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FREE WILL: DR JOHNSON WAS RIGHT

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Abstract: In this attempt to deal with the problem of free will Tallis identifies intentionality as a feature of our lives that cannot be explained by deterministic, natural, physical, causal laws. Our ability to think about the world, and not merely be objects subject to it, gives us room for manoeuvre for free thought and action. Science, far from being antagonistic to the possibility of free will as it is usually presented through its deterministic explanations, is a manifestation of our freedom and could not exist without it. However, doubts arise for the argument owing to a lack of explanation as to how freedom is possible no matter how persuasively we are shown that it appears to be. That is, what kind of world would it have to be for freedom to exist and be explicable. I conclude with my own view, alluded to by Tallis, but not followed up, that the problem with the scientific worldview is that it is wedded to objectivity as the only stance deemed veridical as to the nature of reality, one which therefore cannot by necessity allow subjects or freedom. As freedom is a property of subjects, the scientific worldview cannot allow for freedom. Once the condition is dropped that only the objectively knowable can be real, freedom also may be real, defined as a knowable property of our subjectivity. There is no need to deny physicalism if the definition of it is released from the epistemic bonds of objectivity and we hold that some physical properties may be known subjectively, namely those that characterize our subjective life.

Keywords: freedom; will; intentionality; science; determinism; objectivity; subjects.

1.

Any attempt to solve the problem of free will is heroic. Heroic because anyone who tries probably knows their attempt is doomed, that the chances of them getting to a solution of which people say, ‘now we’ve got it!’, is very unlikely. Though of course most philosophical problems are like that; perhaps all true philosophical problems are.

Raymond Tallis heads into the fray with his book *Freedom: An Impossible Reality*. The only way to make the ‘impossible’ and the ‘reality’ here not contradictory if one aims to argue that freewill is possible as he does, and indeed actual, is to say that freewill *appears* to be impossible, if wider deterministic considerations are taken into account, but *really* it is not. Without those wider deterministic considerations, interestingly, the reverse would seem to be the case, that our *not* being free appears near impossible, and that it is surely a reality. Thus Dr Johnson declares, ‘Sir, we *know* our will is free, and *there’s* an end on it’. Later in the paper I shall try to show why Dr Johnson may have been right, rather than the declaration simply being, as it usually is taken, a mere outraged mental stubbornness, but one argumentatively otiose, directed toward any denial of freewill.

2.

Tallis's approach is traditional. He accepts the way freedom as a problem is usually set up as a metaphysical issue, and that it is within those constraining conditions that the problem of how freedom is possible has to be solved. Later in the paper I shall show that this starting place constrained by these conditions need not be the only one, and that to start in the traditional way bodes ill for a solution to the problem of freedom, whereas to shape the problem with the injunction, 'if I was going to try and solve the problem of freedom I wouldn't start from here', bodes much better.

Let us see however what Tallis has to offer and see how far his arguments can take us towards having good reasons to think that freedom is a possible reality, indeed an actual reality.

The traditional configuration of the freedom problem as a metaphysical problem always involves the possibility of freedom in a deterministic universe. This is narrowed down often to a deterministic physical universe, following the unassailable success of physical science. The problem is often called the problem of free will because for something we do to be free it seems to require that it be something we consciously choose to do, not whatever may be involved in and follow from an involuntary thought or movement, so freedom is glossed as something we will to do rather than something else we might will to do. Every natural physical event has a previous event that determines necessarily that it shall happen in such and such a way and not otherwise, and this may be traced back event by event to the beginning of the universe. This necessity is not logical necessity, but is contingent necessity given the kind of universe that exists¹, but is quite necessary enough to seemingly preclude freedom. Freedom is an illusion as it seems to involve the possibility of a range of outcomes, and control over which outcome occurs in any given situation, so that any one of them might be chosen as the actual outcome, since in reality one actual outcome was always the only possible outcome. The problem of freedom arises as freedom seems nevertheless to be real. When I pick up my cup of coffee, as now, the event was determined to be as it is and not otherwise by previous events which may be tracked event by event back to whatever happened at the beginning of the universe. My having a choice whether to pick up the cup of coffee or not is a mere appearance, whereas in fact there is no choice – it was either determined to happen or not, and if it was determined to happen, then no other event could have taken place. I may feel as though I am choosing between outcomes, whereas in reality I could not have done otherwise, and choosing is always a misnomer.

That freedom is not possible and that we live in a deterministic universe where freedom is impossible seem to bother Tallis very much, and he describes the idea as 'dispiriting' and 'terrible' (Tallis, 2021, ix). Personally this sort of theoretical threat to freedom has never bothered me because I ask myself what difference holding it to be true could possibly make to my life. I do not think it would or could make me live my life any differently or have that

¹ Spinoza of course thought the universe was logically deterministic and had to be if we were to attain a complete explanation of the universe according to the principle of sufficient reason. This meant that that each happening in it was not only a matter of logical necessity, but that the universe as a whole was the only logically possible universe.

life mean anything different from what it does. There is perhaps a philosophical lesson to be learnt from that. In a Wittgensteinian way the threat of determinism to freedom is a cog that whirls in the machine, perhaps occasionally drawing our attention to its frantic rotation, but a rotation that is connected to nothing. But this is another dissolving way of treating the problem that we shall not pursue here as it involves the grandeur of a wholly different way of dealing with philosophical problems.

The problem of freedom arises because the determination that appears incompatible with it does not absolutely overwhelm our belief that we are free. If we could get in a frame of mind where we were perfectly willing to accept that strict causal determinism applies to everything that happens and that that extinguished the possibility of freedom, then there would be no problem of freedom. But that would be a very strange mindset indeed, one people find impossible in practice no matter what they may believe in theory², and it may also involve drastically abandoning all the things that make human life history (see Bellow, 1976, p. 11) meaningful and valuable. The totality of talk about what it is to be human, what it is to be a person, the things that we think and do, and why and what for, would simply fall out of use as false and even nonsensical. We would have to view ourselves as essentially no different from a rock. A hard trick to pull off, to put it mildly, despite it being, as the history of thought on the subject has shown, intractably difficult to show it is not true. The issue remains that if the universe is deterministic, that is to say if determinism is comprehensive and complete, then a total explanation of all that happens in the universe, which includes ourselves, may be derived from merely understanding all the determinations, and since freedom involves happenings that are not so determined, then freedom is not merely problematic but logically impossible.

The traditional metaphysical way of setting up the freedom problem and giving an answer, positive or negative, involves permutations relating determinism and freedom. They are these.

- (1) determinism ✓ freedom X
- (2) determinism ✓ freedom ✓
- (3) determinism X freedom ✓
- (4) determinism X freedom X
- (5) [determinism] X freedom ✓ or X (will)

(1) determinism is affirmed but freedom is denied. (2) determinism is affirmed yet freedom is affirmed also. This is compatibilism. (3) determinism is denied while freedom is affirmed. This is incompatibilism or libertarianism. (4) determinism is denied and freedom is denied. One might call this chaoticism. Narrowing the seemingly exhaustive permutations (1)-(4) to physical determinism allows us to add (5), where physical reality is denied and Will is the fundamental stuff of the universe, and this may lead one to hold that freedom is possible or not possible (see Schopenhauer, 1969) depending on how deterministic

² The theoretical view that consciousness, and *a fortiori*, free will is an illusion – albeit an evolutionary advantageous one – has been proposed, see (Humphrey, 2006). How the theoretical belief that these things are illusions interacts with the overwhelming feeling that they are not, and how it makes any difference to his practical life, is not explored in the book.

one supposes the Will to be in relation to ourselves as minute manifestations of it. This is voluntarism.

Denying determinism for those events we deem free gets us nowhere, as to say an event is free but undetermined strips it of any possibility of its being determined by our choice. When we say an event is free we do not mean that it has nothing that determines it, as an event *ex nihilo* can no more be free than one that is determined *ex materia*. So most attempts to solve the problem of freedom accept determinism, but aim to show that freedom is still possible.

Now to some of the metaphysical responses barring (5) in an all-too-quick overview. Dualism supposes an enclave of freedom in a substance that is non-physical. But this brings with it the problem of interaction and explanatory redundancy. So while not denying there is a deterministic physical world, not all the world is physical. Monism, as one finds in Spinoza and Russell, argues that there is a more fundamental stuff in the universe than the physical and the mental, and they exhibit themselves as two aspects of this more fundamental metaphysical substance. But this view is haunted by the mysterious nature of this further substance whose existence is seemingly inaccessible to direct verification, while it is also not clear how, since determinism remains, it helps show that we can be free unless one changes the usual meaning of 'free' to necessary, contingent-independent, thinking as Spinoza does. Physicalism as a metaphysical theory understood in a certain way (we shall see that this need not be the only way it may be taken) as it involves determinism, makes the problem of freedom extremely difficult to solve. A common route here also in that case is to change what we mean by 'freedom' – perhaps by showing that we are in some way mistaken or confused about what freedom really is – so that determinism can be embraced, and yet we are still free. The problem with this is that the allowance of freedom becomes proportionally less convincing and satisfying as the new meaning of 'freedom' moves away from what we normally mean by freedom, to the point where we are left with something, but it does not tally with our usual understanding of freedom at all.

Tallis says he is a compatibilist. That is, he affirms determinism, and physical determinism at that, but yet supposes freedom is possible. His strategy is traditional, but as set out it involves an interesting argument with an ingenious turn-it-on-its-head manoeuvre in the middle. However, I think it has a flaw, or rather an omission that would be required for it to fulfil its aim, one that may leave one wondering, without it, what the argument amounts to.

Swiftly stated, as I have understood it, the course of the argument is as follows. Tallis alights upon a feature of our existence that does not appear to be capable of being fully explained by talk of mere happenings, that is of physical objects and the laws that they obey. That feature is intentionality. It is somewhat unclear what is meant by intentionality, indeed it seems to vary in meaning somewhat throughout the argument – sometimes it seems to amount merely to there being subjects, that there is subjectivity – but the core is that in my interactions with the world the world can be something for me but I cannot be something for the world. The cup over there can be out of reach, or beautiful, or something I value, or something I'm afraid of breaking, or something I'm grateful a friend gave me, something I might do an experiment using or not, or something I might hit someone over the head with – but I can be nothing for the cup. It is an object of my thought, my thought is about the cup, but there is nothing to the cup's existence that makes me an object for it, whatever the cup is doing it cannot be such that it is about me. Of course, intentional objects need not exist.

The intentional object (what my search is about) of my search for a mouse in a room is the mouse I am searching for in the room, whether there is a mouse or not. And of course my intentional object might even be mythical and not exist at all, such as a unicorn or a gryphon.

Let us gloss this notion of intentionality as an awareness of the world. As Tallis puts it, I perceive an object in the world as a result of a causal process that comes from the object into my eye and then my brain, but then there is my awareness which seemingly goes the other way to the object, and this, he claims, if it were to be explained as a physical causal process would be a very strange one indeed, as it appears to go both ways. Of course it does not, and the physical causal process only went in one direction from the object to me. He then goes on to argue that this intentional awareness cannot generally be explained by purely physical deterministic processes for no objects considered purely in regard to their physical properties can exhibit them. Physical objects interact, but they are not anything to each other. Some have questioned this (Quinton, 1973, p. 340) either on the grounds that some propositions can be formulated that show intentional not causal relations between physical objects (and the reverse is argued, if intentionality is taken as the defining mark of the mental as it was by Brentano; although not all mental states have intentional objects, some moods for example). However, these counterexamples are reasonably successfully argued to be parasitic on the semantic mental formulations of the physical relationship, without which they would just be distinct physical happenings with no intentional aboutness referring to any other physical objects. Let us suppose therefore that the purely physically explained cannot exhibit intentionality. Tallis then goes on to say that this realm of intentional objects opens up a 'virtual world' of objects that we may play with freely independently of mere immediate physically determined happenings. A mental room for manoeuvre. He extends this notion of intentionality to intersubjective intentionality, which vastly increases the scope of our thought about the world as it expands to include that of others and is shared with others. Intentionality is one might say a standpoint towards the world, but not as passive receivers, but rather an active view, a perspective, a gaze, something we project onto the world like a torch in the darkness.³ It is directed towards objects between which, other than for those objects like ourselves, such a projected torch-like gaze is not possible. Human beings can both stand back from the world and illuminate more than the patch of ground they are standing on.⁴

He then goes on to talk about science and scientific thought. In a clever move he turns upside down what we might learn about the universe from science by seeing it not as a threat to freedom, but as a demonstration of it. In a general sense the argument amounts to: if I were not free I couldn't write this book. Or more specifically: whatever the findings of science the existence of the scientific view of the world is itself proof that we have free will for without it science would not be possible. Without free creatures like ourselves, the delineating concepts and objects it involves, the normative methodology, would not be possible, since they require contemplation of and contingent engagement with the world.⁵

³ Interestingly this view is found in (Wilson, 1966), and indeed is a dominant theme throughout his writings.

⁴ This is close to Heidegger's concept of *Dasein*.

⁵ This is a view with which I have some sympathy. (Shand, 2009).

Take for example the idea of a beginning and an end; this paired duality is not something that resides naturally in the world, but something that arises only from our viewing the world and engaging with it in a certain way. So while the scientific view of how the world is can be used to deny freedom, the very existence of that view can only be an affirmation of freedom. Although science may seem to lay before us a world of physical determinism that leaves no room for freedom, it is itself, as a scientific way of thinking about the world, a prime example of the result of our being able to detach ourselves from the world and think about it freely. It exhibits degrees of abstraction and imaginative formulation of laws that are clearly not just the same as the particular physical events in the world which science itself describes, but which take place in a realm that cannot therefore be explained by such physical events, which, as such, have no interest in such ideal formulations.⁶

Tallis goes on to do everything he can to weaken the idea of laws and of causality as essential features of the universe which make sense independently of our thinking about the world. Rather they are abstractions, a way of understanding the universe that could not have existed were it not for creatures capable of thought about the universe. Thus he neatly makes the world viewed scientifically an affirmation not an antagonist of freedom.

The last step is to say more about freedom, in particular that it is a more complex matter than is usually supposed within an oversimple view of the free will problem. There is a discussion of action and agency, so that it is said that: “There is no satisfactory physical description of the fulfilment of an intention to go to London to make the case for improving stroke services, let alone a unique or definitive one” (Tallis, 2021, p. 133). Such actions are beyond and clearly not mere happenings, that might be satisfactorily and exhaustively explained by a physical deterministic explanation. But it has to be said that the exact nature of agency as explained by Tallis can sound downright enigmatic, as when he says: “The position developed in this book argues that agents are cause-makers, transformers of events into causes, or requisitioners of events to be causes, rather than themselves being causes” (Tallis, 2021, p. 150). This is said so as to deny that agents are causes, whereby they are not dragged back into the world of causal determination where freedom would be impossible, while at the same time we somehow freely harness causes to our ends without ourselves being causes. This formulation is surely quite mysterious. It’s hard to comprehend how we can do anything to the world if we are not causes. It is made to sound as though we are kinds of vectoral nudges altering where things were going anyway, diverting their course – but in order even to be this we would still have to be causes. There is too much poetry here and not enough philosophy.

The basic general point is this however: if we just had the world as it is physically described and only that, there would be features of our relation to the world that would be inexplicable, in particular our understanding of the world. Those features can only be explained by there being freedom, therefore there is freedom. The overall argument of Tallis’ book is straight *modus ponens*.

⁶ (Hampton, 1998) makes similar points, and extends it to point out that science involves normative, non-factual concepts, such as truth, and mistakes, that cannot be formulated as purely physical phenomena, but depend on an understanding awareness. Bergson also contrasts our everyday understanding of the world with that of the idealised abstractions of science. (Bergson, 2016).

But there's the rub. And it's the metaphysics, or rather the lack of it. It is only late in the book that Tallis mentions the word 'metaphysics' at all, in particular "the metaphysics of freedom" (Tallis, 2021, p. 159). Yet that is what he says the book has been about (rather than say, political freedom). Indeed, later still in the book he says that ". . . the material world and the habits of nature portrayed in the laws and causes of natural science" (Tallis, 2021, p. 167) cannot accommodate freedom, that viewed like that freedom would indeed be an impossible reality. So either freedom is an illusion or science gives an incomplete account of the world, in particular of human life. But he says we should not deny something as a reality just because we cannot understand it scientifically. As we have seen, Tallis says that science is only possible because of a free conscious awareness of the world, since the entities and events causal laws pick out and determine depend upon our chopping the world up in a certain way, but that there is a scientific gaze which the gaze itself cannot accommodate as possible. It is as though there are many photographs, but the photographs are never of, and perhaps never can be of, the camera or its mechanism that makes them possible. This dependence of science on a gaze is a difficult claim, for it might suggest that the laws are relativistic to our mode of awareness, though taken in a certain way, one that denies a view from nowhere as a possible view, this perhaps need not be so. It might however be said to confuse what is required to discover something with what is discovered. If science gives a correct description of how the world is and that is taken to be theoretically comprehensive and completable, the discovery process requires something unexplained by the world as that scientific description has it, leaving that something else as incompatible with the way the world is, its possibility quite mysterious.

In any case it is hard to see how the dependency of science on the very thing it cannot explain, even if the existence of the science indicates its reality, helps the case for our freedom because it leaves wanting an explanation of the world that would be both a correct understanding of it and allow for freedom. Without this we just have a mysterious explanatory void of what the world is really like in itself, a world in which for all we know freedom might still be an illusion. What is required to solve the problem of freedom is not just a description which makes a convincing justification that we must be free – for surely there is plenty of that around already – but an explanation of what that world would be like. And that is metaphysics. But such a world might have a different nature and laws also incompatible with freedom.⁷ Indeed it might be said that any lawful deterministic explanation of the universe is incompatible with freedom, while on the other hand the universe might be utterly chaotic and beyond lawful explanation, which again hardly makes freedom, as opposed to mere randomness, similarly impossible. The idea, if that is the aim, is to show how freedom is possible in the universe as we understand it, not just to deny that as we understand the universe freedom is impossible, but somehow nevertheless it is possible, indeed must be possible as it clearly exists – for the latter point is mere hand waving without an explanation of the universe where freedom is possible, and an account of freedom that will go with it.

The worry is that Tallis' book simply points convincingly to all sorts of features of our human existence, our being-in-the-world, summed up in the intentional gaze upon the world

⁷ See Schopenhauer again, just to pick one example.

within which we can manipulate thought about it, and that that gaze *if* real is incompatible with a complete deterministic physical explanation of the world. But we knew that. That this subjective intentional awareness appears to be part of our existence in the world is incredibly difficult to deny – we might do so objectively, but it is hard to understand what denying your own subjective awareness could amount to – but the question is *how* it is possible, what is the explanation of the universe that makes it possible. Merely denying that the physical explanation is complete leaves everything to play for. What we seem to have is a long description of how all sorts of phenomena such as thoughts about the world and free actions in it would be incompatible with and inexplicable were the world completely physically deterministic, without any explanation or description of what the world, any kind of world, would have to be like to make the phenomena of thought and free action possible. There is a great deal of the description of free will, that it must exist, but it is not matched by anything showing how it is possible: how the world would have to be for free will to exist. It might even be said that Tallis' book amounts to a very elaborate Dr Johnson denial if viewed as a metaphysical rebuttal (but as we will see I do not think that is how it should be taken) with two senses of 'is' in play which are not the same, and enacting only the first 'is' of description, without the 'is' of existence, where the latter explains how the former is possible if it is real.

Tallis says at one point that it is not surprising that objective science cannot accommodate free will (Tallis, 2021, p. 167) and indeed subjects and the subjective view, but he fails to take that anywhere or, I think, draw the right conclusion. A different approach can be taken.

Luckily I have one that I prepared earlier.⁸ And I set it down here in brief. The fundamental problem is whether there can be subject, for if there can be subjects, then freedom may follow as a subjective phenomenon. The best way of tackling this is to step back and see that the problem of subjects and freedom is not a metaphysical one, but an epistemic one. The problem surrounding these is so intractable, not because the universe is made of a certain kind of stuff that appears to render them impossible, but because of the domination of the objectivity stance on the universe as the only veridical stance as to how the world is. Other phenomena, it is supposed, such as subjectivity and freedom, have to be accommodated within the universe viewed objectively. There is nothing wrong with viewing the universe objectively for certain purposes, but there is no reason to suppose that it alone delivers the truth, that is, the facts about how the universe is. In particular it cannot be shown from the objective stance that the subjective stance must be illusory for being the stance that it is, it could necessarily never allow such a subjective stance, and so could never come to any other conclusion. It is not a contingent matter, one that is or just happen to be the case, that the scientific world view makes subjects and freedom inexplicable, and an implied illusion, it could never be any other way.

My contention is that we can grant that the universe is completely physical and not connect the objective stance to the definition of the physical but allow that certain physical properties can only be known subjectively, which occurs when the object of awareness and

⁸ This combines two of my papers, one on freedom (Shand, 2015) and one on consciousness (Shand, 2021).

that awareness are one. And this is true of our own brains. This is my answer to the hard problem of consciousness.

Once subjects are allowed, and we do indeed have good reasons to make that allowance, freedom may follow as a subjective phenomenon. In a sense Dr Johnson was right because he did not, I think, intend his remarks to be taken as metaphysics, but epistemically. We have no good reason to deny that we are free, because the objective stance could never allow it, not by the contingent result of the findings of that stance about the world, but necessarily by being the objective stance that it is, so any attempt to show that freedom and subjects are impossible from that stance would be question begging. On the other hand, we have a good idea in the subjective phenomenology of our experience, which acts are free and which are not, and no good reason to believe they are not from any other stance, therefore we have a good reason to believe we are subjects and free.

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