

# The Doings of Things

## Reconsidering the question of technical agency

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# Agenda...

1. The question of agency more generally
  - The analytical tradition
  - The continental tradition
  - Social theory
2. The problem of technical agency *or* the doing of things
  - ANT and the doing of things
  - Heidegger and the doing of things
3. So what? How does this change the way we look at things (technology)?

# The question of agency more generally

## The analytical tradition

### Philosophy of action

Donald Davidson (1980) asserted that *an action, in some basic sense, is something an agent does that is 'intentional under some description,'* and many other philosophers in the analytical tradition have agreed with him that there is a conceptual tie between genuine action, on the one hand, and intention, on the other.

# The question of agency more generally

## The continental tradition

### Foucault

In his essay "What is an author?" Foucault deconstructs the idea of the original author (subject). However, the 'disappearance of the subject' is not subjectivity as such but the original autonomous subject assumed by the enlightenment. For Foucault subjects are the outcomes of discursive formations (constituted through power/knowledge regimes) - each of which sustains a different type of subjectivity (religious subject, the academic subject, the business subject).

# The question of agency more generally

## Social theory

### Giddens

- Agency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place. (9)
- Action depends upon the capability of the individual to 'make a difference' to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events. An agent ceases to be such if he or she loses the capability to 'make a difference', that is, to exercise some sort of power. (14)

Central to Giddens' discussion of agency is the **reflexive subject...**

## The question of agency more generally

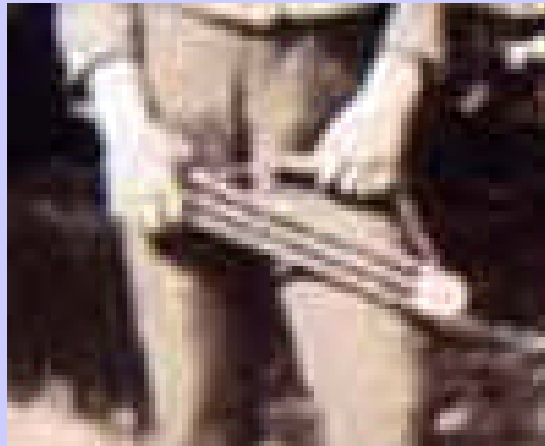
Central to all of these traditions is the idea of causality – agents effect change, makes a difference, in some situation or context.

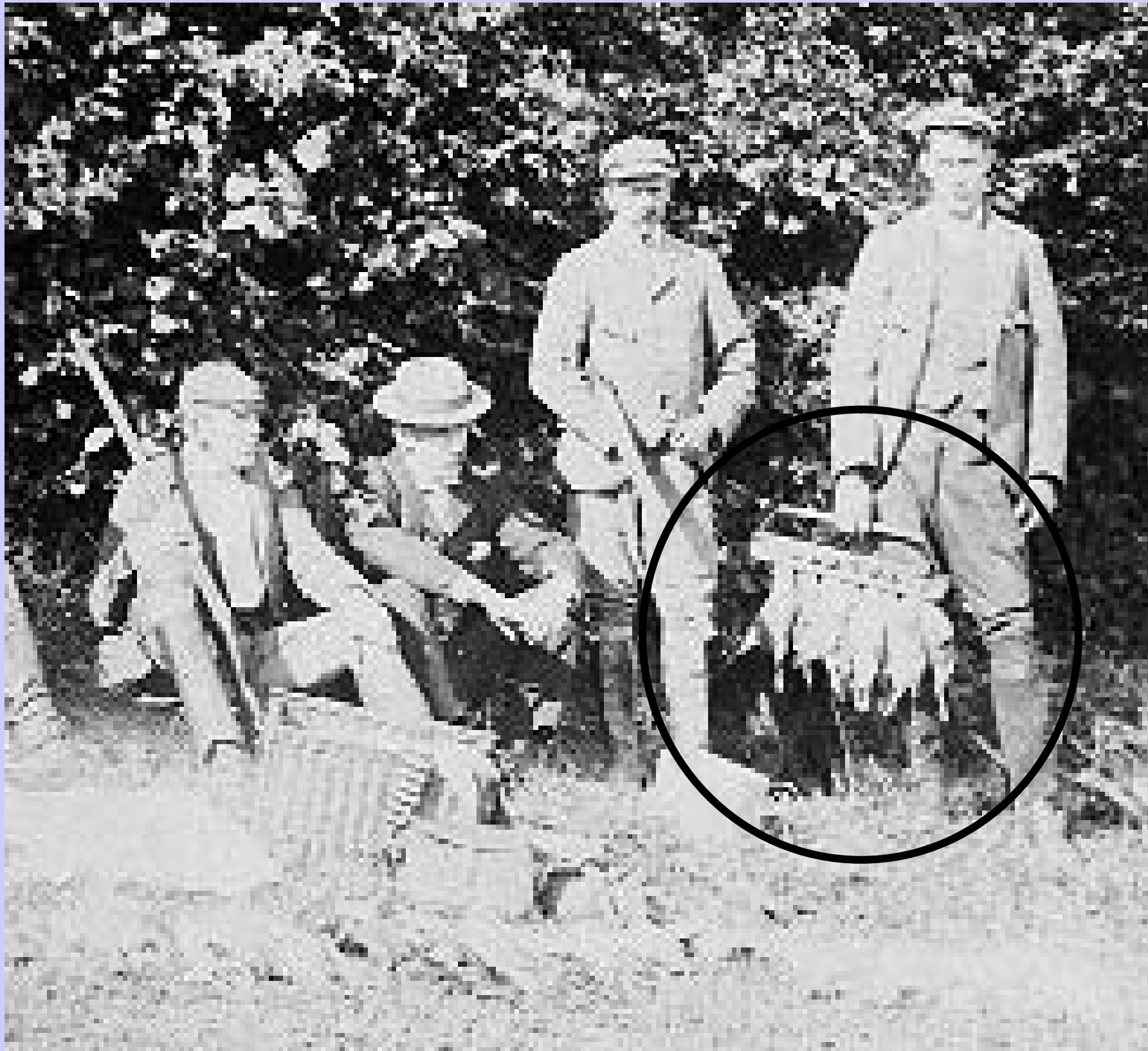
What is disputed is the *origin or source* of the agency as well as the level of *control* that can be accrued to a particular agent or actor

# The problem of technical agency or the doing of things



**What does this thing do?**





# The problem of technical agency or the doing of things

## ANT and the doing of things

Action is not done under the full control of consciousness; action should rather be felt as a node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies that have to be slowly disentangled. (44)

An 'actor'... is not a source of an action but the moving target of a vast array of entities swarming towards it...the very word directs our attention to a complete dislocation of the action...Action is borrowed, distributed, suggested, influenced, dominated, betrayed and translated. If an actor is said to be an actor-network, it is first of all to underline that it represents the major source of uncertainty about the origin of action...(46)

# The problem of technical agency or the doing of things

## ANT and the doing of things

*Intermediaries:* is what transports meaning or force without transformation: defining its inputs is enough to define its outputs...a black box counting for one, even if it is internally mad of many parts.

*Mediators:* cannot be counted as one...Their input is never a good predictor of their output; their specificity has to be taken into account every time. Mediators transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry (39)

ANT pictures a world made of ***concatenations of mediators where each point can be said to fully act.***

# The problem of technical agency or the doing of things

## ANT and the doing of things

“This, of course, does not mean that these participants ‘determine’ the action, that baskets ‘cause’ the fetching of provisions or that hammers ‘impose’ the hitting of the nail. Such a reversal in the direction of influence would be simply a way to transform objects into the causes whose effects would be transported through human action now limited to a trail of mere intermediaries. Rather, it means that there might exist many metaphysical shades between full causality and sheer inexistence. In addition to ‘determining’ and serving as a ‘backdrop to human action’, things might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on. (p.72). Not ‘little goblins’... [T]he analysts should be prepared to look in order to account for the *durability and extension* of any interaction. (my emphasis)

# The problem of technical agency or the doing of things

## ANT and the doing of things

Scallops *make* the fisherman *do* things just as nets placed in the ocean lure the scallops into attaching themselves to the nets and just as the data collectors bring together the fisherman and the scallops in oceanography... We don't know yet how all those actors are connected, but we can state as a the new default position before the study starts that all the actors we are going to deploy might be *associated* in such a way that they *make others do things*. This is done not be transporting a force that would remain the *same* throughout as some sort of faithful intermediary, but by generating *transformations* manifested by the many unexpected *events* triggered in the other mediators that *follow* them along the line. ... A concatenation of mediators does not trace the same connections and does nor require the same type of explanations as a retinue of intermediaries transporting a cause. (107)

# The problem of technical agency or the doing of things

## ANT and the doing of things

*Some questions:*

1. If it is not a 'network' of 'relations' but rather 'associations' how do these associations come about? (if it is an empirical question how do we investigate without turning them into objects/subjects)
2. More importantly how do these actors *make others do things* (if scripts, etc. then why do we take scripts as 'scripts', etc)

# The problem of technical agency or the doing of things

## Heidegger and the doing of things

### Example - The coming into being of a mobile phone

“Equipment—in accordance with its equipmentality—always **is** in terms of its belonging to other equipment: inkstand, pen, ink, paper, blotting pad, table lamp, furniture, windows, doors, room. These things never show themselves proximally as they are for themselves. So as to add up to a sum of *realia* and fill up the room [to be a study].... [Rather] out of this [already belonging to other equipment] the ‘arrangement’ [the study] emerges, and it is in this [equipmental nexus] that any ‘individual’ item of equipment shows itself. [But] *Before* it does so, a totality of equipment [the equipmental nexus or whole] has already been discovered (pp. 97-98).

# The problem of technical agency or the doing of things

## Heidegger and the doing of things

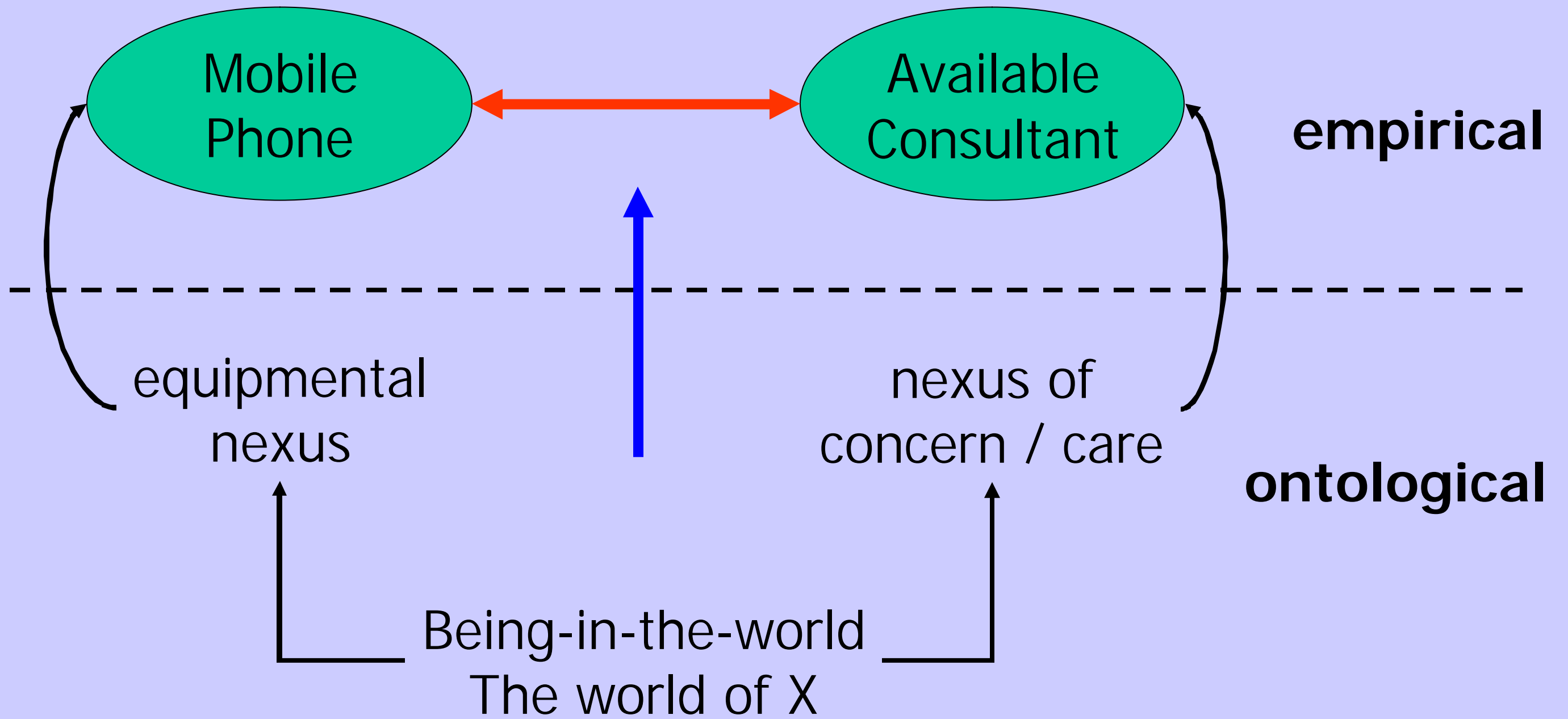
Mobile phones can *make* 'available consultants' do what they do (call, receive calls, etc) not because there is a particular cause (or agency) in the artefact as such (or in the human as such) but because mobile phones appear in the world of consultants, wanting to be available, as *already necessary and meaningful*. Thus, the mobile phone will only show up or stand out as something potentially relevant and useful in a nexus of concerns and equipmentality where the possibility of contacting 'at a distance' might be a *necessary condition* to realise the concerns that constitute the 'who' that such a mobile phone assumes or already refers to (the consultant, etc).

# The problem of technical agency or the doing of things

## Heidegger and the doing of things

*The important point is that the necessary relation (that which makes X do Y) is not empirical it is ontological. It is the necessary ontological co-constitutive relation that makes the empirical possible. Artefacts script our behaviour in our dealings with them but this 'scripting' is rendered possible by prior, but always already present, ontological co-constitutive relation that render them meaningful.*

*Constitutive agency—or rather co-constitutive agency—is the always already present horizon of meaningful possibilities to be in the world. That is, the already present *necessary conditions* for a being (mobile phone, available consultant) to be that which it is already taken to be in the world where it has its manner of being.*



# The problem of technical agency or the doing of things

## Schatzki on prefiguration of agency

The future is made in the ceaseless advance of human and non-human agency. This advance, is not, however, a leap into an empty, unfurrowed, isotropic space that receives motion in any direction. Agency does not invent the future wholesale from its own resources. Instead, it arcs through a variegated and folded landscape of variously qualified paths: Agency makes the future within an extant mesh of practices and orders that prefigures what it does—and thereby what it makes—by qualifying paths before it. Indeed, the incessant advance of agency is the endless happening of the social site, from which nascent agency “starts” in the twin senses of originating (taking place) at and being formed as the doing it is. (Schatzki, p.210)

# So what? How does this change the way we look at things (technology)?

We will not understand the co-constitutive relation by only doing an empirical study (natural attitude). We can study the way users interact with technology but we will not grasp the co-constitutive relation as such. We need to shift to the phenomenological attitude.

This will lead to the following type of questions:

- What sort of being must the user be for the artefact to appear as relevant and meaningful (and therefore necessary)?
- What is the equipment whole that renders the artefact available
- What sort of way of being (way of going about) does the artefact assume in its appearing in the world? Where does it appear and why?