

# **What My Hands Have Done: Reflections on Agency**

by Theodore Plantinga

College professors are sometimes branded as insensitive because they have trouble identifying with the difficulties their students encounter as they struggle with the material. Since I undoubtedly appear insensitive myself, I often give a standard explanation to students who wonder whether I know what they're going through. First of all, I tell them that whoever winds up teaching a particular subject on the college level was probably good at that subject when he first took it in college himself: thus he will not have gone through the same agonies in terms of trying to learn the material. Secondly, I point out that teaching a certain subject on the introductory level year after year makes that subject seem simple. I find this phenomenon manifesting itself especially in textbook evaluation: it is not easy for me to discern what the students will find difficult and what they will be able to manage. A proposed textbook usually looks fairly simple and straightforward to me.

But this is not to say that "Introduction to Philosophy" was one of the easiest courses I ever took when I was an undergraduate. Precisely because I loved the material and took it very seriously, I did struggle with it and was in a fog for at least part of the time. I also remember vividly a major assignment which was part of our course (two semesters worth, it should be noted) and which, by today's standards, seems excessively demanding. We were to write a paper on the theme "What is a thing?" By way of a resource, we were to make substantial use of the first 150 pages or so of the third volume of Herman Dooyeweerd's *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*. The section in question has the daunting title "The Structures of Individuality of Temporal Things." It was through this assignment that I learned the word "thingness". [NOTE 1]

Looking back on that assignment today, I believe it was too much for most of us as beginners. But I sometimes mention it to my own "Introduction to Philosophy" class, for the "What is a thing?" issue does come up and needs explaining. I usually tell the students that rewording the question slightly helps

bring out one of its dimensions: What is *one* thing? If they are inclined to suppose that everything must, in some sense, be something, I raise the question whether "everything," or every animate thing that could be mentioned, is capable of acting or doing. In other words, agency (from the Latin "ago," I act or do) has a good deal to do with our question.

A classic example that can be used is that of the hand. Is a hand *one* thing? A hand is a good example of a reification: when we isolate it in thought, we are conceptually cutting it off from the arm and body that gives it life and movement. I appeal to Hegel for support: "A hand which is cut off still looks like a hand, and it exists, but without being actual." [NOTE 2] The hand is not actual or real, for Hegel, because it cannot do things by itself or on its own. And so a hand is not a thing; it does not stand alone.

On the other hand, we do sometimes ascribe independence and functional thinghood to the hand. If I claim that with one hand I can remove the seal and the cap from a new bottle of my favorite salad dressing (most people would need two hands for such a task), I am making such a claim, for in such a case the hand is sustained by what reaches it from the rest of the body through the arm.

Claims of agency made in everyday life are somewhat like the case of the hand: we often ascribe more to the reified agent than is, strictly speaking, his or her or its due. A sentence that has been lodged in my brain for decades can illustrate this point. It comes from a book called *Teach Yourself Dutch*, which I studied during my high school days in an effort to learn to read this language. The sentence reads: " "De firma laat een nieuw kantoor bouwen." Dutch is close to English, and the verb "laten" is a cousin of our word "let." Thus it might seem as though the Dutch sentence had to do with permission and therefore means: "The firm allowed a new office to be built." Not so: an accurate translation would be: "The firm had an office built."

Someone who uttered the latter sentence, e.g. the head of the firm, might even be justified in saying, "I built a new office." He might thereby create the impression that he did the work personally. Yet the Dutch sentence, if properly understood, does not favor such an interpretation. Other such sentences used in *Teach Yourself Dutch* are: "Ik laat een huis bouwen" (I am having a house built) and "Ik heb een nieuw pak laten maken" (I had a new suit made) and "Mijn buurman heeft zijn huis laten verven" (My neighbor had his house painted). [NOTE 3]

Consider another example, which happens to be a true story. Two years ago, in 1996, I moved from 85 Lorraine Avenue in Dundas to 126 York Road. This move was noteworthy for three reasons. First of all, it occurred during the teaching term. This is the only time in my life that I have ever attempted such a thing: all other moves took place when classes were not being held. Secondly, we did all the work ourselves -- almost. My wife and I, assisted by our two sons and our daughter plus one Redeemer College student, did all the packing and carrying and so forth.

The third noteworthy thing about the move was that the house we occupied needed some renovations, which were accomplished after we moved in. Of course it would have been more convenient to have renovations made while we still occupied our former abode, but I could not afford to own two houses at the same time.

During the winter of 1996, I took pleasure in telling people what my wife and I had accomplished -- the move to the new house, and then the renovations. I would say, "We needed to put in a bathroom on the main floor, and then we added a small room in the basement. The electrical system of the house needed some upgrading ...." People listening to this recitation were usually impressed, and in a few cases someone would get the wrong idea, congratulating me on my many manual skills -- carpentry, plumbing, electrical work. I would then have to explain, "No, I didn't *personally* do the plumbing and the electrical work; I hired people to do it. My contribution to the physical part of the work was relatively modest."

Despite this qualification, I was taking credit for the work that had been done. Was this fair on my part? I maintain that it was, and that I was in line with accepted English usage in speaking as I did. The Dutch would use "laten" in such a case but still speak in an accomplishment mode.

In considering whether I was giving myself too much credit, we must bear in mind that money comes into the picture. Someone who has an office built must either pay for it or arrange for a loan that will cover the cost.

In the case of the modest renovations to my current home, the arranging of the financing was no great accomplishment: it became part of the mortgage process. But suppose a larger project were envisioned -- like building a campus for a college to use.

It happens that I was once a witness to such a situation. Rev. Henry De Bolster, the first president of Redeemer College, is often said to have built the campus

which the college now occupies. Of course he did not make much of a contribution to the physical side of this great construction process. But he did spearhead the operation of raising funds for the campus and of borrowing an immense sum of money from the bank. Accomplishing these twin tasks in fund-raising is almost tantamount of building the campus: once an adequate amount of money is in hand or is promised, competent people can be hired to do what is envisioned in terms of design and construction.

As the first president of the college, Rev. De Bolster is also said on occasion to have started the college. A limited charter was obtained from the government of the province of Ontario in 1980. Once the charter was obtained, the board of the college association decided to proceed, and Rev. De Bolster was appointed as president and given the green light. And while he himself likes to say that this or that key step in Redeemer's history was God's own doing, human beings are inclined to associate such deeds with the person who was at the helm at the time they were performed.

We also see this pattern in warfare. When armies clash, we tend to name them via their top generals: thus we may speak of Grant (the commander of the Northern forces in the U.S. Civil War) attacking Lee (the commander of the Southern forces). Or the head of the government may be named: in 1941 we have Hitler attacking Stalin and driving him a long way back before Stalin recovers and then proceeds to push Hitler all the way back to Berlin.

One of the pleasures of occupying positions of high leadership is that you get credit for work performed largely by subordinates. (Of course you can also be blamed for what they do wrong.) For some people, however, being some distance removed from the actual work takes away from the pleasure of accomplishment.

Consider the work associated with a hobby. My hobby is raising and keeping tropical fish. I have two aquaria in my living room which can usually be counted on to win an admiring word or two from a visitor. I take pride in them and enjoy most of the work associated with them. I would like to have more aquaria (and did have more at one point in the past). I sometimes ask myself: would being very, very wealthy make a difference in this regard?

I suppose that if I were extremely wealthy my home would include many aquaria. I imagine that I would also travel more than I do now. To manage the aquaria I would clearly need some domestic help to keep an eye on the fish whenever I was away. And because many aquaria would generate a great deal of work, my domestic assistants would inevitably have to pitch in when I was

in residence too. Perhaps I would come to think of myself as the manager of the aquaria in my home, or even as the mastermind behind keeping them in good order.

It has long been one of my fantasies to have an aquarium and tropical fish establishment comparable to Baker's Aquarium, which I used to visit during vacations in Lake Worth, Florida, in the 1960s and 1970s. Now, Baker's was a commercial establishment; the commercial end of things, by itself, must have entailed a great deal of work for its owner. But it had stunningly beautiful pools and aquaria with large and very impressive homegrown specimens of my favorite types of fish, especially the live-bearers. I found the place completely enchanting and was deeply disappointed when I found it gone when I arrived in the area once on a vacation after an absence of a couple of years.

Now, I would love to be the proprietor of such an establishment. Would I be willing to work night and day to keep the place up? I suppose that if I were exceedingly wealthy, I would hire the best help I could get and let my employees do much of the work, while I basked in the credit for what they were accomplishing. But at what point would the place get too large for my claims of agency to be credible? At what point would I cease to derive deep satisfaction from its delights and begin to feel like a visitor on the premises? I know of no simple answer to this question.

Every gardener who has a large piece of property must sense the same tension between doing the work yourself and managing a more elaborate showcase in which the bulk of the work is done by others. How long can you go on claiming the credit for a certain kind of work, by arguing that you are paying for it, or arranging for the financing, and also somehow managing things and making the key decisions? The desire to have things in your own hand, so to speak, must be a motive for keeping an enterprise or a business or even a garden comparatively small. There is a difference between "what my hands have done" and "what my mind or mouth or authority or money has done."

The considerations I am advancing here have also functioned in past debates about the division of labor. There is certainly a gain in productivity and economic efficiency made possibly by such division, but something is also lost in terms of the satisfaction that work ought to afford us. A degree of wholeness or fullness disappears from our experience, and it is sorely missed. The effort to get it back (especially on the part of people who are highly specialized workers in their day-to-day lives) is quite a factor in stimulating hobbies.

Expansive talk about what I myself did (e.g. renovating the house I now occupy) must be carefully distinguished from accurate talk about what tasks are performed by workers under a division-of-labor approach to manufacturing. Indeed, these two types of talk seem to be moving in separate directions.

I believe it is uneasiness with specialized work yielding little satisfaction that leads us toward the tendency to take too much credit when we talk grandly about what we did -- or had done. We need to rediscover the pleasures of the area in between, where what we do is indeed what *our hands* have done, or what we have done in cooperation with a continuing partner (such as our spouse), but without falling into a division of labor that alienates or distantiates us from the process as a whole.

Perhaps there was something wholesome about the old days when a man needing certain renovations could in effect carry out all the work himself. Such self-sufficiency was more feasible in a time when there was little by way of licensing needed for electrical work, plumbing, and so forth, a time when municipal authorities had virtually no say over buildings on private property. Today it's not a matter of "anything goes" on your own property.

Much of what I call mine is connected with the property of others and forms a system or a network. Therefore I am not free to do exactly as I please when it comes to electricity and plumbing. The ideal may be that my work is "what my hands have done," but in practice other hands will be needed from time to time. Like it or not, this is the human condition in a complex and highly-regulated society. *[END]*

## NOTES

### [NOTE 1]

See p. 56. Dooyeweerd's *magnum opus* was translated by David H. Freeman and H. de Jongste and was published 1953-57 by Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company of Philadelphia.

### [NOTE 2]

*Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 283; see also *Hegel's Reason in History: A General Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. Robert S. Hartman (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953), p. 47. The example of the hand also occurs in *Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Vol. II, trans. Elizabeth Haldane and G.R.T. Ross (Cambridge: University Press, 1967), p. 99.

[NOTE 3]

H. Koolhoven, *Teach Yourself Dutch* (London: English Universities Press, 1952), pp. 83, 85.