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Lund, Sweden, January 14, 2017.

Dear reader,

This is the final version of my contribution to an upcoming special issue of the *Journal of International Relations and Development* on the topic of “performances of agency.” The main contributions are by Karin Fierke, Christian Bueger, Dorothy Noyes, Tobias Wille, Sebastian Abrahamsson and Endre Dányi. My article is a “discussion of the contributions” which concludes the issue. I’m critical of the post-structuralist stance taken by the contributions and criticize their notion of “performativity.” Instead I defend a more theatrical understanding of actors and agency — emphasizing the importance of the imagination and of embodiment.

Please refer to as:

Erik Ringmar, “The Problem with Performativity: Comments on the Contributions,” special issue on “Performances of Agency,” edited by Sebastian Schindler, Benjamin Braun and Tobias Wille, forthcoming in *Journal of International Relations and Development*.

Please get in touch if you have comments: erik@ringmar.net.

Happy reading, yours,

Erik

The Problem with Performativity: Comments on the Contributions

Erik Ringmar

As long ago as in 1959, the American political scientist Arnold Wolfers discussed the nature and role of the actors of international politics. Who is it, he asked, “who properly can be said to perform on the international stage”?¹ The traditional view was that only states could be considered international actors, but, said Wolfers, that view began to change already between the world wars. Today “[e]ven the identity of the ‘actors’ ... is a matter of dispute which raises not unimportant problems for the analyst, for the practitioner of foreign policy and for the public.” Wolfers was keen to add new names to the traditional cast — individual human beings, domestic bureaucracies, international organizations, corporations and NGOs — and in the time since he wrote these have indeed come to be widely accepted. Yet the contributors to this special issue want to expand the cast list even further. Thus Bueger writes about pirates — both in the Indian Ocean and in popular imagination; Abrahamsson and Dányi about paperless immigrants on hunger strike in Brussels; Fierke about self-immolating Tibetan monks; Noyes about Polish plumbers, and Wille about how the previously unknown state of Kosovo came into being at a French castle in 1999.

In contrast to Wolfers, our contributors want not only to expand the cast of characters but also to problematize the notion of agency and subjectivity itself, and in so doing they are concerned with issues which Wolfers would have been happy to leave to metaphysicians. More specifically, they are all writing in the wake of what has been

1 Wolfers, “The Actors in International Politics,” 3.

referred to as the “performative turn” in the social sciences as represented, *inter alia*, in different ways, by the work of Judith Butler and Bruno Latour.² Performativity, we are informed, is not the same thing as a performance and it is not something that takes place in the theater. Instead, performativity concerns, according to Butler, the way discourse is reiterated and, according to Latour, the way networks are created and maintained. Reiteration and networking, it turns out, are the respective ways in which agency, and thereby subjectivity, are constituted in social life. In briefly commenting on the contributions to this special issue, it is this claim we will discuss.

Performances and performativities

Consider to begin with the pervasive role which theatrical metaphors play in analyses of international politics.³ Originally a way to talk — with Shakespeare and other early modern authors — about the vanity of human ambition, it was also the way the European system of sovereign states first came to be imagined. States are “actors” on a “world stage” “acting” in front of a “world audience,” and so on. This is also the language which Wolfers, entirely unselfreflectively, invokes. And yet, post-structuralists argue, the theater metaphor is problematic at best. The traditional notion of a performance, Judith Butler points out, presupposes an unacceptable theory of representation.⁴ Most obviously it requires the existence of exogenously formed subjects — selves that precede and authorize the actions which they carry out. Yet underneath a person’s “characteristics” and “experiences” there is no exogenously formed subject ready to be unearthed.⁵ There can be no “freedom” and

2 For professions regarding these connections, see Wille, “Representation and Agency in Diplomacy,” 6; On the connection between ANT and post-structuralism, see Bueger, “Performing Piracy,” 15; Abrahamsson and Dányi, “Becoming Stronger by Becoming Weaker,” 21; Fierke, “Self-Immolation,” 3.

3 See, *inter alia*, the contributions to Beer and Landtsheer, *Metaphorical World Politics*.

4 Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 12–13; Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” 519–20; Cf. the discussion in Ringmar, “How the World Stage Makes Its Subjects,” 101–25.

5 Derrida, “Différance,” 11, 16.

no “authenticity” since “the ascription of interiority is itself a publicly regulated and sanctioned form of essence fabrication.”⁶

Instead subjects come to exist as they are performatively enacted. Invoking an argument introduced by John Austin and developed by John Searle, theorists of performativity insist that words not only mean things but also do things in the world.⁷ Language has “perlocutionary force.” It is when a symbolic structure is performatively enacted — when it is cited and cited again — that the illusion of an abiding subject comes into being. “The subject is inscribed in language, is a ‘function’ of language, becomes a speaking subject only by making its speech conform ... to the system of the rules of language as a system of differences.”⁸ Compare actor-network theory.⁹ What an actor might be, ANT theorists suggest, should not be determined *a priori* — they can be individual human beings but also collectivities, material objects or even concepts. What matters is instead the interactions that take place between the actors. In networks connections are made and information circulated and it is this interaction which comes to constitute the actors as such. This is how scholars of international relations have come to insist that “sovereign nation-states are not pre-given subjects but in process and that all subjects in process (be they individual or collective) are the ontological effects of practices which are performatively enacted.”¹⁰ It is important to keep in mind, says Wille, “that the state with its identity and interests is not an objective reality but the result of manifold

6 Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” 195; Cf. Fierke, “Self-Immolation,” 6.

7 Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*; Searle, *Intentionality*; Searle, “How Performatives Work.”

8 Derrida, “Différance,” 15.

9 Latour, *Science in Action*; Callon and others, “What Does It Mean to Say That Economics Is Performative”; Cf. Mol, “Actor-Network Theory.”

10 Weber, “Performative States,” 78.

practices.”¹¹ “Agency,” says Bueger, “depends on webs of relation set up in and through practice.”¹²

This argument may remind us of Ervin Goffman's thesis regarding “the presentation of self in everyday life.”¹³ As Goffman stressed, we present ourselves to others by means of the conventions that exist in our societies. We draw on the various ways of being a “woman” in order to become a woman; “father” in order to become a father, and so on. Yet as far as Goffman was concerned, such self-presentations have no ontological implications. To him, a social role is something that we perform and he is not speculating regarding the existence, or otherwise, of the performer. Our contributors, however, are not as cautious. Emboldened by post-structuralism and by ANT, they want to study not only what actors do and how their actions can be explained, but what actors are. Yet there is nothing in speech-act theory which allows us to draw any such conclusions. The perlocutionary force of a statement tells us nothing about the status of the subject. Indeed, reducing the subject to a citational practice, or to a function of the interaction in a network, makes him or her or it quite unrecognizable. Most obviously, the subjects created in this way have no bodies; they are bleak, two-dimensional, characters entirely determined by forces beyond their control; they are puppets on structuralist strings, formed by language, by power, and by language-as-power.¹⁴

It is never going to be enough to simply focus on practices and networks. Seeing someone act in a certain fashion tells us nothing in the end, no matter how often the action is repeated. First we must make sense of what the person does, and we do this, as Searle points out, by drawing on our knowledge of “the background” — the set of abilities,

11 Wille, “Representation and Agency in Diplomacy,” 25.

12 Bueger refers to these as “agencements.” Bueger, “Performing Piracy,” 3–4; See also Abrahamsson and Dányi, “Becoming Stronger by Becoming Weaker,” 3.

13 Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.

14 Bordo, “Postmodern Subjects, Postmodern Bodies,” 76–92; Ringmar, “How the World Stage Makes Its Subjects,” 107.

capacities, tendencies, and dispositions that humans have as a result of being members of a certain society.¹⁵ A key mechanism here, let us suggest, is that of the imagination. Performativities need to be imagined before they can make sense. We are not only looking at what a person does, but imagining what the person might be up to, and we have made sense of the action once we have settled upon one of these alternatives. Subjectivity may indeed be a metaphysical illusion, but so are all conceptual categories. “Phonemes and verbs are real,” as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson put it, in the sense that they are entities of language, but no one regards them as physical entities.¹⁶ “We take them as real because they are required if we are to make sense of the nature of language. Any explanatorily adequate theory of language will have to posit them. That is, they are real relative to an understanding, in this case, a scientific understanding of language.”

The question of the ontological status of the state illustrates this nicely.¹⁷ The state is not a body, it is not an actor, not on a stage, and so on, but this is nevertheless how we have come to think of it. The state is not real, but imagined; or rather, it is imagined as real. States are not persons but persons are not persons either. If we look for ourselves inside our heads we will not find ourselves; all we will find is a lot of gooey gray matter. Instead subjects are imagined into existence and this is how they become real. Whatever an actor does — practices, citations, the “enactment of structures,” and all that — follows from this act of the imagination. We understand what something is not by determining what it really is, but by comparing it to something else which we know that it is not but which it resembles in certain respects. We think metaphorically.¹⁸

15 Searle, *Intentionality*.

16 Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 109–10.

17 Ringmar, “The Ontological Status of the State,” 439–66.

18 Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*.

How actors are imagined

Reading the contributions to this special issue with these distinctions in mind, we realize that they fall rather neatly into two separate categories. On the one hand we have actors with physical bodies. This is the case with the hunger strikers discussed by Abrahamsson and Dányi and with Fierke's self-immolating Tibetan monks. Yet the case is quite different with Wille's Kosovo, Bueger's pirates and Noyes' Polish Plumber who all are bodiless. This is obviously the case with the wanna-be state of Kosovo but it is true of Bueger's pirates and Noyes' Polish Plumber too who, despite the occasional reference to actual human beings, exist mainly as imagined by consumers of assorted mass media.

Let us look more closely at how the imagination works. In February 1999, as Wille tells the story, a small ragtag band of dissidents, intellectuals and resistance fighters boarded a plane in the Kosovar capital of Pristina which took them to an international conference held at the Rambouillet castle just southwest of Paris.¹⁹ They had no official status, it was unclear who they represented, and they were highly prone to disagree between themselves. "The group that arrived at Rambouillet by no means resembled a unified delegation that could speak with one voice," as Wille puts it.²⁰ Their inexperience regarding matters diplomatic was at times acutely embarrassing, such as when they addressed the British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook as "Mr. Ambassador."²¹ Once sequestered within the walls of the Rambouillet castle, however, they were forced to define their position, to agree with one another, and to express themselves in the language of international diplomacy and law. They would have to fake it 'til they made it. If not, Wille explains, "the Kosovars would literally be reduced from being a fragile international actor to being a hopelessly divided secessionist movement."²² Before the

19 Wille, "Representation and Agency in Diplomacy," 2.

20 Ibid., 10–11.

21 Ibid., 15.

22 Ibid., 19.

conference began there was no fully constituted international subject by the name of Kosovo, but after the conference there was — although independence was not declared until February 2008 and universal recognition is yet to be achieved. It follows, says Wille, that Kosovo's "appearance at Rambouillet must have been an effect of the diplomatic performance itself."²³ This "is a particularly clear case in which a diplomatic performance created international agency." "It is only through diplomatic performances that collectives gain the capacity to act in international politics."²⁴

In Wille's account there is no discussion of the role of the imagination, but there should have been. After all, as Benedict Anderson famously explained, nations are real only as they are imagined.²⁵ On Anderson's telling, they were imagined first through the books and newspapers produced as a result of the appearance of print capitalism. By following the events reported in the pages of the press people came to see their state as acting and interacting with other states — taking part in negotiations, signing agreements, and so on — and it was by imagining themselves as members of a community formed around this entity that the nation came to exist. The constitution of Kosovo at Rambouillet in 1999 would have served Anderson well as an illustration of his thesis. It was in Paris in February 1999 that a stage first was imagined on which Kosovo was one of the actors, and it was when these negotiations were reported in media back in Kosovo itself that Kosovars at large began to see themselves as a members of a sovereign state. The diplomatic machinery which Wille describes was a means to this end to be sure, but it was through an act of the imagination that Kosovo came to be constituted as an international actor.

As Anderson went on to explain, there is a ritual aspect to this work — or, with a concession to poststructuralism and ANT, we might call it a "performative" aspect.²⁶ This

23 Ibid., 24.

24 Ibid., 6.

25 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

26 Sweetser, "Blended Spaces and Performativity," 312–19.

was particularly evident in colonies in Latin America and East Asia where talented young natives were dispatched to educational centers by the colonial authorities in order to acquire the basics of a European education. These educational journeys, says Anderson, resembled pilgrimages in that they took members of the fledgling local elite far away from their homes and forced them to interact with others, in the same situation as themselves, who they never previously had encountered. Pilgrimages, for a religion, is an important ritual means by which a community of believers is imagined and, says Anderson, this is how nations were imagined as well.²⁷ The example of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Muhammad Ali Jinnah making the educational journey to Europe at the turn of the twentieth-century comes to mind. It was in London that they became nationalists. The ragtag band of Kosovars at Rambouillet had made a similar journey, we could argue. Uprooted and on foreign soil they were forced to interact with their ostensible compatriots and to think about their place in the world. It was this ritual process which allowed them to imagine Kosovo as a sovereign subject. That is, the ritual — the “performativity” or “practice” — mattered, but only as a means by which the imagination could be set to work.

The work of the imagination is even more obvious in the case of Bueger's pirates, although he too says nothing about it.²⁸ Instead he insists that his argument is derived from “actor-network theory.” “My modest intent,” as he puts it, “is to show how [Somali pirate Abduwali] Muse, his friends and other actors described as 'pirates' are subjected to different *agencements* which provide them with different forms of agency”²⁹ It is through this network of things and practices that our understanding of pirates is constituted, and Bueger enumerates some of the objects — movies, graphs, formulas, games, Xboxes,

27 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Cf. Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*.

28 Bueger, “Performing Piracy.”

29 Ibid., 5. *Agencement* is an “arrangement” or “layout.” See <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/agencement>.

policy documents, legal texts — of which the network consists. “In these objects,” he says, “things and technology agency is also inscribed. These various objects, practices, and actors make up the heterogeneous elements of the *agencements* that produce pirate agency.”³⁰ No, we must insist, it does not. Our understanding of pirates and piracy are *not* the result of physical objects or the networked connections between them. “Pirates” do *not* come into existence as a result of what people do but as a result of what we imagine to exist. Movies, graphs, games, Xboxes and so on are only the vehicles of the imagination, they are not the imagination itself. It is only when we call upon the books we have read, the movies we have seen and the games we have played that pirates take on meaning. References to “*agencements*” add an unnecessary level of pretentiousness to an argument which is faulty, or at least incomplete.

Noyes, to her credit, is uninterested in metaphysical matters. Instead she talks about “cultural processes of reception and reproduction” which are “circulating much more easily within the public sphere than actual workers do.”³¹ And instead of subjectivity she talks about “*personae*” and about the “registers” at their disposal. “[T]he multiplicity of available registers in even stable hierarchical societies,” she says, “enables actors to blend in or assert themselves, to try out their aspirations through the gradual perfection of one persona, or to enact tactical selfhoods as needed.”³² The Polish Plumber illustrates the argument. As it turns out, he has little to do with pipe-fitters of East European origin and much to do with figments of a public, mainly French, imagination. Launched as *le plombier polonais* by Philippe de Villiers, a right-wing French politician, he initially featured in the rhetoric which preceded the referendum on a European constitution in 2005. An EU constitution, de Villiers insisted, would result in a France overrun by Polish plumbers, Estonian architects and other Europeans prepared to work for a pittance. French workers

30 Ibid., 15.

31 Noyes, “The Phantom Polish Plumber,” 2.

32 Ibid., 5.

would not be able to compete and the French welfare state would crumble.³³ While the Estonian architect disappeared never to be heard from again, the Polish Plumber went on to have a long and successful career — as a specter of neoliberalism, as a hardworking entrepreneur, a fellow proletarian, a generic foreigner, a substitute Muslim, and so on.³⁴ Once imagined, Noyes explains, the *plombier polonais* helped give voice and agency to a number of unexpected actors — including the Polish Tourism Board and the actual plumbers of Maubeuge, a small French town in which Dutch EU commissioner Frits Bolkestein has a summer-house. But the Polish Plumber also helped silence voices and restrict agency — notably those of the traditional, unionized, working-class.³⁵ What Noyes shows us is the imagination at work, and there is no mention of “practices,” “performativities” or “networks.” Good for her. Clearly, her credentials as a folklorist makes her well equipped to understand actors and agency, including the actors and agency of international politics.

How bodies are performed

Consider next the actors discussed by Fierke and by Abrahamsson and Dányi. These actors are not imagined but real. Or, rather, they are properly embodied. It was their bodies after all that the paperless immigrants in Brussels starved and their bodies that the Tibetan monks set ablaze. And crucially, the performances in which these bodies engaged are performances in the sense we know from the theater — they are staged and performed in front of audiences to whom they are intended to convey a message. The fact that this is street theater rather than Shakespeare makes no difference in this regard. Without the presence of the body the performance would clearly not work. As neuroscientists can

33 Ibid., 19.

34 Among Noyes’ many sources, a particularly catchy one is Kilembe, *Chanson pour un plombier polonais*.

35 Noyes, “The Phantom Polish Plumber,” 2.

explain, the bodies of the people in the audience react viscerally and largely precognitively to the distressed bodies of the people on the stage.³⁶ Our bodies understand before our minds interpret and this is what lends the theater its visceral force. This fact proves Judith Butler and the poststructuralists wrong. Performativities have no visceral force since they are mediated through the symbolic structures of language. Language arrives too late on the scene as it were, once meaning already has happened.

Fierke's description of the desperate performances of the Tibetan monks is not only gruesome but also sad. Since 2009 no fewer than 145 individuals have set themselves ablaze but none with the worldwide attention which similar actions attracted in the case of Vietnam and Tunisia.³⁷ The Chinese authorities, for whom the monks are "criminals," are cracking down on protesters and they are not budging in their interpretation of national sovereignty. Moreover, as Fierke explains, suicide is prohibited according to Buddhist teachings and not every Tibetan agrees that religion should be mixed up with politics in this way. Under the circumstances, defenders of the burning monks have rephrased their deaths as a form of sacrifice. They are not about drawing new sovereign boundaries, says Fierke, and not about simply escaping the world; they point instead "towards the possibility of a different and more compassionate politics of reciprocity, in which the autonomy of all is respected."³⁸ Yet Fierke undermines her conclusions by references to Judith Butler and to performativities, and Nagarjuna, for his sins, gets dragged in too. There are "family resemblances," Fierke decides, between Butler and the third century Buddhist philosopher.³⁹ Yet while poststructuralists find it impossible to accept the existence of anything *hors-texte*, Buddhism teaches a doctrine which is nothing if not embodied. Meditation in the Buddhist tradition is not a matter of thinking or

36 See, inter alia, Damasio, *Descartes' Error*, 180–91; Gallese, "Mirror Neurons, Embodied Simulation, and the Neural Basis of Social Identification"; Rokoitz, "Too Far Gone in Disgust."

37 Fierke, "Self-Immolation," 19.

38 Ibid., 27.

39 Ibid., 16.

contemplating after all, but only a matter of sitting. Try to just sit, and you will soon find out how difficult it is. And yet, it is from this fundamental embodiment that everything else arises — desire, illusion, suffering, death and rebirth.

The performance of the hunger strikers in Brussels discussed by Abrahamsson and Dányi are also both gruesome and sad. In 2012 some 23 illegal immigrants, mainly from North Africa and the Middle East, embarked on what was to become a 102 day long hunger strike in protest against Belgian immigration policies and their own lack of political rights.⁴⁰ After 56 days, one of the hunger strikers — Jamal Jaoudi — stitched his lips together which made it impossible for him to talk or to drink. The image of Jaoudi's face, as we might imagine, spread quickly in Belgian media. Yet the authorities, much as the case of China, refused to budge, although they in contrast to the Chinese could make references to democratic principles. The protesters, said Maggie de Block, member of the Flemish liberal party and Secretary of State for Asylum, Immigration and Social Integration, "demand more rights than other people. In a democracy everyone has equal rights. To start a hunger strike is a way to apply pressure that we cannot tolerate."⁴¹ As Abrahamsson and Dányi point out, de Block makes the mistake of thinking that people without rights can make an appeal through the political system, yet as far as the power of the theater is concerned she is obviously correct. Someone who engages in a successful theatrical performance can claim rights which others are denied. The politically powerless have always known this and often used performances in order to enhance their power. Yet democracy does not only presuppose an equal right to vote but also a public space which we can all enter, even if we are *sans papiers*, and some will necessarily be better performers than others. There is no way around this inequality since democracy requires a public sphere. Given the level of

40 Abrahamsson and Dányi, "Becoming Stronger by Becoming Weaker," 9.

41 Ibid., 12.

attention the hunger protesters attracted, they were quite successful as performers even if none of their political goals ultimately were attained.

Abrahamsson and Dányi seem surprised that the silent can speak and the passive can act, and they invite us to be surprised too. Yet this is surprising only since they rely on the wrong theoretical tools. Much like Fierke they undermine their own conclusions — in their case by references to actor-network theory. There is no theatricality in networks constituted by the interrelationship of objects and this is why ANT cannot be used to give an account of what is going on here. Once we think of the hunger strike as a theatrical performance, however, we are not at all surprised. There are an endless number of plays in which voices are given to the silenced and agency to the powerless — to outcasts and misfits, to orphaned children, unwed mothers, and mid-life losers stuck in loveless marriages and meaningless jobs. Or think of mime artists who make a career out of being silent or of Harold Pinter who was more famous for his pauses than his dialog. The power of the hunger strikers, such as it was, was derived from the power of their performance, not from the network in which they were embedded.

Conclusion

The contributions to this special issue seek to explore the status of the actors of international politics and the nature of their agency and to do this by means of the intellectual tools provided by post-structuralist theories of performativity. Yet post-structuralism fails to deliver on its promises. This is *not* how actors are constituted and this is *not* how agency works. The problem is that performativity is too much in the head and not enough in the body; that performativities are discussed while performances are ignored; that theories of practices are plagued by an insidious anti-theatrical prejudice.⁴² In

42 An antitheatricality plaguing already Austin's work. See Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 21–22.

these brief comments we suggested an alternative way of thinking about actors and agency. Actors are imagined first of all. We come to see them as actors of a certain kind by means of metaphors which compare them to things we know they are not but which they nevertheless resemble. Actors are real only as they are imagined. Practices of various kinds — newspaper reading, educational pilgrimages — play a role here but only as vehicles of the imagination. In addition, actors are embodied, and their bodies place them in the world rather than in the structures of language. As embodied, we make sense of our world by means of our interaction with it. This is a visceral, precognitive, process which precedes explicit interpretation.

The distinction between the imagined and the embodied might remind us of the discredited Cartesian dichotomy between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* according to which the imagined cannot be embodied and the embodied not imagined. Yet there are not two things going on here, only one, and imagination is not precluded by embodiment but, on the contrary, possible only because of it. How we imagine agency and subjectivity depends ultimately on how our bodies interact with the world. Meaning is something felt, something perceived, it grows out of our ability to manipulate things, move our bodies in space and evaluate our situation.⁴³ To perceive and to conceive are closely related activities and explicit interpretations become possible only because of this embodied interaction.

Theatrical performances are one way in which we do this.⁴⁴ In theatrical performances the imagined and the embodied come together as one. We enter an imaginary world which is all make-believe, but the imaginary world is real. It is not a figment of the imagination; there are bodies on stage which we interpret directly by means of our own bodies. They

43 Johnson, *Meaning of the Body*, 11.

44 Rokotnitz, "Learning to Trust the Body"; Cook, "Interplay"; An application to international politics is Ringmar, "Performing International Systems," 1–25.

find themselves in a certain mood, and so do we, the members of the audience.⁴⁵ The actors are sweating, crying, hugging; liquids are being slurped and zippers opened; and none of this has to be interpreted in order to be understood. Instead, since we too are human, we just understand it. This is consequently not, as post-structuralists argue, a question of representation. It is not that the theater presupposes the off-stage existence of already formed subjects which the stage proceeds to represent. Rather, the theater is about presencing — making present, making real — by means of bodies and by means of the imagination. The contributions to this special issue illustrate very nicely, despite themselves, how this happens.

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45 See further Ringmar, "Outline of a Non-Deliberative, Mood-Based, Theory of Action."

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