



# A grammar for non-teleological geographies: Differentiating the divergence of intention and outcomes in the everyday

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## Abstract

Teleology shapes the design of much geographical research through the requirement to identify outcomes. In contrast, the theoretical orientation of geographical research on the everyday promotes a relational and visceral approach to resist the teleological logic of the primacy of outcomes. With this paper, we address this tension between different orientations to the practice of geographical research. Drawing on three case studies of empirical research we propose a grammar for non-teleology to capture the divergence of intentions and outcomes. Giving rise to non-teleological narratives, we suggest, signifies a forward orientation for doing geographical research to unpick the messiness of everyday life.

## Keywords

non-teleology, practice, ethics, everyday, consumption, volunteering, making

## 1 Introduction

With this paper we make the case for a grammar for non-teleological geographies to differentiate between intention and outcome in studies of the everyday. We suggest that teleological logic shapes the geographical discipline through how research is considered and conducted, shared and promoted. Within the academy the need to define and demonstrate outcomes is perpetuated through the discipline of research practice: from securing grants, writing outputs and demonstrating impact; research is aligned towards proving outcomes and thus ends justify means. However, against the teleological assumptions of research design, the practice and focus of much geographical research is inherently

*non-teleological*. This tension between the relative merits of ends (telos) and means, which has defined philosophical thought for over two millennia, especially imbues research on ordinary, taken-for-granted agency. But it is a distinction that is rarely explicitly named, particularly within geographical research (see [Aoyama, 2011](#); [Warf, 2009](#)). Therefore, we contend that there is considerable value in naming and disentangling non-teleology as a defining geographical principle and drawing

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attention to the complexity of means and ends that this requires.

To address this, we outline a grammar of non-teleology (similar to the language of ends and means in teleology) with reference to intention and outcomes. This structural grammar foregrounds the non-linearity between intention and outcome which, we suggest, can be articulated through a forward orientation to research design. This conceptualisation of non-teleological everyday practices parallels other non-teleological approaches in geography, especially research on mobilities and the life course inspired by non-representational readings of everyday life. The genus of a non-teleological grammar is not to strip out the language of intention or outcomes, as these frame the narratives that people tell about everyday life. That is, we make sense of repetitive and ordinary practices through ‘in-order-to’ intentions and reasoned outcomes. The inspiration of a grammar of non-teleology is to move beyond the expectation that consequences are directly related to specific intentions. Instead this grammar can lead towards an emphasis on how doing is orientated towards an open-ended ethos of care, the need to do *something*. In seeking to progress geographical practice, we are inspired by feminist theorists to foreground relational rather than absolute interpretations of everyday life. Our explication of non-teleology is aligned with Katz’s notion of Minor Theory (1995: 166) that is ‘interstitial with empirical research and social location’. As she later acknowledges, ‘productions of knowledge [are] inseparable from – if not completely absorbed – in the mess of everyday life’ (Katz, 2017: 598). Thus, our discussion of a grammar of non-teleology to differentiate the messiness of intention and outcome in everyday practice does not propose it as a totalising approach. Instead we acknowledge how the knowledges produced in these accounts are ‘socially, institutionally and geographically situated’ (Derickson, 2018: 556).

Outlining a grammar for non-teleological geographies requires a shift from theoretical to practical reason and in this paper, we explore the implications this has for empirical applications of geographical research. We suggest that the limits of teleology are ontological and epistemological as the

questions to ask are not just *why* non-teleological practices are relevant to geographical inquiry but *how* these are studied. Speaking to key themes of non-teleologies of practice, ethics and care, we draw upon current and vibrant geographical scholarship, highlighting the potential of a non-teleological grammar. We frame our discussion around three distinct empirical case studies: ethical consumption, youth volunteering and therapeutic making.<sup>1</sup> Each domain is inherently complicated by the relationships between means and ends: what are the values that guide consumption decisions; what do young people gain from volunteering; and how can making enhance well-being? In all three case studies, adherence to a teleological framework would prioritise outcomes over the experience of doing. This orientation tends to frame the research questions that are asked as well as policy responses and context. And yet the empirical evidence, we reveal, consistently demonstrates the value of doing *in itself*. Our explication of non-teleology is rooted in these empirical case studies as these were integral to our own orientation of developing a grammar for non-teleological geographies.

Our proposition for naming and defining a grammar non-teleology is arranged; thus, we begin with a brief summary of the development of teleological thought, couched within philosophical debates on morality and ethics. We discuss the narratives of (non)teleological logics and ethics within western scholarship, before moving on to demonstrate how non-teleological orientations are shaping empirical geographical research. Using three empirical case studies, drawn from rich geographical literature, we reveal how research on ethical consumption, youth volunteering and therapeutic making is framed by teleological assumption. And yet, as we demonstrate, there are important non-teleological narratives to be disentangled, with which the research process and geographical thought more broadly, might be considered anew.

## II Teleology and non-teleological narratives and ethics

Teleology has dominated philosophical thought for over two millennia (see Driver, 2005; Proctor,

1998; Russell, 1946; Warf, 2009). It was the basis of Ancient Greek thought; entered the English language in the 18th century; debated by Kant, Hegel and Marx; rejected by 20th century empirical philosophers; and remains a contentious interpretation of natural selection. Put simply, teleology studies phenomena with reference to the purpose that is served, rather than the causality of how phenomena come to exist. It is derived from the Greek for end 'telos' and 'logos' reason<sup>2</sup> and is often reduced to the maxim: the ends define the means. Teleological explanations are applied in various realms including ethics, philosophy of science, history and theology.

In Ancient Greek philosophy teleology is most closely associated with Aristotle's writings about final cause and his commitment to efficient causation (Aristotle and Barnes, 1984). The theory of efficient causation is naturally appealing, it is easy to identify the final causal activity in human production. Everyday artefacts have functions because we ascribe these functions to objects. The more challenging explication of efficient causation is its application to the natural world. Not only do the parts of natural bodies require explanation (for example bodily organs), but whole organisms, human and non-human, have final ends. It is this inscription of final causes into entire beings that defines the merits of and disputes about teleology. Aristotle broke with his Greek predecessors in disputing an external agency to teleology and the belief that an extrinsic cause, such as a God of 'intelligence', defined the outcome of things. Rather he considered nature itself as an internal principle of change and as an end. Aristotle's teleology focuses on what is intrinsically good for natural things and beings.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to map out in detail how Aristotle's original conceptualisation of teleology has developed throughout the natural and social sciences. Our interest is how classical debates are relevant for 21st century geographies which foreground progressive and relational interpretations. It is important to acknowledge the diversity of scale of teleological explanations from interpreting social and biological change over extensive temporal scales to defining the moral conduct of everyday practice.

Our interest is closer to the latter, but debates about the application of teleology from the 18th century onwards have been very much concerned with its application in philosophies of science and history.<sup>3</sup> The development of teleological explanation in post-enlightenment thought is especially associated with Hegel's interpretation of idealism. For Hegel history is a teleological narrative that progresses through the development of spirit or *Geist* (Bond, 2014). His progressive reading of spirit in which history is the process of 'spirit emptied into time' (Hegel, 1807: 808) unfolds through a 'dialectical process towards the final end of its full development, the full realisation of human consciousness and freedom' (Sayers, 2019: 37). Thus, Hegel advocates an internal reading of teleology that does not depend on conscious intention. Living systems show this internal teleology through nourishing, repairing and re-producing and, for humans, through the processes of self-realisation.

Hegel's theorisation of internal teleology was also highly influential for Marx. Ascribing Marx as a teleological thinker is though problematic. As Sayers (2019) explains it is possible to find convictions and rejections of teleological interpretation throughout Marx's writings. For example, from his conviction that the 'riddle of history' has been solved to show that communism is its solution (Marx, 1977; quoted in Sayers, 2019: 43) to his explicit rejection that history has a destiny, goal, germ or idea (Marx and Engels, 2000; quoted in Sayers, 2019: 42). This ambiguity about teleology in Marx's writings does, we suggest, reveal broader issues with teleology. While it is intuitive in providing an explanation of human behaviour and social progress with reference to purpose, this clarity breaks down through materialist examination. This duality is applicable to smaller scale studies of everyday life which often elided these early philosophical discussions, couched as knowledge often was in gendered, classed and racialised frames of reference (see Katz, 1995). While it is appealing to seek explanations of behaviour through explications of purpose, this clarity is elusive in empirical accounts that situate behaviours within progressive interpretations of time and space. Indeed geographers' insistence on space undermines the temporal certainty of the telos and the

broad direction of spatial dialectics nullifies the intuition of teleology (Harvey, 1990).

The temporal certainty of teleology does not imply that an alternative logic is atemporal. Instead interpretations of progress or change need to engage with a forward interpretation of uncertainty rather than a retrospective determination of causality. This shift is particularly developed in Grosz's writing about time and evolution.<sup>4</sup> As Grosz writes:

it is impossible to predict what will follow, what will befall a particular trend or direction, let alone a particular individual, what will emerge from a particular encounter, how natural selection will effect individual variation, until it has occurred, until it is completed or provisionally arrested (2004: 8).

Grosz's reading of the temporalities of Darwinian evolutionary theory illuminates her insistence that bodies are not ends in themselves, but a series of open-ended systems that are immersed within the 'always forward movement of time' (2004: 4). We briefly return to this feminist visceral approach in our discussion of the non-teleological methodologies of geography.

(Non)teleological narratives are just not relevant to explanations of social change they are similarly bound up with deciphering the ethics of everyday practice for which the tension between action and end is equally pertinent. Redefining the scale of a grammar of non-teleology within the time and space of everyday practices necessarily involves deciphering how the logic of (non)teleology is applied to define how people should act. In accordance with Aristotelian accounts, teleological ethics distinguish between right and good, in that what is seen to be 'right' is that which maximises the 'good', or rather actions are seen to be 'right' if they have 'good' consequences (Hay and Foley, 1998). In addition, Driver (2005) suggests that a theory of value is important within teleological accounts, since this avenue of moral thought claims that moral actions are those which are carried out with the intention of good or positive consequences (otherwise referred to as the consequentialist approach). In this sense, a teleological account is often used in support of the notion of ethics as subjective, because 'it promotes what everybody wants', which of course varies between

individuals (Stewart, 2009: 13). An example of this in practice would be utilitarianism, 'which holds that right action maximises the good', or the greatest good for the greatest number (Driver, 2005: 34), and therefore 'satisfying the majority is regarded as morally correct conduct' (Hall, 2013: 427).

The main competing moral framework to teleological ethics is Kant's examination of deontological morality (Kant, 1775).<sup>5</sup> Kantian deontology sees certain actions themselves as good or morally correct (Furrow, 2005). Deontological theories are often described as 'duty-based', and the term 'deon' is derived from the Greek for 'duty' (Stewart, 2009: 35). Deontological accounts reject the principle that what is right may be determined by the evaluation of consequences, such as resulting in 'good'. The contention here is that moral actions are valued according to 'having the correct intention' (Smith, 2000: 13) rather than 'on account of their effects' (Russell, 1946: 190). A deontological perspective considers the fact that morally correct actions do not always result in good or positive consequences, theoretically suggesting that there are some morals that should be placed above happiness, desire or pleasure, as unconditional commands or moral duties (Hay and Foley, 1998). In this sense, deontological accounts see 'right' as 'a more paramount concern' than good (Proctor, 1999). Kant believed duty or moral obligation to be determined by the aforementioned unconditional demands that place 'right' over 'good', rather than being driven by the desire to produce 'good' consequences. Hence, using this theory, people are regulated by what morality demands to be correct practice (Driver, 2005).<sup>6</sup>

The criticism of teleology applied to ethical practice stems from the simple observation that acting in a universally moral way is difficult, as there are no set morals to which everyone (or everyone knows that they should) adhere to, and 'correct' actions are too often presumed to have positive consequences (Barnett et al., 2004; Brock, 2005; Proctor, 1998). As Lee and Smith (2004: 3) also explain, the human capacity 'to think normatively and to imagine', to express moral values, is what distinguishes humans from other beings. Although ethics are used in everyday life to decipher between good and bad, they are also highly personal and

plural in nature (Nagel, 1979), making moral practice highly contextualised and incomparable between every individual. From these debates a substantive critique of teleology is that it is biased towards normative explications of what should be, rather than what is.

A note of caution should be made here that an emphasis on non-teleological interpretations of everyday life should not fetishise doing. The potential of developing a non-teleological grammar is that it can similarly embrace non-events, nothingness and non-productive agency (see for example Baraitser, 2017; Scott, 2019). We stated in the beginning that developing a grammar for non-teleological inquiry should not direct our attention to what geographers study, but *how* geographers study. This approach can pay equal attention to non-productive acts of care, repair and maintenance. An ethic of care, whether for bodies, selves or environments, foregrounds the fragility of outcomes, the world we live in has to be cared for, maintained and repaired (Tronto, 1993). Bodies that are caring and cared for are not, to repeat Grosz, ends in themselves. The very act of care is predicated on the uncertainty of outcome or even the refusal of an end. Sustaining end-of-life care, for example, can be interpreted as the ultimate non-teleological act. Even material objects cannot be regarded as definitive ends, as in the absence of maintenance and repair objects are left to go their own way and decay into other things (Graham and Thrift, 2007; Jackson, 2017). The repetition of care is not without intention, consequence or direction but nor is it orientated towards predestined outcomes.

Despite the detail of critiques of teleology as an explanatory force in history and science and a basis of ethical practice; our observation is that as empirical researchers the intuition of teleology overwhelmingly frames the design of empirical research. The expectation of empirical inquiries of everyday activities, such as consumption, volunteering or making is that the rationale of studying these acts is towards definable outcomes (also see Barnett et al., 2005). It is this teleological logic as a default position of the rationale of geographical empirical inquiry that we seek to excavate in this paper, through an

examination of non-teleological orientations in existing geographical research.

### III Non-teleological geographies

Before we turn to our empirical case studies, it is important to draw wider connections of non-teleological interpretation within geographical inquiry. Developing a non-teleological geographical framework is commensurate with broader theoretical trends within the discipline. Subverting the dominance of outcomes over means opens up diverse and contradictory ways of understanding interconnections between people and practice that is integral to progressive readings of space. These interconnections are not fixed by the demarcation of ends, and moreover, this direction of thought is prominent in geographical scholarship. For example, Massey's (2005) theorisation of space made up through flow and movement can be interpreted as a non-teleological approach. Harvey's interrogation of how historical materialism takes its geography seriously locates dimensions of space and time not in linear order but as 'sites of innumerable differences and othernesses' (1990: 355).

Thus, while a non-teleological paradigm is rarely explicitly named in geography, we suggest that this orientation develops ideas and interpretations that are very much live issues in current geographical thought. For instance, geographers engaging with practices and meanings of mobilities refer to the significance of experiences and encounters of being mobile rather than research being fixated with destination (Binnie et al., 2007; Cresswell, 2006). Studies of mobility – including Bissell (2018) and Edensor (2011) who invert the assumption of mundanity in the daily commute; Wilson's (2011) research on encountering during journeying; Rose's (2020) reflections on derives and drifts through urban streets; Adey's (2004) detail of the (im)mobilities of airport surveillance; and Merriman's (2019) interpretation of molecular movements and affects to dissect the binary between mobility and stasis – all implicitly evoke non-teleological orientations. Likewise, geographers researching age and the life course write about ways to subvert a focus on pre-determined and normative life paths and certain

modes of ageing, towards understanding biographies as relational (Hörschelmann, 2011) and non-linear (Brown et al., 2012), marked by ‘multiple becomings’ (Worth, 2009: 1058) and defined by situated meanings (Hopkins and Pain, 2007). Work in geography on families has similarly argued for a focus on practices of doing and displaying family (Rose, 2011), and explored how family relations are mediated through technologies (Longhurst, 2013) and across time-zones (Waters, 2002), as well as other ways of practicing family (Wilkinson, 2020).

The vibrancy of non-teleological narratives in existing geographical research falls short of conforming to a totalising theoretical interpretation and it is not our intention to promote non-teleology in this way. Instead we are inspired by existing research to interpret non-teleology through a feminist lens that prioritises relationality and hybridity (Butler, 2004; Haraway, 1988). Non-teleology foregrounds bodies as open-ended systems and the intricacy of interdependencies that move bodies forward in time. Starting from the acceptance of interdependency subverts any expectation that a non-teleological approach offers and final and definitive interpretation of the everyday.

If a non-teleological grammar is to be valuable for geographical research then this has to do more than state that geographers should turn their attention to studying what people do. Indeed, it can be argued that this turn to practice is well established within the social sciences and we already have a range of theoretical interpretations that capture the significance of everyday activity (Highmore, 2002). In this approach, as Schatzki (2002) maintains, social practices ordered across space and time are the basic unit of social enquiry. Our interest in framing a non-teleological grammar for geography is not simply to elevate the importance of practice, but to interrogate how practices should be empirically examined and interpreted, especially the relationship between intentions and outcomes. In other words, non-teleology implicitly brings the temporal into interpreting practice in a non-linear way, echoing Grosz’s (2004) explication of non-teleological evolution. Developing a non-teleological paradigm can break out of the linear, normative

structures of teleology, but this needs to be balanced by avoiding the cul-de-sac of simply describing what people do.

To summarise our argument so far, the limitations of geographical research that assumes linear ordering of social actions within time and space is not a novel idea within the discipline. Furthermore, the merits of focussing attention beyond events and actions that are determined by cause and effect is theoretically and empirically established. The potential however remains for a more explicit grammar of non-teleology that foregrounds how intentions and outcomes can be empirically accounted for in studies of everyday practices and acts of omission, care or repair, without resorting to the ethical subordination of means to ends. Moreover, a grammar of non-teleology while resisting the orientation of interpreting agency directed towards a destiny, needs to resolve the ontological implications that everyday acts of care, consumption and community are enacted in the forward movement of time.

#### **IV A grammar of non-teleological geography: Intention, outcomes and direction**

With the remainder of the paper we aim to move beyond thick description, to provide empirical evidence and tangible examples of how geographical debates have been working – or not – with non-teleological logics. Here, we aim to show how non-teleology shapes everyday life, disentangling many of the teleological assumptions that are still firmly held in the design of geographic research. We do this using three case studies, drawing together geographical literature of empirical studies in each: ethical consumption, youth volunteering and therapeutic making. We choose these themes as they capture the core constituents of our interpretation of non-teleology: practice, ethics and care and how these are aligned between means and ends. In particular each case study highlights a key element of a grammar of non-teleology in relation to intention (ethical consumption), outcomes (youth volunteering) and direction (therapeutic making).

## I Ethical consumption: Intention

Geographical scholarship has been heavily invested in demonstrating how ‘ethical consumption’ is complex and multifaceted, and what intentions belie such practices. There is also no consensus on what constitutes ethical consumption or what it entails (Gibson et al., 2011; Seyfang, 2004), but it is generally associated with buying so-called ethical products, boycotting or resource management. There is a strongly held assumption pervading ethical consumer discourse, which in fact beholds a teleological logic: that providing consumers with information regarding the conditions in which their products are produced, or the impacts of their consumption, is central to transforming everyday practices (Barnett et al., 2005).

Questioning and critiquing these assumptions about the intentionality of ethical consumers has been a key concern for human geographers. Within this simplistic knowledge = action logic, consumers are expected and required to act, or to educate themselves for a greater good (Eden, 1998). As noted by Barnett et al. (2004: 6), there exists a dual set of assumptions when thinking about responsible action:

That providing information to consumers regarding the conditions of production and distribution of commodities is central to changing consumer behaviour, and that knowledge is also the key to putting pressure on corporations and governments.

However, not only does this assume a certain course of process and outcome (ends and means), but it also ignores issues of accessibility. The focus becomes placed on the outcome – the purchasing – and not the intention, motivations and struggles therein.

It is from these critical debates that work on ‘the ethics of consumption’ emerged. This work has sought to develop understandings of

‘the ethics in how consumers make decisions, and what influences these decisions, such as those driven by family duties, rather than the ethics of the outcomes of consumption choices’ (Hall, 2013: 427).

Rather than framing ethical consumption according to a prescriptive set of practices or products,

with this work scholars have been developing a non-teleological framework that instead forefronts intention, acknowledging that all consumption practices have a moral reading (Hall, 2011; also see Adams and Raisborough, 2010; Barnett et al., 2005; Hall, 2015; Holmes, 2018; Jackson et al., 2009; Meah and Jackson, 2017). Here, intentions of affordability, care, thrift and convenience are thought to be balanced alongside rather than in opposition to ethical consumerism.

Take, for instance, intentions of care, devotion and love within everyday consumption practices. Research in this vein argues for understanding consumption practices – from shopping, to cooking, to waste – as ethically imbued activities in their doing, regardless of outcome. Such work considers consumption as an expression of affection and responsibility, ‘a labour of love’ (Carrier, 1990: 587; Miller, 1998; Tronto, 1993). This is of course a complex issue, given that it is this duty-bound perspective that then also frames moralistic and gendered assumption about good mothering, especially as expressed through food consumption (also see Murcott, 1983). Furthermore, and as noted earlier, within a deontological framework moral duties and commitments are thought to be placed above pleasurable outcomes (Hay and Foley, 1998). As research demonstrates, consumption as care work can be tiring, thankless and unrewarding; it is, after all, part of the sphere of social reproduction that is commonly undervalued and underpaid (see Mitchell et al., 2003). Geographical contributions that employ such a non-teleological perspective include Daya (2016) on the ordinary ethics bound up within informal craft trading as an enactment of care ethics; Hall (2011: 635) on everyday family consumption practices as ‘an ethically embedded process’; and Meah and Jackson (2017: 2065) on convenience food provision as ‘an expression of care rather than as its antithesis’.

Similar non-teleological underpinnings can be noted in research on thrift and the intention rather than the outcome of being thrifty. Holmes (2019: 135), for instance, identifies thrift as a continuum, rather than a discrete set of outcomes, as one that ‘extends beyond the point of purchase and which is a productive practice’. Thrift is thus temporally marked, in terms of ‘the contours and gradients’ of ‘time spent engaging in

thrifty practices' (Holmes, 2018: 141). For Evans (2011), deconstructing everyday practices of thrift and frugality requires careful scrutiny of the scale at which care and compassion are exercised. Likewise, McEwan et al. (2015: 234) posit that thrift is 'primary factor in consumption decisions [for middle-classes in the global south], rooted not simply in anxieties about economic precarity and debt, but a choice exercised in relation to care ethics, responsibility for the household economy and aspiration'. Here, then, scholars are developing non-teleological grammar to understand ethics as they occur and through consumption.

A further set of empirical examples that warrant mention comes from fieldwork on related work on everyday consumption practices, or rather on consumption as method. There has been a recent shift within geography towards considering the growing, eating, cooking and disposing of food stuffs as what can be understood as 'embodied methodologies' (see Crang, 2003; Longhurst and Johnston, 2014). With this feminist, visceral approach, the focus shifts from data that comes out of a project, towards doing-as-data. This includes Pottinger's argument for slowness, carefulness and gentleness, of light treading within research looking at seed saving and growing (Pottinger, 2017, 2020). Longhurst et al. (2008: 210) argue for further geographical consideration on 'doing research and of being researchers' (emphasis in original) and of 'the body as a tool in the research process' (209). They use the example of sharing a lunch with participants, and the visceral experiences of disgust and desire experienced in eating with others. Hayes-Conroy (2010: 736) also argues for doings with food and participants to be understood as a form of visceral fieldwork. She refers to these as 'in-the-moment sounds, smells, doings and happenings' that shape 'the outcomes of the "interview" with regard to what kinds of "data" I was able to witness, gather, or experience research outcomes'; but are important and valid in their own right. In this, and the preceding examples, geographers working on the ethics of consumption have sought to redirect empirical interest to the exercising, expressing, happening, doing and practising of ethics as valued and significant, and of primary interest, to consumption. In doing so, they are (often inadvertently and without acknowledgement) also pursuing a non-teleological

agenda that moves away from results towards the value of intention. In what follows, we turn to explore how studies of volunteering necessarily grasp the varied and non-causal qualities of outcomes.

## 2 Youth volunteering: Outcomes

The study of youth volunteering quintessentially captures the potential and limitations of teleological explanations. It responds to the intuition of teleological explanation, that human behaviour is inherently purposive. Studies of youth volunteering are orientated towards either identifying the motivations of young people to volunteer (Davies, 2018; Handy et al., 2010; Hustinx and Lammertyn, 2003) or the outcomes of their volunteering. Outcomes are identified with broader societal benefits (such as the creation of a 'big' society, Mohan, 2012) or the subjects that are created through this activity in relation to citizenship (Baillie Smith and Laurie, 2011; Milligan and Fyfe, 2005; Yarwood, 2005), employability (Kameråde and Paine, 2014; Leonard and Wilde, 2019) and well-being (Mcgarvey et al., 2019).

This emphasis on intention and outcomes mirrors broader debates in youth studies around the necessity to research outcomes (as exemplified by the transition approach, see for example Furlong and Carmel, 2006; Roberts, 2007; Wallace and Cross, 1990) versus the relevance of studying youth experiences (such as the generational consciousness approach, Wyn and Woodman, 2006). This debate is more muted in geographical scholarship, for which the potential of theorising youth through the lens of becoming involves meshing different scales, to not only capture the ongoing synthesis of personal identities but also the entire process of youth as a process of becoming, rather than a discrete stage (Valentine, 2003; Worth, 2009). Becoming captures the nascent qualities of youth but in a way that resists defining it as a period that has to be lived through, it opens up the possibility of the value of youth experiences that are not deterministic. Geographical studies of younger people not only embrace multiple geographies (Smith and Mills, 2019) but are open to the banal and uneventful spaces and



events of everyday life (Holton and Finn, 2018; Horton and Kraftl, 2006; Pyyry, 2016; Skelton, 2000).

This potential to reimagine youth through banal and habitual experiences resists teleological explanation and sidesteps the questions that might be asked about what an activity is for. Yet when applied to youth volunteering this approach can be seen to fall short, and the intuition that young people volunteer to do something cannot be ignored (Holdsworth, 2010). This motivation to do *something* aligns with indeterminable practices of care rather than defined intention. Thus, reasserting the intention of volunteering activity does not imply a teleological interpretation. Teleology assumes that outcomes are inherent to practice, whether this is overtly or, in a more Hegelian interpretation, instinctively intentional.

Through maintaining a focus on the embodied practice of volunteering and/or activism that happens in place, geographers have paid closer attention to the narratives of becoming that emerge *through* this engagement not because of it (see for example Horton and Kraftl, 2009; Hopkins et al., 2015; Maynard, 2018). Geographers are able to critique the imposed temporality inferred by the assumption that volunteering makes sense retrospectively with reference to 'in-order-to' intentions. Through foregrounding the situated and embodied experiences of volunteering this research subtly refutes teleological explanations in a number of ways.

First, outcomes that volunteers identify with volunteering are not necessarily intended ones. Young people report dissatisfaction with volunteering and unease about assumed societal benefits. In this way the deconstructive potential of volunteering can engender understanding of social inequalities that third sector activities ostensibly seek to reduce (Holdsworth and Brewis, 2014; Holdsworth and Quinn, 2012). Second, volunteering can confirm individual and social identities rather than promoting discovery or change. The predictability of volunteering activities and who takes part in volunteering is framed within the cultural ethos of established volunteering organisations (Mills, 2013; 2016). The premise of youth volunteering organisations is equally orientated to their continuation into the future

and preserving organisational cultural heritage. Thus, individual and organisational intentions and outcomes do not necessarily coincide. Third as Cloke et al. (2007: 1099) maintain volunteering is habitual and as such can usefully be seen as a way of 'bringing ordinary ethics into extraordinary circumstances' (see also Denning, 2021). Ordinary and normative ethics of care not only frame motivations and commitment, these also instil reciprocal practices of support, that is the benefits of volunteering are multi-directional, not linear. These diverse outcomes emerge in a Deleuzian sense (1994) through the repetitive acts of volunteering which occur within variations of intensities and ideas. Habitual volunteering does not solidify outcomes, instead it is through the varied intensities of experiences and ideas that acts of volunteering retain their freedom with respect to destiny (Williams, 2013).

This last point returns us to the proposition we consider in this paper that a non-teleological grammar can orientate an ethic of doing geography. The premise of research on young people's participation to reveal reasons for (non)involvement not only fails to capture acts of omission (which is often the question premised by policy, i.e. why young people do *not* take up opportunities such as volunteering) but it also frames acts of engagement in normative contexts. The problem with a teleological interpretation of non-engagement is that not doing does not simply reflect an absence of motivation. The legacy of youth sub-culture research effectively demonstrates how not doing can be a practice of resistance (Corrigan, 1975). When applied to acts of participation, teleology collapses the temporal into a linear unity (i.e. motivations apply equally to both present and future). Flattening out the dynamics between being and becoming can result in interpreting practice through a normative reading of what young people are expected to do (and what they are assumed to gain from volunteering, see Holdsworth, 2017). Liberating (non)acts of volunteering from what they are presumed to do for people and organisations does not diminish the possibility of identifying outcomes, it does though require an empirical commitment to identifying the diversity of experiences and subjectivities.

### 3 Therapeutic making: Direction

Our final case study examines in more detail the direction of non-teleological activity. As we describe in relation to youth volunteering, breaking the link between activity and telos does not imply that there is no agency to habit or practice, but that outcomes are not determined by destiny. This indeterminable interpretation does though raise the question of whether direction is a necessary component of non-teleological interpretations and we discuss this in relation to therapeutic making. Our examination of empirical studies of the therapeutic potential of making foreground the potential of interpreting making forwards, rather than a backwards retrospective interpretation.

Recent resurgences in craft and making have stimulated geographers' interest in these practices in relation to space, materials, bodies and social relations (see Price and Hawkins, 2018). This research resits normative representations of craft and making as enduring and apolitical activities to unpick how these processes, as Braitch and Brush write, 'fasten[s] the concrete and the abstract into material symbol' (2011: 246). Studies of making are particularly intriguing to examine through a non-teleological lens. On the one hand these are aligned towards non-teleological interpretation through focussing on embodied experiences of making (Carr and Gibson, 2016). Yet the rationale for many studies of making is often to identify its broader outcomes, in other words the uses that are made of craft itself. Making has multiple purposes more than the outputs that are produced – it is interwoven into political activism; personal and spatial identities; frames relationships; and can be a practice of self-care. For our purposes we review scholarship on the contribution of making for well-being<sup>7</sup> and how this highlights the potential of a forwards interpretation of activity.

To begin with making, Ingold's interpretation that it arises 'within the process of use' (2000: 354) is particularly pertinent for foregrounding a non-teleological approach. His affirmation that it is what people do with materials that comprises the lifeworld requires reading creativity forwards rather than backwards (Ingold, 2010). That is rather than moving from finished object to the initial intention of the maker as agent, making

should be read forwards 'in an ongoing generative movement that is at once itinerant, improvisatory and rhythmic' (Ingold, 2010: 91). Thus, for example, Ingold and Hallam (2014) describe the process of basket making as rhythmically and artistically intertwining reeds in a circular motion. The completion of a work in its final form, a basket, is not the 'end' of the making process. Rather making is a way of thinking and feeling that results in the generation of cultural forms that continue their life course within the framework of an adapted process of use (Ingold, 2013). Ingold's dynamic reading of making at the intersection between materials and sentient makers has influenced geographical scholarship on craft and skills (see for example Mann, 2018; Patchett, 2016; Price and Hawkins, 2018) and enlivened research about the significance of making. This attentiveness to making is supported by detailed (auto)ethnographic accounts of these processes (for a review of this methodology see Carr and Gibson, 2017).

While geographical research is aligned towards a non-teleological approach, it is easy to twist this focus on doing into an account that is determined by the outcomes of practice. This is especially evident in recent research on well-being that seeks to establish the therapeutic possibilities of making. The aspiration to identify wider benefits of making breaks with Ingold's insistence against a backwards interpretation. Instead the growing body of evidence on therapeutic making relies extensively on retrospective observations from makers to confirm common-sense observations that making can be beneficial through intrinsic and extrinsic outcomes (see for example Riley et al., 2013). This research finds that making can facilitate achieving a state of 'flow'<sup>8</sup> through concentration, manipulation of materials and repetition (Brooks et al., 2019; Burt and Atkinson, 2012; Kenning, 2015). Equally the benefits of making can be external: through expanding friendship networks; benefitting from the advice and support of others; and the satisfaction of making objects for others, often through volunteer groups (Brooks et al., 2019; Genoe and Liechty, 2017; Pearce, 2017). The therapeutic potential of making can be assimilated within a broader arts therapy movement (Leone, 2020; Parr, 2006). In these accounts the arts are

positioned as agents that can help with individual recovery, deliver health and social care and in doing so save money ([All Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing, 2017](#)). The ongoing rationale of this agenda is the amassing of the evidence base to establish the causality of arts therapy. This research agenda is, therefore, directed towards working backwards from outcomes rather than moving forwards through detail of making and in attributing agency to arts and crafting the experiences of sentient practitioners is paradoxically undermined.

Against this overarching teleological interpretation of the outcomes of making, geographers' contribution to these debates is developing through more careful attention to the spaces and inter-subjectivity of therapeutic making. Notably [Smith's \(2021\)](#) study of a community based workshop develops [Dunkley's \(2009\)](#) conceptualisation of therapeutic taskscapes to draw attention to 'spatial-affective practices, atmospheres, and active engagement with place' ([Smith, 2021: 15](#)) within the workshop. The potential for research to engage with the transient and embodied engagements is also developed in [Bunn's \(2020\)](#) study of basket weaving. Bunn identifies the therapeutic potential of basketry in engendering an 'intersubjective interweaving of practice and thought' ([2020: 53](#)). The intention of this research is not to challenge the therapeutic potential of making but rather to move forwards to detail the personal, spatial and material encounters that can make the promise of well-being. Instead of ordering means and ends along a continuum or working backwards in the pursuit of amassing an evidence base, detailing the assemblage of means that are enacted in making can reveal the diversity of possible outcomes. We echo Smith's observation that there is considerable potential for geographers working within a non-teleological grammar to contribute to this expanding inter-disciplinary research agenda through a commitment to working forwards from making, rather than backwards from assumed outcomes.

## V Conclusion

Our intention in writing this paper is to reveal the already present non-teleological approaches in geographical research to clarify a grammar for

empirical studies of everyday practice. A grammar of non-teleology draws attention to the plurality of everyday ethical dispositions and the dynamics of ordinary practices that co-ordinate multiple and radiating intentions and outcomes. Thus, what can be achieved through resisting attempts to bring practices into line with overarching goals that may be expressed in political or normative codes of what people should do (for example volunteering for employability, making for well-being), is to foreground the diversity of meanings and intentions of doing everyday practices. Indeed our examination of non-teleological orientations in the three empirical case studies finds that this approach can open up a different reading of intention that is not defined by destination (whether explicit, internal or reflective) but orientated towards an ethic of care for bodies, things and environments. This approach avoids overtly descriptive accounts through detailing the contingency of consumption, volunteering and making that allows for ongoing calibrations of these activities. These practices might be habitual, but these ongoing and repetitive qualities do not infer that these are fixed. Understanding how habits of consumption, volunteering and making are formed and retuned through practice avoids the cul-de-sac of normative description.

In this paper we have orientated our justification of a non-teleological grammar for geographical research in opposition to teleological explanations. However, this binary position is equally problematic as the combination of humans and ethics is not necessarily dyadic ([Tronto, 1993](#)). We do not want to suggest that geographical research should rigidly adopt a non-teleological grammar that denies the possibility of interpreting the relationship between means and ends. It is intuitive to want to understand why things happen and the impact of practice, events or policy on everyday life and vice-versa. The value of a non-teleological grammar is that it opens up diverse non-linear relationships between means and ends (such as the plurality of ethical consumption practices). Teleological emphasis on detailing outcomes and voiced intentions can misinterpret causality: either working backwards from ends to means (such as retrospective studies of the benefits of volunteering

or making) or exclusively interpreting how activities are orientated to predetermined accounts (delivering making or volunteering opportunities *in order to* enhance well-being or employability). In taking a non-teleological approach that requires starting from the detailed study of means, opens up the possibility of unexpected or divergent accounts. In our reviews of consumption, volunteering and making these approach is validated through paying attention to not just what people do but the spatial, material and relational contexts of means and the ongoing dynamic calibration of these activities. Such a non-teleological research process aligns with a feminist visceral approach that interprets bodies as open-ended systems, rather than ends in themselves.

In detailing how orientations to non-teleology are already present in geographical research, the value of explicitly naming non-teleology cannot simply be to add to the lexicon of jargon in geography. To return to our initial observation, while the orientation of much geographical research can be interpreted to align with non-teleology, the institutional framework within which it is carried out is not. Instead the pursuit of research is increasingly measured through the numerical goals of outputs and funding and the requirement to demonstrate impact. In funded projects research questions are identified, addressed through methods and directed towards predetermined outputs and impacts. Adhering to a teleological approach may favour projects that demonstrate, for example, the moralistic framings of consumption; the impact of volunteering on young people's employability; and the benefits of making for well-being. This teleological design is counter intuitive to the theoretical developments of geography and the practical application of more fluid and progressive approaches to time and space. Our suggestion is that the value of explicating a non-teleological grammar for research practice is that it can open up subtly different and forward-looking research questions. Thus, rather than negating research questions that are orientated towards predefined outcomes and impacts, empirical projects can ask questions that foreground the messiness of everyday practice and the divergence of intentions and outcomes. For example, with reference to the case studies considered here these

research questions might ask: how can volunteering be delivered to be more inclusive; how might consumption offer a window into understanding other everyday practices; and how do the assemblages of making reveal diverse expressions of well-being?

These questions resist the assumption that either theoretical or methodological rigour can be imposed on the mess of everyday life. Through orientating to a non-teleological grammar, knowledge can be coproduced through engagements with everyday realities that acknowledge how people are constantly seeking to interpret and where possible, bring about change, in their everyday lives. Through retaining a commitment to the divergence of intentions and outcomes that is revealed through a forward orientation to empirical methods, researchers can navigate between the vibrancy of recent developments in geographical theory and practice and the requirement for research to pose questions and provide solutions to these.

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## Notes

1. We use the term making rather than crafting as it is more inclusive of all crafts and people, in particular that crafting may assume the application of an acquired skill.
2. Though derived from Greek, teleology was not a term used in Ancient Greek thought.
3. Critiques of teleology in the 20th century were developed by empirical philosophers such as Nagel and Hempel whose logical positivist approach requires all explanation to be 'reducible to confirming observations' (Perlman, 2004: 4). Attributing function is not possible within this logic as it requires observation of action beyond an individual instance.
4. Teleology is especially associated with evolutionary theory and the study of biological evolution is one scientific domain in which teleology is explicitly named (Wright, 1976). Scholars in the field recognise that teleology is a favoured explanation of natural selection because it is intuitive, whereby human and non-human functional properties are acquired either as a result of intrinsic goal-orientated agency or the extrinsic agency of 'Nature the Designer' (Kelemen, 2012).
5. Kant's engagement with teleology exemplifies the variability of its application at different scales. In the second part of his *Critique of Judgement* he seeks to define the relevance of teleology in the natural sciences against the rising dominance of mechanistic explanation, that is the extent to which nature has a purpose or not (Ginsborg, 2019). Kant's defence of teleological explanation falls short of Hegel's in that he defines judgements as reflective, that is they refer to how we see the world, not how it is (Sayers, 2019: 40).
6. This parallels Christian moralist theories, which hold that 'while the consequences of virtuous actions are in general good, they are not *as* good as the virtuous actions themselves, which are to be valued on their own account, and not on account of their effects' (Russell, 1946: 190).
7. We do not have space in this paper to provide a detailed definition of well-being. For our purposes we approach

well-being as dynamic and intersubjective, rather than a thing in itself; it is structure of feeling that is moved towards rather than an objective state that can be measured (Ahmed, 2010).

8. A flow activity can be defined as one when 'a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990/2008: 3).

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