty Years War, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.


Sending, Ole Jacob / Pouliot, Vincent / Neumann, Iver B. 2015: Diplomacy and the Making
of World Politics, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.


