

How Can I Possibly Be Free? ~Raymond Tallis

This evening, I am going to try to persuade you of something you probably cannot really doubt. I am going to defend your instinctive belief that you have free will. I want to persuade you that it is not naive or untutored to feel that that you are responsible and indeed morally responsible for your actions; and I want to provide you with arguments that will enable you to answer those increasing numbers of people who say that our free will is an illusion, even an adaptive delusion implanted in us by evolution.

In order to do that I will have to marshal arguments against the claim that a deterministic reading of the universe is incompatible with free will; and I will also meet the challenge arising from the deeper argument – which seems to hold up even if the deterministic world-picture is not true - that unless we are self-caused, we cannot be held responsible for what we do. I will argue that the key to freedom is to be found in first-person being, in the very ‘I’ for whom freedom is an issue.

My case against those who deny free will not take the form of a knock-down proof. Indeed, my position is quite elusive. I am painfully aware that it is easier to demonstrate theoretically that we are not free than to see how, in practice, we are. For this reason, I am going to have to take you on quite a long journey and it might be useful to set out its various stages.

I shall begin by clarifying what I mean by freedom. I shall then proceed to define the determinist case against freedom. After this, I will examine the very widespread belief that gene-based evolutionary theory, and what we now know about brain function, have given us additional reasons for believing that we are not free. I characterise this as ‘clothed’, as opposed to ‘naked’, determinism – bio- or neuro-determinism. Finally, I will describe a more recent, powerful variation of the case against freedom, advanced by Galen Strawson, which actually poses a challenge to our notion of moral responsibility, irrespective of whether the universe is determined or not. Strawson’s argument is important because I think it makes clear the undeclared intuition that lies behind the determinist argument.

At this point in my talk, I will start to develop my own ideas about the nature of freedom. The key to freedom, is, as I have already suggested, the self-same ‘I’, ego or self, for whom freedom is an issue – who worries and frets about freedom. At the heart of my argument is *intentionality* – the ‘aboutness’ of consciousness, which turns the causal chain back on itself. Various other concepts will then be wheeled on: the self, as embodied subject, as a new point of origin and the centre of an egocentric space. This space is the Space of Possibility, of transcendence. Pooled transcendence creates a shared, public, human world – the first-person plural world - which grows and is elaborated in parallel with the self: this is the field of our freedom. I-perception is connected up into a we-world by gestures such as pointing, artefacts, language and, eventually, institutions. This, the human, world is an outside-of-nature in which we may utilise the laws of nature to deliver our own ends.

One of the keys to understanding our freedom – and central to confronting in particular Galen Strawson’s challenge – is to see the extent to which we are self-developing or self-creating – as when we train the mechanisms of our own bodies to carry out our wishes automatically – so that we can increasingly subordinate cause-pushed natural events to reason-led actions.

Two further things. Firstly I will consider how much of the apparent power of the determinist arguments comes from its focussing on isolated actions, or even components of actions, that have been stripped of the self-world – their proper ambience and the field of our freedom – so they are easier to embed in the net of material causation. And secondly, I shall point out that in many cases, the arguments against freedom – typified by Strawson’s argument (which is why I pay him so much attention) – place impossible requirements upon someone before they can count as free – requirements that would actually empty freedom of content and hence meaning. Finally, I shall deal with the worry, arising out of my argument that the outside-of-nature from which we exert our individual freedom is a *collective* product, that I may have replaced physical determinism with either psychological or cultural determinism. I will escape the charge of swapping one sort of bondage for another by noting that our freedom has two sources, each counter-acting the limitations of the other.

You might find all of this a bit indigestible but I hope it will become clearer as it is teased out at greater length and at a less breathless gallop.

Let me begin by characterising the freedom that I am concerned about. If I am truly free, I am the *origin* of those events I deem to be my actions. I am accountable for them: I have ownership of them, I own up to them. They are expressive of me in the sense that they cannot be separated from that which I feel myself to be. In this regard, they are connected with my motives, feelings, expressed aims. They make biographical sense. This is not enough. I would not be free if all my willing was so tailored as to bring about what was anyway inevitable. A truly free act is one which *deflects* the course of events. I am free if, as a result of many actions, themselves free in the sense I have described, I have an important hand in *shaping* my life.

So that’s what I mean by ‘being free’. What about determinism? There are many versions of the determinist argument, but let me set out the most straightforward one. Since every event has a cause, actions, which are simply a sub-category of events, also have causes. Their causal ancestry, what is more, is not confined to what we would regard as ourselves, if only because we ourselves are the products of causes that are in turn the product of other causes *ad infinitum*. The passage from cause to effect is determined by unalterable laws of nature.

For a determinist, intentions are simply another means by which the laws of nature operate through us. In short, we are not the origins of our acts and we do not deflect the course of events, we are merely conduits through which the processes of nature operate, little parishes of a boundless causal net extending from the Big Bang and perhaps terminating in the Big Crunch.

Most philosophers think that determinism is incompatible with free will. They fall into two camps: the libertarians who save freedom by denying physical determinism; and the sceptics who affirm physical determinism and so deny freedom.

There are, however, philosophers who believe that free will is compatible with determinism: the so-called compatibilists. They include me (as you will see) though I believe that determinism applies only to the material world understood in material terms.

The traditional arguments for determinism have recently been dressed up in some very fancy clothes. Evolutionary theory, genetics, and brain science have been invoked in combination to generate a new form of determinism: biodeterminism. According to biodeterminist thinking, our behaviour is subordinated to the evolutionary imperative of organic survival: it is the unchosen result of the fact that we, and in particular our brains, are so designed as to maximise the chances of replication of our genome. It is our genes, especially through their phenotypical expression in our brains, not we, that are calling the shots.

The attacks on free will that arise from brain science go beyond evolutionary psychology. Any adequate account of neurodeterminism would take more than an evening and most of it is not directly relevant to our theme. There is one particular set of observations that has captured the determinist imagination and, in fact, is highly pertinent to today's theme – which is why I will re-visit it later. I am referring to Benjamin Libet's observations about the relationship between intention and action.

For a long time, it has been known that the preparation to act is associated with a particular potential or brain wave – the so-called *readiness potential*. In fact I have done some work on this myself. In Libet's experiment, the action was very simple. Subjects were asked to flex their wrists when they felt inclined to do so. They were asked also to note the time on a big clock when they experienced the conscious intention to flex their wrists. Libet found that the readiness potential, as timed by the neurophysiologist, actually occurred *before* the conscious decision, as timed by the subject. There was a consistent difference of over a third of a second. The interpretation of these findings has been a matter of intense controversy – many of them methodological - but some (not Libet himself) have argued that, since the brain activity associated with voluntary actions *precedes* even the intention to perform the actions, we do not truly initiate them. At best we can inhibit ongoing activity: we have “free won't” rather than “free will”. Actually, free won't – if genuinely free – at least is free but many others have seen Libet's experiments as confirming what we feared: that our brain is calling the shots. We are merely the *site* of those events we call ‘actions’.

A recent attack on the notion of free will from Galen Strawson is particularly important. It goes beyond the arguments from determinism and purports to demonstrate the impossibility of freedom or moral responsibility, irrespective of whether the universe unfolds along fixed lines, so long as we are not self caused.

- a) Nothing can be the cause of itself (*causa sui*)
- b) In order to be truly morally responsible for one's actions, one would have to be *causa sui*
- c) Therefore nothing can be truly morally responsible

Performing acts for which one is morally responsible requires, Strawson argues, that we should be self-determining and this is impossible because the notion of true self-determination runs into an infinite regress.

Strawson's argument – which I think is flawed because its premises are flawed - is nevertheless useful because it makes clearer the underlying force of deterministic arguments: that whatever I am has been caused by events, processes, laws that I am not and that, in order to be free, I have to escape being caused. Strawson's argument is the reduction to absurdity of deterministic assumptions; for in the end such arguments require that in order to be free, I have to escape being determined; and in order to escape being determined, I have to have brought myself into being – a trick that of course only God can pull off. In order to be responsible for anything I do, I have to be responsible for everything that I am, including my very existence. Given that I cannot pre-exist my own existence, in order to be able to bring it about, this is a requirement that cannot be met.

We will, I believe, be able to deal with Strawson's argument by looking a little harder at the question of whether or not a self is *causa sui* - it is not overall and ultimately of course but it is, I will argue, to an important degree – and whether its actions can or cannot be seen as expressing itself.

As I have already intimated, I am going to argue that the case for determinism will prevail over that for freedom so long as we look for freedom in the wrong place – namely in the no-person world or a first-person world understood in no-person terms. Freedom, I will argue, can be found only in the first-person world we first persons have created individually and collectively: freedom is a feature of the first-person world which is not given over to a no-person perspective.

Let me first spell out again what I think should be the case if we are to be correct in our intuition that we are free. Firstly, that are the point of *origin* of our actions; secondly that our actions really do *deflect* the course of events; and thirdly that they are genuinely *expressive* of ourselves and for this it is necessary (though not sufficient) that they should relate to our explicit, subjectively embraced, goals, aspirations, endeavours, purposes or what have you.

The issue of whether or not we are the *origin* of our actions is central. SLIDE
Seen as pieces of the material world, we seem to be stitched into a boundless causal net extending from the Big Bang to the Big Crunch. How on earth can we be points of origin? There is sensory input and motor output and nothing – or nothing much different – in between. This, indeed, is the functionalist take on consciousness, beliefs, the self etc. Let us therefore deal with the question of how on earth the actor could be a point of origin, so that the act in a very important sense begins with him: he can truly say 'The buck starts here'. The key to this is *intentionality* which, in its fully developed form, is unique to humanity. Intentionality is that in virtue of which the contents of our consciousness are *about* something. It is also the seed of the self and of freedom. Intentionality is entirely mysterious and not, at any rate, to be explained in terms of the processes and laws that operate in the material world. Its relevance today is that it is the beginning of the process by which human beings transcend the material world, without losing contact with it. Freedom begins here.

I have just said something rather startling: that intentionality cannot be understood in terms of the laws of physics. Let me explain what I mean with a very basic example, taken from the ground floor of intentionality; that of my perceiving a material object; more specifically, my seeing a material object. If you believe the kind of account that underpins determinism, the light from the object enters my eyes and stirs up neural activity and this activity is the basis of my seeing the object. Now while the passage of light into the brain (the upper arrow in the diagram) is an example of a standard causation, the gaze that looks out (the lower arrow) most certainly is not. It is different from a standard causal chain in two respects: firstly, the directionality is 'upstream' – the look is from the effect (the neural activity in the brain) to its cause (the object that deflected the light into the eyes); secondly the reverse arrow is finite – it comes to a rest on the object. It does not, for example, look beyond the object to the earlier history of the light

Intentionality is so central to the arguments about freedom and to everything I have to say today, that I want to dwell on it for a few more moments. Let me first list some of the consequences of this counter-causal bounce back. The object that is picked out by the gaze is has some interesting features, the most important of which is that in human beings *and in human beings only* it explicitly exceeds the experience of it. It is a locus of future possible experiences. These possible experiences have a general character, quite different from the definite particularity of the items in the material world. For reasons that there is no time to go into here, the object in humans exists not just for an organism but for an embodied subject. (I am happy to discuss this in question time, by the way). Objects of this kind open up, and hold open, a Space of Possibility that exists explicitly for an embodied subject. The object is also public, accessible by anyone. It is therefore the ground floor of a shared Space of Possibility. This is the human world which unfolds through the joint and shared attention we pay to things and which is outside of material causation. Indeed, it is in this shared, human world, that, as Schelling said, 'Nature opens her eyes and sees that she exists'.

The key thing to grasp is that intentionality is in the reverse direction to the flow of causality. It underpins the sense of an object out there related to me here as an embodied subject. This lies at the root of the process whereby the individual conscious person comes to lie at the centre of a world of his own pitched in space and time that would be otherwise boundless and centreless. The flag of 'here' and 'now' and of a bounded world has been planted in a material world that is in itself without such indexicals and without origin and limits. This bounded personal world is then open to be collectivised as 'the human world' – but I am getting ahead of myself.

Now at this stage, I could get very complicated and take you through the 1,000 or so pages of the trilogy on human consciousness that has as its heart what I have called 'The Existential Intuition'. However, I am going to focus only on what is strictly relevant to the present discussion. I am not going to speculate as to how it is that we, uniquely among living creatures, have this Intuition but discuss which aspects of it are relevant to my claim that we are, at least for some of the time, free agents. Let me first explain what the Existential Intuition is and then tease out the aspects that are relevant to freedom. This is a bit dense and complicated and those of you who want to take this bit for granted may have a little vacation and come back when I give you the signal.

The Existential Intuition – ‘That I am [this]’ - is the sense that one exists. It is the assumption of a piece of the world – a living body – as something that someone is; or, rather ‘am’. Notwithstanding the way I have presented it, it is not a proposition. It is like a blush that spreads over one’s body as in one’s early months, one assumes that body as one’s self. It is rooted, of course, in bodily awareness – in the sensations that arise from one’s body. But it goes beyond that and this is essential to the sense of one’s self as something substantial and being something that is more than the succession of one’s sensations. Although you are permanently identified with your body as that which you ‘am’, you, as it were, colonise your body to a variable degree. Different parts are colonised with awareness at different times. You are often your mouth, sometimes your buttocks, sometimes both, sometimes neither, occasionally the small of your back and probably never (unless it ruptures) your spleen. Bodily self-awareness is permanently haunted by the sense of more to come; or the sense of what I am is surrounded by an aura of what I might be. The important point is that the sense that what I am goes beyond the sensations through which I experience what I am, the body that I assume as me. My bodily sensations are therefore *about* something they explicitly are not. I therefore have a sense that I *am* something that transcends what I am experiencing as me. It supplies what Kant looked to the transcendental ego to supply but it is meatier and is located in space, time, and the causal net. What is more, the Existential Intuition opens up the sense of transcendent objects that are more than what it actually experiences of them. This makes one’s own body a place where possibility takes root. This sense of possibility is projected into objects other than the object that is one’s self – to the material objects that surround one, as we discussed before. Quite early on in life, one is in a world that at its most primitive is a network of objects that irradiate possibility; or that between them sustain a Space of Possibility.

Now we can see that there are two sources of cracks in the prison of ‘is’ and the materialist determinist network and they both arise out of intentionality. There is the appropriation of part of the world – one’s own body in the first instance and surrounding objects next – as ‘myself’ and ‘my world’. There is the awakening of ‘am’ and, connected with this, there is an opening up of the Space of Possibility. The natural world does not deal in either am or possibility. And this is where we shall find the seed of our freedom. This is only a seed. The Existential Intuition unfolds into a self addressed to its world. Most importantly, however, this world is massively expanded as a Space of Possibility, as the theatre of a life led rather than merely organically experienced, due to its being built as a collective enterprise. Self- and world-building are talks in themselves but I want just to give an illustrative example of the sort of thing that happens. For it is this that delivers the virtual outside from which, I will argue, we are able to position ourselves to utilise the laws of nature and hence act freely. The transcendence that comes from intentionality is greatly expanded and, indeed, pooled, as is the Space of Possibility. This is the first step in a long journey that involves a multitude of sign systems, most notably natural language, though it also includes artefacts, tools, rituals and so on, that weaves together the boundless human world. This, too, is a very big story.

But from the point of view of emergent freedom, these are some of the key consequences. Intentionality that is implicit in sensation becomes explicit in object perception; and is made yet more explicit through the multitude of sign systems that fill our waking consciousness. The transcendence that begins with intentionality is

now growing into something that is only indirectly related to the body. The invisible world into which my language, points goes beyond experience. It opens the way to knowledge which is not, as positivist thinkers and, more generally, materialists would think, merely piled up or compressed experience. It belongs to what Donald Davidson called the community of minds. Secondly, this invisible world, first intuited in the intrinsic properties of objects that are not exhausted by our perceptions of them, is of a general character: it is a Space of Possibility that is, of course, not present in, or part of, the material world. At this stage, I would invite those who have been having a little vacation to resume attention or at least simulating it.

What we have, then, is an increasing divorce between the world of sensation and the body-as-organism and the theatre of our lives. It is in this first-person world – or the interaction between a first-person singular self and a first-person plural Space of Possibility – that we find our freedom. Within this realm, we have a *point of origin* – ourselves who in the first instance are surrounded by material objects that form the contents of a personal world. By means of intentionality – the gaze that looks out and comes to rest on an object that is specified as its cause – we plant the flag of here and now in a material world that the no-person or impersonal view of science would see as boundless. This is where the buck starts: in a self that is not a thing, but not insubstantial, either: it is an embodied subject. This is a self that can get a purchase on a particular world, the theatre of its existence, unlike incidentally either a Kantian transcendental ego or the Humean flow of experiences that Kant wanted to lift the self above.

This, then, is how we are points of origin and there can be events – actions – that actually originate with us. This brings me to the second requirement: that we can genuinely *deflect* the course of events. To understand how this is possible, I will borrow an idea first put forward in a posthumously published paper by John Stuart Mill. Mill was exercised through most of his life with trying to reconcile his materialism with his passion for liberty. How can there be free agents, when we are material parts of a material world and subject to the laws of nature? He argued that, yes, we have to obey the laws of nature but that we should appreciate that at any given juncture, there is more than one law of nature operating. By aligning ourselves with one law, we can use nature to achieve ends not envisaged in nature. More specifically:

Though we cannot emancipate ourselves from the laws of nature as a whole, we can escape from any particular law of nature if we are able to withdraw ourselves from the circumstances in which it acts. Though we can do nothing except through laws of nature, we can use one law to counteract another.

We *utilise* the laws of nature by aligning ourselves with the one that leads to our goal from the virtual outside-of-nature that is the world opened up by intentionality. This virtual outside-of-nature created collectively by humankind – millions of people over hundreds of thousands of years - a huge place into which to withdraw from particular laws of nature.

We can, as Mill said, quoting Francis Bacon, ‘obey nature so as to command her’. The ultimate expression of this is our use of the laws of nature in science-based technology, a supreme expression of the knowledge that we have accumulated into the community of minds that is our collective selves. This is possible because we are

coming at a particular piece of nature from the outside and I have described this outside: it begins with the transcendence of intentionality, and is built up through the expanding Space of Possibility, first-person plural reality constructed through the joint endeavours of the human race, whose products have accumulated since the first hominids first awoke to their own existence.

Anyone who doubts that we can individually deflect the course of events should consider what we have achieved collectively in building up a human world so extensive as virtually at times to conceal the natural one. As was said of Christopher Wren '*Si monumentum requiris, circumspice*': if you seek his monument, look about you. The artefactscapes of cities which cover the surface of the earth with man-made objects, the human institutions to which we relate for so much of our lives, and the extra-natural social facts and preoccupations that fill our waking hours, to which there is nothing corresponding in nature – these are all eloquent testimony to how collectively we deflect the course of events and operate within a space outside of the material world construed according to the laws of physics. We get ever greater purchase on the natural world through an ever greater outside built up by thousands of generations comprised each at first of thousands, then of millions and ultimately of billions, of people.

The third requirement for events in which we are implicated to be true actions is that they should be *expressive* of what we are. The most obvious manifestation of this is that they are relevant to our explicit goals, motives, intentions. Curiously, this is the most difficult area for those who want to defend the intuition that we are free. Everyone knows the argument: I do things because I am motivated to do them but I do not choose my motives. So while, for example, we withdraw into an outside-of-nature that is the human world, what withdraws is a piece of a nature subject to laws. Motives etc are subject to natural rather than human laws. And these natural laws are not, according to determinists, particularly special ones.

As the biodeterminists I alluded to earlier would argue, even the most abstract and elevated motives are simply transformed instincts which in turn are an expression of the unconscious imperative of our organisms designed to ensure the replication of the genetic material they carry. There is a half-truth in this: namely that the motives and indeed the motors of our actions lie deep. So much for the half-truth. The other half is error; for the depths from which our specific actions arise are not the impersonal ones that reach into the biosphere from which we have evolved. What makes our actions expressive of our individuality, what, in short, makes them ours and us properly accountable for them, is the fact that they arise out of personalised depths, even if the latter ultimately stand on biological need.

Let me defend this claim about the personal depths from which our actions arise by taking the argument into enemy territory and this point by revisiting Libet's by taking the argument into enemy territory and revisiting Libet's experiments because they – or the interpretation that some have put on them - show how we tend to overlook the personalised depths of our actions, the 'am-soil' from which they arise.

You will recall that Libet noted that the timing people that ascribed to their intention to flex their wrist at will seemed to locate it *after* the onset of the physiological activities associated by neuroscientists with the initiation of movement.

This raised the disturbing possibility that our intentions have little to do with our actions. Let us remind ourselves, however, of the actual circumstances of Libet's subjects and, of the action they performed. Their action did not consist simply of flexing their wrist but of getting up in the morning to visit Dr Libet's laboratory, to consent to take part in an experiment whose nature and purpose and safety they fully understood, of listening to and understanding and agreeing to the instructions they received and *then* deciding to flex their wrists. In other words, the immediate intention was not the whole story and the timing relation between it and the readiness potential seen in the lab was not all that important. The whole story is one of sustained and complex intentions being maintained over a very long time and taking in a thousand, many thousands, of items of behaviours – getting on and off buses, looking for the laboratory, cancelling other appointments, and so on. The flexing of the wrist is just the last component of this action called 'taking part in Dr Libet's experiment'. The fact that the making of the movement seemed to precede the intention to make a movement by 300 to 450 milliseconds now seems less disturbing, since the general intention to make a movement of the required kind had been there as soon as the instruction was given and the general intention to cooperate with Dr Libet's experiments had been present there for even longer – in some form or other since the subject read about his experiments and decided to see if she could participate in them because she found them so interesting. The specific intention to flex the wrist belongs to an entire field of intention which has temporal depth and 'existential' extensity and is connected with great swathes of the self-world (know-how, know-that, motives, principles etc)

This exposes a major objection to the determinist case: that it traduces the nature of action. One way to make voluntary actions seem involuntary is to strip away their context and to break them up into their components. This can be taken even further. I can break up the action of walking to this lecture hall into physiological elements such as the breaking and formation of cross-bridges in my muscles. Now it is perfectly obvious that 'I' cannot do this – I would not know how to make a cross-bridge if I tried – but it does not follow from this that I am not walking freely to the lecture theatre; or that I am not really intending to get there.

The wrist-flexing in Libet's experiment is only a part of the story, the final step in a long journey of intention. The Space of Possibility which is the framework and theatre and rationale of our activity is an infinitely complex nexus that has many layers before it reaches something as simple as a biological or material cause. Indeed, because our actions are so complex, the notion of 'a cause' loses its grip and even the more complex notion of motive, understood as a force external to, and certainly that of instinct, cannot easily be applied. What is the cause of my giving this lecture? What material cause would you invoke? You may say – Your entire past. But this is hardly a cause; and, if it were, it would be interesting to know who or what gathered it into a single cause. If it was me, then we are a long way from the notion of causation of my actions as being somehow outside of me.

While we concede that our past is deeply implicated in our actions, it is not there as a mere cause of which we are passive effects; it is there as an explicit presence – a million components of know-that and know-how – and not simply as a deposit of effects in my brain that then becomes a cause. The only way of synthesising these elements is through a sustained, forward-looking, explicit intention; in short not

through a cause pushing from behind but a reason pulling from in front – a reason that does not dig backwards into some putative biological substrate but that is a forward-looking affirmation of, assertion of, expression of, myself.

It is wrong to think of actions as the effects of causes, if only because, as already emphasised, even ordinary simple acts are composed of vast numbers of material events that are inseparable from one another. Think of something as straightforward as ‘going to this lecture’, as less straightforward but no less commonplace as ‘travelling to London’ or as even less straightforward but still very commonplace as ‘preparing for a holiday’, ‘making one’s self a competent psychiatrist’ or ‘undermining someone else’s self-confidence’. The countless events of which they are composed cannot be generated by ordinary causation and their coherence understood in terms of e.g. drives or motives that are themselves seen as quasi-material causes. Wishes, intentions, and other propositional attitudes adequate to actions are not simply caused nor simply causes. Like the actions that can be understood to some extent by means of them, they are portions of a self-world that is more or less of a piece with other parts of the self and its world.

To see actions aright, we have to invoke the notion of reason, which pulls us towards goals we have ourselves envisaged and articulated, and shapes the succession of action-components we undertake. This is the hidden nerve of association gluing together the countless sub-routines that make up action components, the countless action components that make up ordinary-sized actions (such as taking a train to London) and the countless actions that make up our lives, understood as something we consciously and strivingly or effortfully lead rather than merely organically or material live or experience. To see actions as cause-pushed rather than reason-driven is, of course, to prepare them to be reinserted into a causal chain extending backwards from a present material event to the Big Bang; and this is wrong.

Let us suppose that, in the middle of this talk, I had an epileptic fit. I might fall to the ground and you would see twitching movements. Now there are several things to say about this event. Firstly, it can be explained by the activity of my brain. The EEG would show changes correlating with first my loss of consciousness and then my tonic and clonic movements. The second point is that it would cut right across my biography: it would be an impersonal sequence of events that had nothing specific to me about it – the sequence could belong to anyone.

Contrast this with the lecture I am giving; and contrast it, too, with what follows when I come round from the fit. My interpretation of what happened, the help that I accept or reject, and what I subsequently do about my fit, would dip deep in my biography, drawing on the kind of person I am, my dispositions and attitudes and emotional make-up, and on particular experiences and knowledge that inform my decisions and make me able to act on them. We could summarise the difference between the lecturing I am doing before I have the fit and my responses to the fit when I come round on the one hand and the fit itself on the other by saying that the former are temporally deep, personal to me, are rooted in my biography and character and so on; and the latter is an event that is entirely of now, is impersonal, and cuts across my biography.

We might put this differently by saying that a true action belongs to an entire field of actions that are rooted in our selves. Any action is a part of a boundless nexus of behaviour that extends over huge swathes of what we might call ‘am-soil’ or ‘I-territory’, unlike the events that comprise an epileptic fit. That is what I mean when I say that my actions are free in the sense of being expressive of myself: they are modes of *self-assertion*. So there you are: you have a model of an action that is genuinely expressive of the actor. It belongs to a field of action that is unique to ourselves; makes sense only with respect to a frame of reference, a ‘present past’, a ‘present future’; is rooted in ‘am-soil’, ‘I-territory’; which is related in turn to ‘we-soil’, ‘we-territory’. In short it truly is a mode of self-assertion or self-expression

It is easy to overlook the hinterland of self behind behaviour if we focus on individual actions lifted out of their context. Consider catching a ball. The more brilliant the catch, the less it seems voluntary. We seem to have done it without thinking about, without *deciding* to do it. Indeed, when you consider what catching a ball involves, it seems impossible to perform it as a voluntary act. You have to fling yourself across empty space in such a way as your outstretched hand intercepts the ball. The hand has to be sufficiently open at the time of contact as to admit the entry of the ball but not so open that it just bounces out. The fingers then have to close rapidly round the ball. You also have to allow a certain amount of compliance so that the ball does not at once bounce out of the hand before you have managed to trap it between your fingers. There are many other variables that have to be fixed, none of which you could deliberately control. So surely you did not catch the ball, your body did and you were just a fortunate bystander who took the credit.

Not so. First of all, in order to catch the ball, you had to participate in a game of cricket. This requires that you should have (voluntary) turned up to a particular place on a particular day, that you understood and assented to the rules of cricket, and that you understood the role of the fielder, in particular that of the slip fielder. More importantly, in order to make the catch, you would have had to practise. This means that you would have had to spend time in the nets, preparing yourself for this moment that would bring such glory upon you. To do this, you would have to so order your affairs that you would be able to go to the nets at the booked time – negotiating the traffic, making sure your day was clear to take up your booked slot, and so on. You would listen hard to your coaches’ advice and do your best to translate it into action. In other words, behind this quasi-involuntary action there would be a huge and complex hinterland of complex actions – actions that is very difficult to imagine happening without your deliberate intent. You have performed a vast number of voluntary actions in order to enable yourself to perform an action that you could not carry out involuntarily. Many of these preparatory actions have taken the form of positioning yourself to have experience and acquire knowledge, deploying many intermediate steps in doing so. And this is how it is with much of our life, which consists of acting on ourselves in order to change ourselves – from going to a pub to have a drink to cheer one’s self up to paying good money to improve one’s ability to cut a figure in Paris by polishing up one’s French.

If you really must be neurological about it and talk about neuroplasticity, you should be reminded that neuroplasticity is often self-driven and that the self that does the driving cannot be understood without invoking the collective and individual transcendence that is the world. While *neuroplasticity* is evident – there is plenty of

research showing changes in the brain when you are acquiring a skill – there is also bodily plasticity, plasticity of consciousness (including increased confidence in my abilities which can be self-fulfilling), plasticity of the self, and plasticity of the world – as when I decide that others should work with me in a different way to ensure that one or other of us holds that so important catch. It is a mistake to try to stuff all that back into the brain and see it in terms of changes in synaptic connexions at the microscopic level or alterations in cortical maps at the comparatively macroscopic level. Stuffing it back in the brain, of course, is the first step to handing it all over to the no-person material world and sneaking back to determinism.

It will be evident from what I have said that the self that is expressed in actions has temporal depth and I want for this reason to look again at the temporal dimension of the Space of Possibility. We are explicitly aware of having had past experiences, of having contracted in the past obligations that are presently valid and should shape our continuing behaviour. Neuroscientists try to reduce this explicit past to its implicit presence in the current structure of the brain – the changed properties of synapses and the altered cortical maps that result from learning etc. And they try to reduce the future to the altered activity of e.g. the frontal lobes that fits the behaviour of the organism to predictable events. To make time merely implicit in material processes in this way is to remove the explicit temporal depth of our selves and our world.

Temporal depth is another form of intentionality and just as resistant to being fitted into the materialist world picture as the intentionality of perception, of pointing, or of discourse. In fact, as many of you will know, there is no place for tensed time in a physicalist account of the world. Matter does not accommodate past, present and future. This was what the Special Theory of Relativity made finally and irrefutably clear. No wonder neurodeterminists want to reduce memory and other aspects of temporal depth to the present state of the brain. Making past and future merely implicit in the present disposition of the brain takes away an entire dimension of the Space of Possibility. It collapses the human world to a present tense and this helps to reduce us to the status of animals that simply pinball through the world rather than explicitly plan their way through it. We should look upon time as a form of intentionality that goes beyond what is before us to what is no longer before us and what is yet to come. And while it is easy to trace the causal chains that led to the present state of my synapses which is supposed to encode memories; it is not at easy to understand in material or causal terms the way the present state of the brain refers intentionally to the events that brought it about. How it refers upstream to its causal antecedents. That a changed state in the brain brought about by an experience of an event should itself *refer to* the event, should be *a memory* of the experience, is utterly mysterious in materialistic terms. And yet it is this that places the ‘now’ in the middle of boundless time and divides time into the past and the future. Most importantly for our present discussion, the field of intention, of self-hood, of self-expression to which our actions belong, has a temporal depth. Pretty well any piece of behaviour draws on an explicit personal past and an explicit personal future. This distances us from the material world. Tensed time can also break the prison of ‘is’.

The example of catching a ball illustrates several things additional to the fact that we use our agency to perfect the performance of tasks that are carried out largely by means of mechanisms over which we have little control. Firstly, that we *need*

causation and law-like behaviour of the universe including our bodies in order to be free. Otherwise training would be pointless. Each situation and the sequence of events would be unique. Far from freedom being merely compatible with a world unfolding according to the laws of nature, the latter is a necessary condition of freedom. The laws of nature are an enabling constraint.

Secondly, we actively seek out those things that will change us – make us better, more experienced, more effective, more competent. In this sense, we are *self-constructed*. Effort, diligence, placing ourselves where we can learn and be changed – this is the stuff of daily life. We are actively complicit in our development as we train, struggle, figure things out, put ourselves in a certain place in order to have certain experiences, and just ordinarily live our lives, driven by a sense of possibility. More broadly, we have had a significant role in bringing about those things that are the very context of our actions and our inclination to perform them and our competence to do so. The more we have had a hand in it, the more it is ‘ourselves’ - and that ‘ourselves’ is built up of many layers of past choices – and the more it may be seen as expressive of ourselves and as originating from within us. There comes a point in our development at which our actions involve so much of our selves that – unlike an epileptic fit – they are not separate from ourselves. Thirdly, we must not see this as the acquisition by a pre-existing self of the ability to perform actions that express itself; rather as the emergence of the self with its ends in parallel with the ability to perform them: what emerges is an agentive self. We will not understand either selfhood or agency unless we see the two as sides of the same coin.

Fourthly, the process of self-construction does not involve myself alone. We discover our bodies as ourselves, and the embodied subjects we are as agents, but this is only the start. Self-driven development takes place with help from our fellow human beings – those we actually bump into from our parents onwards and those present and past who have constructed the world in which we operate – those millions who make up the Space of Possibility that is our collective human achievement. It involves the community of minds of which I am a part, the world which has been built up by the collectivisation of the transcendence which begins with intentionality, and which is embodied in the functioning of artefacts and institutions such as cricket nets, transport systems, timetables and so on.. Our self is both first-person singular and first-person plural. We drive our own development, choose our lives, and so choose our ends and become more competent at achieving them; but we collectively help each other individually. I catch the collective bus to hasten me to my private goal.

We are now ready to meet Galen Strawson’s challenge to freedom and moral responsibility. He argues, you will recall, that, unless we are *causa sui*. We cannot be held morally responsible for our actions. It seems to me that, given that my actions have grown out of all those items, events and processes that I have appropriated – beginning with my body – in the service of my evolving and increasingly self-conscious, other-conscious and world-conscious ends, they have grown out of a soil that I have cultivated. This is sufficient *causa sui* for me to be justly held responsible for my actions. The first-person is self-appropriating and our actions are ultimately rooted in the unfolding of the primordial act of self-appropriation – the Existential Intuition that makes ‘is’ into ‘am’ and sets the ‘I’ off from the world which is the theatre and substrate of its led life. The Existential Intuition – like the Cartesian Cogito – is a kind of tautology – no-one can gainsay that my intuition that my body is

me and its actions mine. This is the version of *causa sui* that should answer anything meaningful in Strawson's demand.

The demand that, in order that it should qualify to be morally responsible for its actions, the self should have requisitioned itself from nothing, is not only impossible but also inappropriate. Freedom – and moral responsibility – have to operate within some kind of given otherwise they would have no content. The co-evolution of the self and freedom means that freedom gradually acquires a content and the self need not look back in shame to a time when it was not free, when it was in volitional nappies, as it were. This may still leave some people unhappy. They may still feel uneasy that freedom is tethered to something as particular as an individual with all the initially unchosen material, biological, cultural and biographical baggage it has. However, without baggage there would be no content. There would be no agenda to give meaning and purpose to freely chosen actions and the choice of one action over another would be more like randomness than pure volition. Without constraints – that begin with the constraint of being the particular body one appropriates as one's self with all its particular characteristics (including the fact that it was born in a particular century) – freedom would simply being an emptiness in search of content – a bit like Sartre's Nothingness. There would be nothing for it to be free from, about or towards. More fundamentally, Strawson's requirement that we cannot truly be held responsible for our actions unless we are responsible for bringing about ourselves in their entirety – and this would include making our own bodies – actually presupposes that we cannot be free unless there is no particular, inherited, given, locus for our freedom.

Freedom as I envisage it is particular and hence conditioned. Any notion of unconditional freedom is in danger of becoming vacuous. Conditioned freedom is, of course, always vulnerable. While external constraint does not take away inner freedom – which includes my ability to see certain states of affairs *as* constraints – it can be impaired by for example, brainwashing, torture, drugs, or illness that cloud my consciousness or, as in frontal brain head injuries, my judgement and understanding.

Strawson's argument unintentionally helps us to see and deal with the impossible criteria that are set for freedom by incompatibilist determinists; the notion that we can be free only if : a) we were always free or, b) if freedom really has to be acquired, it is acquired all at once by a sudden miraculous change of state. Strawson's demand that we are responsible for what we do only if we made ourselves reflects the intuitions that lie behind these impossible criteria.

This way of thinking, that does not allow freedom to be slowly acquired – both in ourselves individually and in the human race over the history of hominids – fails to grasp two things – one relatively superficial, the other more profound. The superficial point is that, as we have shown earlier, we *do* have a central role in shaping ourselves and both our intentions and our ability to act on them – in short in creating the conditions in which we can freely act in the triple sense of being a) the originators of our actions that b) deflect the course of events and c) are expressive of ourselves.

The deeper point is the one I have made already: that freedom and the self grow in parallel: the self and the freedom it is concerned about are two sides of the same coin. The appropriation of the body and the world as the Space of one's possibility, the theatre of meaningful action, are both the acquisition of the self and the acquisition of

the freedom – the conditions necessary for it and the particular content it has. The self should not be snifty about its freedom on the grounds that it was not acquired freely any more than it should be snifty about its self-hood because it did not grow out of itself.

We gradually become ourselves through appropriation of what we are not in the processes of self-shaping: we have a hand in creating our freedom and the theatre of our freedom. Our selves and our freedom grow in parallel; before freedom we did not have an unfree self: we do not have a self. We could say of a foetus that it is not free but it could not intuit of itself 'I am not free'. Sure there is no freedom for the creature cooking in the womb; but there is no 'I' either.

The reason Strawson was able to make his argument seem convincing was that he looked past the long process of self-shaping straight through to causes that lie outside ourselves – he burnt off the intermediate layers in which reside both what we are and the locus of our freedom. If you remove the locus of the self, you lose the locus of our freedom. By locating the self in a causal chain, by reducing the self to a sequence of events – so he can then allow it freedom only if it is a cause of itself – he removes the layeredness of the self that, as it were, insulates us from material causation. He creates difficulties for the notion of moral responsibility by thinking of the self as an entity which is compressed into a single cause which is at best that is the effect of past causes – a kind of sediment of the effects of past causes. When you think in this incorrect way, you drift into a notion of moral responsibility which entrain the impossible requirement that the moral agent has to exist before himself, bring himself wholly into being out of something that precedes him; or that he has to precede himself in order to be answerable for what he is.

We are free, then, inasmuch as we are capable of actions that originate from within us; deflect the course of events; and are expressive of us.

My notion of freedom begins with a transcendence that is rooted in the human body – it is the conscious body appropriating itself as its self. It therefore avoids the vacuity of Sartre's Nothingness and the problems I identified early with Kant's transcendental ego. Kant's 'I think that accompanies all my perceptions' that binds my experiences and actions together suffers not only from being rather donnish but also from not really being able to get a toe-hold on empirical reality where actual actions are carried out. My transcendent self is an 'I am' and so is not separate in the first instance from the sense that the shit-bathed arse in one's nappy is me, the feeling that the toe one is sucking is mine, and above all (though this is another very big story) that the hand that is grasping is my hand and the agent of my agency – reinforcing the sense that this body is mine and some at least of my events are proto-actions. SLIDE On the basis of the Existential Intuition a process of growth of the self into the individual Space of Possibility and the shared Space of Possibility that is the human world is initiated. That and not self-creation out of nothing is all that is needed.

The reference to the shared Space of Possibility may raise alarm bells with some: Is our freedom simply a collective manifestation? Are we dissolved in the collective? Have I rescued my freedom from the jaws of material causation only to feed it to the equally slaving jaws of cultural determinism? Thankfully, no. Our freedom has twin

sources, each protecting it against the other. The pooling of transcendence that is the human world lifts us from the grip of biological (natural material processes). The unique trajectory of our unique organism through the material and cultural world distances us from the collective. Thus, the awakening of the organism into an embodied subject beginning with intentionality makes each of us an independent point of departure and with each of us, beginning with the appropriation of our own bodies as ourselves, a new world is born.

So there you have it. I am conscious that this has been a long journey and that I have taken you through some quite difficult arguments and invited you to share some rather elusive intuitions. I hope what I have offered you is better than 'Bad reasons for what we believe upon instinct'. I guess I shall find out very shortly. In the meantime, I thank you for your attention or at least for simulating it so persuasively.

Background References

This talk draws on arguments I have spelt out in more (indeed pitiless) detail in the following publications:

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