

Irreducible Freedom in Nature

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Abstract

I provide a novel response to scepticism concerning freedom and moral responsibility. This involves my extension to freedom of John McDowell's liberal natural approach to ethics and epistemology. I trace the source of the sceptical problem to an overly restrictive, brute conception of nature, where reality is equated with what figures, directly or indirectly, in natural scientific explanation. I challenge the all-encompassing explanatory pretensions of restrictive naturalism, advocating a re-conception of nature such that it already incorporates reasons. This allows for an explanation of free actions which is not ultimately brute, but irreducibly normative. Against the backdrop of liberal naturalism I conceive freedom as an emergent capacity to respond to reasons which arises from the acquisition of language. I claim that freedom is a rational causal power to originate actions based within a naturalised ontology, which has sufficient depth to justify moral responsibility without begging ontological or epistemological questions.

1. Introduction

The *modus operandi* of the sceptic concerning free will and moral responsibility is to reveal the conditions of these concepts as metaphysically demanding, whilst seeking to frame them in an explanatory context wherein their conditions cannot plausibly be met. Scepticism is often taken to entail a commitment to determinism. Determinism is the thesis that there are laws of nature, on the basis of which, given a complete description of the world at time A, it follows exactly what the state of the world will be at a later time B. Hard determinists are committed to determinism's truth, with this being held to imply that agents cannot freely originate actions by making choices between alternative possibilities, or as a result merit moral responsibility for acts and omissions. If antecedent causes conspire to determine all agents' choices and actions, then, they maintain, no one can be properly blamed (or praised) for failing to do otherwise than they in fact do. Determinism is neither universally accepted nor obviously true. However, scepticism need not depend on determinism. If our actions result from external influences of which we are incompletely aware, then the possibility and

Jennifer Campbell

justification of freedom and responsibility may be threatened even if the links between these causes and effects are not deterministic.

For free will advocates, compatibilist or libertarian, freedom entails an ability to originate actions in some substantive, irreducible sense, whereby actions' explanation is intentional, grounded in agent reasons. Yet according to the sceptic, by reflectively detaching from an immersed internal subjective experiential perspective and seeing actions externally, as elements in the natural order, freedom is seen to be illusory. Viewed externally from without, actions are held to be mediate links in a greater chain of events stretching outside of an agent's will. As such, instead of an action arising from an agent's choice between alternative possibilities and explained by reference to her reason, its explanation is deemed to be brute causal, relating to circumstantial considerations (biological, social, psychological, etc.) of which she is incompletely aware and cannot control. In the context of the natural order it seems that there is only what happens, randomly or inevitably, with intentional actions being swallowed up by the greater flux of events.

The putative requirement to detach from immersed experience in order to justify freedom naturalistically externally arises from the broadly scientific notion that the less an explanatory viewpoint relies on an individual's subjective capabilities, the less prone to error and closer to objective truth it is. Equating objective truth with the apprehension of an impersonal viewpoint that is devoid of experiential contingency generates a hankering to warrant freedom on this external basis. But if freedom's essential features are anchored internally, in experience, then the move to justify externally fails, implying freedom lacks objective reality.

In this paper I uphold certain elements of an incompatibilist position. I uphold as a requirement for moral responsibility, agents' ability to freely originate actions in a sense which is incompatible with naturalistic necessitation or brute natural explanation more broadly. However, I reject the equation of nature in general with brute nature, and the notion that all instances of causes fall directly or indirectly under the strict laws of physics. This leads me to reject certain neo-Kantian and Humean compatibilist positions which retain these naturalistic commitments. I aim to demonstrate freedom's unproblematic accommodation in nature, appropriately conceived. The expansive form of naturalism which I recommend includes instances of both normative explanation and law-governed explanation without either being seen as more primitive or reducing to the other. This allows me to conceive the world such that human beings as rational animals can sometimes operate outside of laws

and deterministic frameworks. I argue that the free will problem's intractability to date has its basis in an unwarranted commitment to restrictive naturalism, which is the wrong explanatory context for normative features like freedom. By revising this conception of the natural I account for freedom's reality without begging ontological or epistemological questions. The novel antidote to scepticism which I recommend entails my extension to freedom of John McDowell's 'liberal naturalism'¹ as he applies this in ethics and epistemology. In the first section I describe the way in which McDowell sees liberal naturalism entering into ethics and epistemology, prior to extending liberal naturalism to freedom which McDowell has not done.

2. McDowell's Liberal Naturalism

McDowell relates to his form of enriched liberal naturalism in epistemology when discussing the justificatory status of thought's representational bearing on world. He also relates to liberal naturalism as the explanatory backdrop for his moral account, differentiating his neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism from both Immanuel Kant's moral position and a scientifically inspired 'neo-Humean'² approach to morality. In epistemology he makes an analogous distinction between his position and those of 'rampant platonism'³ and 'bald naturalism'.⁴ McDowell points out that rampant platonists see normative features like beliefs and intentions as having *sui generis* explanatory autonomy with respect to brute features under strict laws, as such, failing to reduce to the latter. Neo-Humean ethicists share with bald naturalist epistemologists the view that natural phenomena are governed by strict physical laws. McDowell links bald naturalists' and neo-Humeans' commitment to the primitiveness of nomological explanation or 'realm of law'⁵ to their endorsement of a scientific account of the real. According to this, the reality of a given feature is to be demonstrated by being subsumed

¹ John McDowell, 'Naturalism in the Philosophy of Mind', *The Engaged Intellect* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), 262.

² John McDowell, 'Two Sorts of Naturalism', *Mind, Value and Reality* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998a), 193.

³ John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), 92.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

Jennifer Campbell

under strict laws, directly, or indirectly through supervenience and causal reduction. McDowell maintains that bald naturalists' equation of nature with the realm of law leads them to see rampant platonists' claim of normative features' explanatory autonomy as an endorsement of supernaturalism, implying there is a dualism of reason/norms and nature. In a like manner, neo-Humean ethicists like John Mackie claim that ethical positions which conceive moral values' objectivity on the model of mind-independent primary qualities are epistemologically and ontologically *queer*.⁶ As such, restrictive naturalism interprets a claim of the explanatory autonomy of norms with respect to brute nature as an endorsement of dualism which undermines normative features' objective reality. Since restrictive naturalists wish to account for normative features in scientifically unproblematic terms and so evade dualism, they seek to domesticate these in terms of what figures in the realm of law. However, McDowell insists that brute, law-governed explanation is the wrong sort of explanatory context for features whose explanation is irreducibly normative. In keeping with rampant platonists and in opposition to bald naturalists, McDowell argues that normative features have a *sui generis* explanatory status which is autonomous with respect to law-governed explanation. As such, to seek to domesticate norms in brute nature is to misrepresent these features' objectivity.

In ethics and epistemology McDowell seeks to locate his position between the two opposing sides: between Kant and neo-Humeans, and between rampant platonists and bald naturalists. In epistemology he advocates 'naturalized platonism',⁷ whereby he agrees with bald naturalists that rational normative features are natural, whilst with rampant platonists denying norms' basis in law-governed nature. Whilst upholding the *sui generis* explanatory autonomy of norms with respect to law-governed nature, McDowell denies that this engenders dualism, on the grounds that nature's explanation is not primitively nomological. Instead, the expansive form of liberal naturalism which he endorses allows for reality's inclusion of both brute features falling under nomological explanation and rational normative features explained on the basis of non-strict normative generalisations. It follows that whereas restrictive naturalism advocates the fundamentality of one scientific explanatory space, McDowell upholds the relevance of two explanatory spaces: a realm

⁶ J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (London: Penguin, 1977).

⁷ John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), 92.

of scientific explanation and a realm of normative explanation. The normative explanatory paradigm corresponds with that which Donald Davidson calls the 'constitutive ideal of rationality'⁸ and what McDowell calls 'the space of reasons',⁹ after Wilfred Sellars, and extending Sellars' original epistemological use of the term. By contrast with the brute linkages between items in the realm of law, the space of reasons is structured by norms of rational intelligibility and justification. As such, items internal to the space of reasons exhibit rational connectedness, whereby in judging that something is the case one must be able to proffer reasons which justify the judgment, and make further judgments which this judgment serves to justify. The existence of two logical spaces in nature is not seen as engendering a dualism of nature because both arise naturally in the normal course of human life and so concern instances of disparate explanatory types that are not threatening to the other.

It might be objected that it is misleading of McDowell to conceive science's explanatory paradigm in strict law-governed terms. In addition to features falling under strict laws, physics also recognises the possibility of functional relations between variables under apparently non-strict laws – probabilistic physics. However, I think we can acknowledge this without it serving to undermine McDowell's basic point. This is that there is an important distinction to be drawn between natural scientific and rational normative forms of explanation and their respective subject matter – a distinction which he insists need not entail supernaturalism, or thus imply that there is a dualism of reason/norms and nature. Even if we allow for scientific explanation's extension to take in probabilistic as well as strict law-governed phenomena this still purports to leave out the kind of explanatory intelligibility which normative features instantiate. Since nothing much rests on the distinction between law-governed versus probabilistic phenomena in this connection, I will treat the realm of law and the realm of natural scientific explanation as interchangeable notions. Fundamental to McDowell's liberal naturalism is the view that the physical sciences cannot account for the reality of all worldly phenomena. Normative phenomena are unable to be assimilated with a scientific world view, he maintains, not due to a lack of reality, but because their explanation differs in kind from that of features falling under a restrictive scientific account of the real. As such,

⁸ Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 223.

⁹ John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), xiv.

Jennifer Campbell

whilst acknowledging science's ability to explain certain, primarily physical causal phenomena, he upholds the disparate form of explanatory intelligibility represented by the constitutive ideal of rationality. Whereas McDowell claims that bald naturalism:

aims to naturalize the concepts of thinking and knowing by forcing the conceptual structure in which they belong into the framework of the realm of law, liberal naturalism does not accept that to reveal thinking and knowing as natural, we need to integrate into the realm of law the frame within which the concepts of thinking and knowing function. All we need is to stress that they are occurrences and states of our lives.¹⁰

McDowell regards the ability to bring content under concepts and so to respond to features of normative reality in thought and action, as a natural consequence of human beings' 'second natural'¹¹ rational potential as norm evolving animals. Acquiring language is held to facilitate an emerging conceptual repertoire and belief system, ushering in self-consciousness and a meaning invested outlook on world. McDowell calls the process of second natural inculcation into a society's cultural norms 'Bildung'.¹² *Bildung* translates from German as education – any process, either formal or informal, which shapes the potential of a maturing organism. In McDowell's specialised usage it refers to the process of becoming capable of playing the game of giving and asking for reasons. McDowell accepts that like other sentient animals human beings are innately subject to various brute causal processes (brain function, digestion, etc.). This is, as it were, part and parcel of our sentient first nature. However, in addition, unlike other animals and what causes sensory receptivity to change dramatically in our case, human beings are also seen as possessing a latent second natural potential to acquire language, with this facilitating rationally complex thought and action. The implicit distinction which McDowell invokes between first natural and second natural patterns of responsiveness may be linked with exculpatory and justificatory forms of explanation respectively. Prior to acquiring reason our thought and behaviour is conceived to be a passive consequence of brute casual processes, being explicable on an empirically

¹⁰ John McDowell, 'Naturalism in the Philosophy of Mind', *The Engaged Intellect* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), 261–262.

¹¹ John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), 95.

¹² *Ibid.*, 84.

describable exculpatory basis. By contrast, reason serves to bring thoughts and actions under concepts, invoking a kind of explanation which centres on rational justification – the giving and demanding of reasons. And since human beings are by nature norm evolving animals, once this potential is developed normative responsiveness takes on authority in our conscious thought and action. The onset of reason is not seen as completely displacing features of first natural sentient responsiveness. Only what is conceptually content laden can potentially enter into rational thought and action and so be subject to the space of reasons' explanatory paradigm. Physical causal processes like digestion lack the requisite conceptual character to stand in relations of rational justification.

McDowell denies that normative features' inability to be subsumed under laws is problematic, either in the sense of suggesting a lack of objective reality or that their reality is in any sense queer. In his view the idea that it is problematic to see normative features as possessing *sui generis* objectivity only arises in the context of a falsely restrictive, brute conception of nature. He denies that the disparate explanatory paradigm to which normative features allude is non-fundamental or optional. Because he sees the second natural basis of normative features as ontologically disparate from brute features under laws, he denies that supervenience implies causal reducibility to physical features under laws. This suggests that liberal naturalism is an inclusive doctrine with far reaching implications for our understanding of nature and reality. In what follows I transfer the liberal natural framework to freedom with a view to diagnosing and treating scepticism there.

3. Restrictive Naturalism and Freedom

In my opinion there is an analogous viewpoint opposition in the free will debate to that which McDowell identifies in epistemology, between the views of freedom advanced by Kant and Humean compatibilists. Like bald naturalists, Humean compatibilists' endorsement of a restrictive ontology of nature prompts a like attempt to account for freedom through its brute naturalisation. Kant also upholds nature's equation with brute nature. However, like rampant platonists, Kant argues that freedom has an explanatory ontology which cannot be accommodated in brute nature. This leads him to posit a corresponding ontological dualism of reason/norms and brute nature with respect to freedom, with free actions' basis held to be supernatural, in a noumenal realm beyond experiential

appearances. As such, in opposition to compatibilists like David Hume, Kant holds that the freedom which is presupposed by moral responsibility entails agents' ability to be first causes, with access to genuine alternative possibilities, rather than actions arising inevitably on the basis of antecedent causes. According to Kant, the ability to do otherwise is a prerequisite for moral responsibility, for if an agent could not have acted otherwise she cannot be justifiably blamed for failing to do right. Because Kant claims alternative possibilities are impossible in the natural world of brute causes, wherein actions' source inevitably lies outside an agent's rational will, he sees compatibilist approaches to free will scepticism as a 'wretched subterfuge'.¹³ Hume's approach relies upon the defensibility of making a distinction within brute nature, between internal-to-the-will based freedom and external-to-the-will based unfreedom. Kant's point is that wherever freedom is held to obtain in brute causal nature it fails to be sufficient to ground moral responsibility's justification, for in this case agents cannot be buck-stopping sources of action. He thinks that the only viable solution is to locate freedom outside the natural order.

It might be thought that Hume could respond by insisting that agents *are* sources of what they do, since their actions originate in their subjective desires rather than external influences. Incompatibilists like Kant would be unimpressed by this response, however, due to desires' causal production as a result of broader natural considerations. In keeping with the sceptic, Kant can insist that a Humean agent's perception that she originates what she does is revealed as illusory when viewed within a broader naturalistic explanatory context. Viewed in this way she is not seen to be a source of action but rather a passive conduit for brute natural causes operating through her, controlling her movements like that of a non-rational animal or puppet. Hume sees reason as operative in calculating how to attain what is subjectively desired. But, based upon brute desires, actions' basis is located in a greater brute natural flux, implying that actions fail to be features which are ultimately under an agent's control.

The unverifiable queerness of Kant's transcendental metaphysical analysis of freedom makes it difficult to take seriously as a response to scepticism. Yet neither is Kant's account of freedom and responsibility without insight. Kant is right to insist upon the inadequacy of Humean compatibilists' attempt to reconcile freedom with nature,

¹³ I. Kant, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, Mary Gregor, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 81–82.

although the reconciliation problem is not specifically with deterministic nature. Kant assumes that nature is thoroughly deterministic as a result of being structured by the experiential conditions of space, time and hence causality. However, in my view the more basic difficulty arises from an attempt to reconcile freedom with the brute explanation posited by the natural sciences. The effect of a commitment to viewing nature in these restrictive terms is to unduly restrict the palette of options that are available when accounting for freedom and responsibility. Amongst compatibilists, awareness of the restrictive ontology gives rise to analyses of freedom that are unacceptably deflationary, failing to provide an adequate basis for moral responsibility. Yet even libertarians' and Kant's extravagant metaphysical analyses of freedom may be viewed as knee-jerk responses to the deflationary implications for freedom of the restrictive ontology. As such, theorists' failure to come up with a plausible solution to scepticism has been dictated, wittingly or unwittingly, by the grip which restrictive naturalism has on their thinking.

What explains theorists' commitment to restrictive naturalism? Underpinning this is the idea that science affords us the best means for understanding worldly phenomena. This idea cannot be easily dismissed, for in many respects it is clearly true. Scientific progress has moved us from away from medieval superstition, allowing us to predict and explain many aspects of physical reality. For this reason a plausible analysis of freedom must work together with, rather than against an understanding of phenomena provided by the natural sciences. At the same time, acknowledging science's contribution to knowledge does not mean that science can explain all worldly phenomena. However, in keeping with various hard-nosed materialist accounts of the real, such as physicalism and functionalism, many free will theorists endorse a scientific world view. Accordingly, they suppose that the explanation of normative phenomena like freedom and moral properties must relate to science's brute, law-governed explanation or else lack a basis in reality. A scientific world view may be expected to admit of various levels of explanation, corresponding with a hierarchy of the sciences, of psychology, biology and most fundamentally, chemistry and physics. In keeping with this scientific world view is the notion that certain phenomena causally supervene on other more primitive physical phenomena. Thus, particle physics may account for reality at its most fundamental, microscopic level, with the reality of a macroscopic phenomenon being accommodated through causal supervenience on what is more physically primitive. In a like manner, the reality of mental features may be thought explicable in terms of their supervenience on physical

Jennifer Campbell

features, e.g., neurons firing in the brain. This may be taken to suggest that the subjective reality of reasons based intentional action reduces to a more primitive physical causal reality that is accommodated by natural scientific explanation. Likewise, ethicists who are committed to a scientific world view argue that instead of moral properties being intrinsically motivating and mind-independent, they are merely attitudinal responses to brute features of reality. Elaborating on this, they may claim that moral behaviour is trained and that its purpose is pragmatic, to enhance individual and collective flourishing. In this way, mental features and patterns of responsiveness may be explained psychologically, by applying science's descriptive method of understanding. In terms of the hierarchy of the sciences psychology may be situated furthest away from physics, but it still seeks to understand phenomena on the model of the physical sciences. Its method of understanding behaviour is through detached observation and identifying patterns that are explained by reference to brute natural facts. As such, psychological explanation purports to provide a layer of explanation which supervenes on physics' more fundamental form of explanation.

The problem with attempting to domesticate freedom in nature as a result of commitment to a scientific world view is that freedom's *sui generis* explanatory purport fails to be properly accounted for. For, this *sui generis* status entails an irreducible distinction between normative explanation and brute explanation, which clearly comes under pressure if the fundamental explanatory ontology is seen as brute, law-governed. If we accept that it is essential for freedom that actions are irreducibly explicated intentionally, on the basis of reasons, and yet that mental events' causality is to be explicated on the basis of physical events' causality under strict laws, then reasons seem epiphenomenal or explanatorily redundant. Certainly, epiphenomenalism seems inevitable if one is committed to mental events' type and token identity with physical events under strict laws, undermining the possibility of agents being irreducible free sources of actions. According to Jaegwon Kim¹⁴ it is a mistake to think of the relations between neurological events and their supervening mental events as causal anyway. In his view, supervening mental events lack a causal status apart from their supervenience on neurophysiological events that have a more direct causal role. Worries about epiphenomenalism lead many theorists committed to both freedom and nature's primitive law-based explanation to invoke

¹⁴ J. Kim, 'Causality, Identity and Supervenience in the Mind-Body Problem', *Mid-west Studies in Philosophy*, 4 (1979), 31–49.

mental and physical events' type distinction, whilst retaining token identity. This is the approach which is endorsed by Davidson. Davidson seeks to avoid epiphenomenalism on the basis of his anomalous monism,¹⁵ whilst at the same time upholding the supervenience of mental events upon physical events and the notion that all instances of causes fall under strict laws. Davidson's anomalous monism commits him to the collectively incompatible premises:

- Of causal interaction: there exist mental to physical and physical to mental causal interactions.
- Of the nomological character of causality: all events are causally related through strict laws.
- Of the anomalism of the mental: there are no psycho-physical laws which relate the mental and the physical as just that, mental and physical.

Davidson's ability to maintain all three principles in a unified theory relies on his claim that mental events are token identical but not type identical with physical events. As such, instances of mental explanatory types are anomalous. Under their mental descriptions, relationships between mental events are not describable by strict physical laws. On this basis Davidson upholds an identity theory of mind without the reductive bridge laws of a type identity theory.

However, in order for an analysis of freedom to be persuasive it must amount to more than simply upholding a like claim to Davidson that mental explanatory types are anomalous with physical explanatory types. Because Davidson maintains that all instances of causes fall under strict laws, this suggests that he is committed to upholding a restrictive ontology of nature in line with Humean compatibilists. Arguably Davidson's commitment to the nomological character of causality means that reasons' causal efficacy is indirectly explained on the basis of mental events' token identity with physical events under strict laws. Since instances of causes under strict laws are able to be predicted, putative instances of free agency must therefore also be indirectly predictable. As such, freedom on Davidson's account appears to indirectly reduce to brute causally predictable un-free events in nature. Were it the case that on his view free actions reduce to instances of physical causes under strict laws this would be disastrous for Davidson. His ability to uphold the irreducible causality of reasons to physical causes under strict laws relies on there being a robust account of the anomalousness of the mental.

¹⁵ Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

Jennifer Campbell

He cites as evidence in support of mental explanation's anomalousness, the essentially holistic intelligibility of beliefs and the indeterminacy of translation. However, I see these insights as threatened by Davidson's commitment to the notion that all causes are subsumed under strict laws. We cannot make sense of his claim of the robustness of normative explanations given this commitment. This feeling is enhanced rather than undermined by Davidson's type-token distinction. On the one hand his commitment to the law-governed ontology means that he must invoke token identity in order to evade epiphenomenalism of the mental. On the other, token identity purports to undermine his thesis of rational freedom and causality, since now this possibility is indirectly explained on the basis of physical causes under strict laws.

Davidson's anomalous monism conceives freedom in terms of the free causality of mental events which are subsumed under non-strict normative, rather than strict law-governed explanation. Since he upholds the relevance of two disparate kinds of property and explanation he is committed to a dual aspect theory of mind and he seems happy to extend a dual aspect approach to freedom. I also support a dual aspect theory of freedom. Like Davidson, I uphold the anomalousness of mental with respect to physical explanation, the causal interactivity of mental and physical, and hence the ability of reasons to be causes. Where I disagree with Davidson concerns his claims of the nomological character of causality and token identity. By rejecting these aspects of his view and upholding supervenience without token identity, I seek to retain what is insightful in his position without allowing freedom to be undermined through its indirect nomological reduction.

It might be thought that because I am committed to physical substance monism I am required to posit mental events' token identity with physical events in order to explain the former's causal powers non-mysteriously on the basis of the latter's. However, whilst I uphold the supervenience of mental properties on physical properties, I deny that supervenience entails token identity. In my view it is vital in order for freedom to be a defensible phenomenon in the natural world that token identity is rejected, along with rejecting nature's equation with law-governed, or more broadly, brute scientifically describable nature. Where token identity obtains so does the prospect of mental to physical reduction and hence freedom's brute natural domestication. And where our primitive naturalistic ontology is nomological this generates a latent pressure to causally reduce and so to ontologically reduce. These features yield a will to reduce and a means by which to do so. My account seeks to avoid the reductive

pitfall arising from the restrictive natural ontology whilst also avoiding the pitfall of claiming that freedom is a metaphysically and epistemologically queer property which obtains outside nature. I do this by insisting that nature described in restrictive terms is incomplete because it excludes features of second naturally evolved rational responsiveness, including the ability to act freely by responding to objective reasons. By acknowledging the naturalness of freedom as a reasons responsive causal power whilst at the same time denying nature's equation with brute nature, I simultaneously reject freedom's grounding in supernaturalism and a restrictive naturalistic ontology.

Restrictive naturalists may respond by arguing that there is no basis for postulating a naturalistic ontology beyond what shows up in a scientific account of the real. They will insist that either freedom is accommodated directly or indirectly in brute, scientifically describable nature, thus denying its *sui generis* claim to objectivity, or else be dismissed as queer. However, the kind of brute, detached explanatory paradigm that is invoked by restrictive naturalists presents an explanation of the wrong kind to account for normative properties. Instances of freedom's explanation cannot be understood independently of the immersed perspective of agents who are susceptible to reasons. But this does not imply that free actions are any less real. It might be asked how it is possible to uphold the causality of freedom alongside physical substance monism and an acceptance that mental features supervene on physical features whose causality falls under strict laws. The answer, as I shall explain, lies in our ability to conceive freedom as a second natural emergent phenomenon.

4. Liberal Naturalism and Freedom

If science's law-governed explanation is taken to be all encompassing and primitive then a claim of normative features like freedom's *sui generis* irreducibility looks like an endorsement of queer metaphysics. But by invoking a broadly Aristotelian liberal naturalism we see this is an unnecessary result. This allows that levels of existence and capacity emerge as we ascend the physical and biological scales. Reason is natural insofar as it depends upon our biological endowment or first nature and due to its evolvment during the normal human developmental process. It is a second natural capability because it is acquired only by being initiated through language into a cultural tradition. Aristotle conceives ethical understanding as the expression of second natural potency realised through education into cultural

norms. Generalising this approach, rational spontaneity – the operation of our conceptual powers – may be seen as the actualisation of our natural potential, realised through the appropriate training. By developing an understanding of the natural in accordance with liberal naturalism, instances of rational activity including freedom are accounted for in a way which fails to reduce, directly or indirectly, to physical events under laws. I have suggested that freedom is an emergent phenomenon which arises in conjunction with rationality as a result of developing language. In claiming these features are emergent, I mean that they are unique features which emerge at a higher level of organisation and are thus not to be found at a lower explanatory level. With a liberal natural ontology in place this claim is unproblematic. It is a reflection of the fact that human beings are both sentient: we perceive sensations and have an elementary, undifferentiated consciousness, and have a potential for sapience: we are self-conscious, reflective beings. The fact that human beings are host to rational and brute properties and processes implies the corresponding relevance of two forms of explanation: brute/law-governed and rational normative.

How does our sapient potentiality come to be realised and what is its relationship with sentience? Whereas rationality and self-consciousness are unique to human beings, sentience is common to humans and other animals. Like other animals, from birth we are capable of conscious awareness and possess sense organs, which, when stimulated by externalities, cause us to experience various sensations (visual, auditory, etc.). These responses, in combination with biological drives and inherited dispositions, contribute to our survival as individuals and as a species in conformity with evolutionary explanation. Rationality does not entirely displace first natural responsiveness. We remain, for instance, subject to brute physical urges (hunger, thirst, etc.), the explanation of which is brute causal and law-governed. However, when we develop reason and self-consciousness much of our behaviour is then shaped by our awareness of norms of truth and appropriateness, making norms rather than laws the proper basis for explaining what we do. On my view, language is central to the emergence of self-conscious rational activity in humans. It is important to clarify what I mean by this. Language is not simply a way of expressing thoughts which are already invested with meaning. Rather, language facilitates the emergence of meaning invested thought and self-consciousness. Self-consciousness involves a subject/agent's awareness that there is a distinction between her and a world which exists apart from her. This in turn presupposes her grasp of objective truth, whereby she is aware that

what she subjectively believes in an instance need not correspond with what is objectively the case. Awareness of the possibility of error in what one believes in an instance is a feature which arises in the context of language use, where public truth criteria are enforced. In the absence of a public language there would be no ground for an individual to distinguish between truth and falsehood, since this requires constraint from outside her thinking. From an early age children are encouraged to imitate their parents' use of words in conjunction with experiential objects, with correct applications being reinforced and errors corrected in light of public norms of correctness. In this way a child acquires *the that*: linguistic concepts by which to individuate and relate objects of experience. Picking up *the that* clearly relies on memory, through the recognition of aspects of continuity and the ability to apply a rule in novel situations, for instance, by identifying the same object under novel visual conditions. As the child becomes more competent she will progress from *the that* to *the because*: the ability to provide justifications for her assertions. Since making assertions entails holding something true, this clearly presupposes awareness that there is an objective state of affairs against which assertions are to be compared. It also requires that a subject possesses a greater, holistically related belief system, enabling her to form beliefs in experience based on associations made with pre-existing beliefs held true, providing a basis for justification.

Whilst language plays a vital role in the emergence of reason and self-consciousness, it would be mistaken to see language as carrying the whole weight, as it were, in the emergence of these features. Meaningful thought and talk also depends upon the fact that we are sentient, conscious beings. In order for interlocutors to understand one another they must be able to form and compare their beliefs concerning a common experiential object. As such, if we lacked sense organs or had radically different patterns of sensory response from one another to externalities then forming beliefs and using a language which is constrained by public truth criteria would be impossible. Furthermore, given language's facilitating role in the emergence of meaningful thought, the latter would be impossible unless we possessed the specific physical characteristics which enable us to form and articulate words. In addition, the fact that we are social beings is clearly fundamental to our development and use of language. Like certain other animals, oral communication is an important means of establishing relationships, expressing needs, fears, etc. Since we share this social nature with other animals, many of whom may also possess the physical capability to produce sounds this

Jennifer Campbell

raises a question why human beings alone are capable of developing and using language in a meaningful way. Some animals may be capable of being trained to imitate the sound of words. However, there is little to support the idea that language is a feature which figures in the natural development of other animals as it does human beings, as a means of having and expressing complex thoughts. Neither is it apparent that animals other than human beings are capable of progressing beyond the basic repetition of sounds or responding to verbal commands, and reflecting on words as items with semantic significance. Other animals use sounds in a brute instinctive way, as a means of satisfying various physical and biological needs (to warn of danger or attract a mate, for instance). It might be argued that human speech and behaviour, although more sophisticated than that of other animals, is also ultimately motivated by basic biological impulses and dispositions. I think this view is mistaken. Whilst it is certainly true that in becoming rational we do not cease being animals that experience primitive urges, unlike merely sentient animals our behaviour is not determined by brute urges over which we lack any rational control. Becoming rational sets human beings intellectually free from brute instinctive patterns of behaviour, because it makes us aware of norms of truth and appropriateness. This intellectual freedom yields practical freedom, in the sense that we can choose how to act rather than being passively controlled by brute factors. We are aware of demands on our conduct in particular situations which can conflict with what we might otherwise be inclined to do. And because awareness of what is normatively choice-worthy is significant to us as a result of being brought up within a society with established traditions and rule following practices, we can be motivated to do something simply because we see that it is *right*, in a way which is not brute causally reducible.

Human beings are by nature norm evolving animals. An expanded, liberal ontology of nature allows that human beings' evolvement of language facilitates reflective self-consciousness. By combining an enriched naturalism with Kant's thesis that experience is thoroughly conceptual, my suggestion is that language gives us the ability to move beyond brute responsiveness without this having supernatural connotations. Our acquisition of linguistic concepts and induction into rule following practices radically alters our interface with externalities. Instead of our interaction with our environment being brute causal and largely passive, reason gives us the ability to take in and make sense of our experiences through the spontaneous activity of the understanding, affording intellectual and practical freedom. It

allows us to interpret the world as invested with meaning, enabling us to make judgments and to act intentionally on the basis of reasoned decisions. The capacity for freedom does not involve an ability to get outside one's body or to evade situational facts in a way which falsifies the laws of physics. However, unlike a non-rational animal, rational beings can form beliefs and judgments about things which may be either right or wrong and in any given situation, unlike a non-rational animal, we can reflect on what to do. What guides practical thinking and enables us to interpret other agents based on their behaviour, as well as making reliable predictions over their motives, is our awareness of the rational ideal: the constitutive ideal of rationality. The fact that there is such an ideal and that this fails to reduce to a more primitive physical account, reflects the idea that responsiveness to considerations of reason is an emergent capacity.

The account of reasons responsive freedom which I advocate corresponds with a dual aspect theory. Incompatibilists like Thomas Nagel may be seen as rejecting a dual aspect approach to freedom on the grounds that freedom is too metaphysically ambitious to be accommodated in a harmonised account of the real. Nagel conceives the requirement that an agent be a causal source of what she does in a demanding metaphysical sense that is at odds with naturalistic explanation, whereby she must have access to boundless alternative possibilities in choice.¹⁶ However, liberal naturalism allows for agents' causal origination of actions on the basis of reasons, satisfying responsibility's deep justificatory requirements, without requiring of agents supernatural powers. I do not merely contend that reasons suffice to explain why actions occur in the sense that Davidson intends. I agree with Davidson that there is an irreducible distinction between brute causal and mentalistic intentional explanatory types. But as we have seen from Davidson's view, to endorse a type distinction is not therefore to endorse a token distinction, or to deny that all instances of causes do not ultimately fall under strict laws. In order to substantiate freedom it is necessary to invoke a more inclusive naturalistic ontology. In addition to upholding the type distinctness of mental events and physical events, I also uphold their token distinctness and deny that all instances of causes fall under strict laws. In addition to physical causes under laws, or more broadly, what conforms to brute natural explanation, I hold that there can be instances of mental causes falling under non-strict normative generalisations. This reflects the idea that human beings are host to both brute

¹⁶ Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 110–137.

properties and processes falling under strict laws and rational properties and processes whose explanation is irreducibly normative. My harmonisation of these forms of explanation and responsiveness in a unified liberal natural account of the real corresponds with a dual aspect approach to freedom.

Perhaps it will be objected that the liberal naturalism which I endorse generates a dualism of nature, on the grounds that it involves the upholding of two forms of natural responsiveness which are explanatorily distinct, first natural and second natural. However, this objection fails to appreciate the intimate connections which obtain between items under each form of brute and rational normative explanation and the shared origins of these in the natural evolution of a human being. The point of drawing attention to first nature and second nature is to emphasise that both figure in the natural form of life of a human being. As such, brute physical responsiveness and sapient responsiveness are different but related causal capacities in the unified existence of a human being. This reflects the intuitive idea that a mature human being possesses both a mind and a body, that these components causally interact and that subjective experience results from this interaction. This latter claim would clearly be challenged by an eliminative materialist such as Kim, who would insist that all talk of mind and mental processes is really just talk about states of the brain. His position is to be distinguished from Davidson's. Davidson rejects the idea that mental states/events reduce to physical states/events. As such, he upholds an aspect dualist approach to the relationship between mind and body, on the grounds that although mental properties are essentially subjective they admit of a distinction between appearance and objective reality. However, Kim's and Davidson's agreement for my purposes consists in their like restrictive conception of the natural, which in my opinion renders freedom problematic, for it is necessary that freedom is *sui generis* explanatorily irreducible to brute features under strict laws. Whereas bald naturalism implies that all natural phenomena must directly or indirectly fall under strict laws, liberal naturalism rejects this. Whilst I allow that certain, basically physical causal phenomena may fall under strict laws, mentalistic items conform to non-strict normative generalisations.

Because I reject the ontological fundamentality of nomological explanation with respect to mentalistic phenomena I can explain how instances of freedom obtain in nature without being further reducible. On my view there can be a continuity that encompasses rational as well as physical processes (biological, neurological, etc.) within the natural structure of human life. Second nature provides

a basis for seeing reasons responsive freedom as an ontologically significant causal capacity. Theorists like Davidson who operate within the remit of a restrictive naturalistic ontology must ultimately explain instances of freedom within this limited domain. Yet if the causality of reasons indirectly reduces to physical events under strict laws then this undermines the *sui generis* status of rational freedom. By contrast, I claim that in addition to physical states and processes falling under strict laws or probabilistic explanation, the second natural evolution of reason provides a basis for emergent normative explanations whose intelligibility fails to further reduce. As such, when an agent acts on reasons, despite normative properties' and processes' supervening status on physical features, what she does is motivationally grounded in norms. This does not simply mean that reasons explanation is causally effective in a way which differs in kind from the explanation of physical events under laws. If we retain the thesis that all instances of causes fall under strict laws, then, even if we accept mental events' type distinctness from physical event types, this does not give us an ontologically significant account of rational causality. For where this is the case reasons' causality must be through mental events' token identity with physical events. We arrive at an ontologically significant account of rational causality by claiming that rational freedom is a complex capacity which human beings evolve once a command of linguistic reason is achieved. In so doing, human beings come to respond to a disparate source of explanatory authority to the brute natural, by bringing thought and action under concepts and thereby becoming constrained by the constitutive ideal of rationality. This is the proper criterion of explanation and justification for normative features like free actions.

How are we to understand free actions' instantiation of a form of *sui generis* normative explanation corresponding with the constitutive ideal of rationality? We can understand the notion of normative explanations by extrapolating from physical theory. For instance, when seeking to explain the way atoms relate scientists initially employ an idealised model based on how atoms might be expected to behave under certain conditions. They then build increasing complexity into this model as divergences emerge. In so doing progress is made from an ideal to an actual explanation of the relations exhibited by atoms. The ideal remains significant as a paradigm for normal atom based expectations under normal conditions. However, various stipulations must be added and amendments made depending on context in order to give a full account in accordance with the complex reality apart from theory. We understand the emergence of complex rational behaviour analogously, including the capacity

to act freely. In this case, the paradigm explanation is the constitutive ideal of rationality. This provides the framework explanation against which the *sui generis* objective significance of normative explanation comes into view. In the case of agency and reasons, explanation is more open-ended and there is an ongoing, built in expectation for piecemeal refinement. We have an idealised conception of rational thought and action and build in intelligible discrepancies on the basis of actual behaviour. On the basis of the normative ideal we can intelligibly ask ourselves in different situations *what would an ideally rational person think or do?* This provides an objective basis for arriving at all things considered verdicts in practical reasoning and it enables us to account for intelligible discrepancies from ideally rational conduct on the basis of reasons which justify or merely explain why agents act as they do. Like the diverging behaviour of atoms from the ideal, persons do not always think and act ideally rationally. Persons can act akratically by failing to do what they judge that they ought. Or they can act irrationally through being overcome with emotion, distracted by irrational desires or fears. As such, in different circumstances, for differing reasons, persons' actions can deviate from the ideal just as atoms can. However, as G. E. M. Anscombe put it in her discussion of intentional explanation, 'if Aristotle's account (of reasoning using a practical syllogism) were supposed to describe actual mental processes, it would in general be quite absurd. The interest of the account is that it describes an order which is there whenever actions are done with intentions'.¹⁷ The fact that we can and do make sense of our own and others agents' actions is indicative of our implicit grasp of an underlying ideal of rationality. Like physical events in nature, instances of normative phenomena like free actions allude to and have an explanatory intelligibility that is constrained by an ideal, whilst exhibiting intelligible divergences from it. Unlike physical events' generally predictable conformity to nomological explanation from the micro to the macro level, instances of rational norms conform to non-strict normative generalisations. This reflects the fact that our rational understanding of one another is holistic, whereas holistic understanding is less prominent in science.

Why should we dismiss the idea which is implicitly endorsed by restrictive naturalists that items figuring in intentional explanation reduce to instances in a superseded ontology? I have suggested that causally efficacious intentional states emerge from a complex rational form of life and have an explanatory basis which is irreducibly

¹⁷ G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention* (New York: Blackwell, 1957), 80.

normative. Reasons responsive freedom is an expression of our second natural sapient potential realised during our upbringing in a linguistic community. Freedom as the instantiation of events of an intentional explanatory type supervenes on events of a physical explanatory type, without reducing to the latter. As such, freedom cannot obtain independently of physical phenomena falling under scientific explanation. However, because emergent, instances of freedom have autonomy with respect to features under brute scientific explanation. Because of this independence, freedom fails to be identical with, or reducible to, or predictable from, or deducible from its basis in either passive acquisition of linguistic concepts, or to the physical states on which freedom supervenes. Given the right conditions, in particular – though not exclusively, as indicated at the start of this section – the evolution of language, human beings acquire a capacity for thought and action which is constrained by rational norms. And becoming rationally competent is the basis of agents' freedom. When persons acquire reason they become answerable to norms of reason by being required to justify to others, rather than their thinking being causally exculpated by brute facts, internal and external. As such, rationality implies a kind of responsible freedom, whereby rational subjects aim to make correct judgments, think and act in ways which are rationally consistent.

Earlier in this section I discussed other animals' disparity from human beings in terms of the latter's potentiality for developing language and rational activity by contrast with the former. This distinction may be further elaborated with respect to freedom as a specific expression of rational capability. Merely conscious animals are capable of purposive behaviour. However, rational beings' self-consciousness affords us a freedom which non-rational animals lack, since it allows us to step back from our immediate situation of choice and decide how to act. We have the intellectual resources to move beyond brute responsiveness in action. Non-rational animals have perceptions which allow them to represent their environment and behave in more or less sophisticated ways. Like human beings, they have evolved so as to interact with and use their environment in ways which allow their needs to be met, furthering their species' flourishing. However, it is characteristic of human beings to not simply represent their environment but also to form representations of representations, conceptualising the world in thought and action. As such, human beings are capable of both inner states and reflections on those states, enabling reflection on rational representations. Like non-rational animals, human beings have first-order perceptions of our environment. However, unlike non-rational animals, human

beings also have second-order reflective representations. This second-order capacity brings with it a novel semantic power to find meaning in the world. This enables us to think about the significance of situations, to reflect upon how and why things appear as they do and to consider how to act on the basis of reasons. Second-order deliberation on first-order representations is the source of free causality, since this allows us to determine what to do on the basis of normative reasons. The emergence of a capacity to be sources of free causality is facilitated by language, which yields a novel causal power linked with the paradigm of reason. Rational conduct emerges out of, but fails to reduce to non-rational behaviour. This explains how in terms of agent freedom Platonic universals are naturalised in accordance with naturalised platonism – by being conceptualised in language in accordance with the *sui generis* status of normative explanation. Conceptualisation enables rational thinkers and agents to infer and deliberate and so to organise their conduct according to rational norms, instead of merely functional processes. We can make sense of rational beings' disparity from non-rational animals by reference to this first-order and second-order model. Non-rational animals such as dogs and cats are capable of purposeful behaviour. They possess the first-order ability to form representations in response to their environment. However, as human beings our possession of a second-order representational capacity enables us to step back so as to bring thoughts and actions under normative concepts. This corresponds with adherence to norms of thought and conduct of a kind that is irreducible to connections sustained by brute physical connections.

For hard-nosed materialists like Kim the normative ideal which is implicitly invoked by instances of belief, intentional action, etc., cannot be real unless the patterns that it invokes have their basis in scientifically describable neurological patterns. However, I have suggested that this kind of view relies on an inessential and unwarranted, restrictive account of the natural and the objectively real. We can, without begging ontological questions, expand our conception of nature so that it includes a power of normative responsiveness that is causal, which emerges out of the evolvment of linguistic reason. Theorists who are committed to the idea that all instances of causes fall under strict laws will insist that instances of an intentional explanatory type must inherit their causal power from the physical event causes on which they supervene, or else be epiphenomenal. However, this view reflects philosophers' tendency to rely on overly restrictive notions of causality derived from the physical sciences. I urge that we reject the notion of the nomological character

of causality as a philosophical prejudice trading on scientific insight. For all the insight of Davidson's anomalous monism, his view that all events are causally related through strict laws *is* an unwarranted prejudice. We can reject this assumption as unfounded whilst upholding physical substance monism, the causal interactivity of mental events and physical events and the supervening status of mental upon physical phenomena. McDowell agrees that Davidson's notion of the nomological character of causality is an unwarranted prejudice. According to McDowell, the 'third (dogma of empiricism) – the 'dualism of scheme and content' – was not, as Davidson surmised, the last...Pending an alternative recommendation, the Prejudice of the Nomological Character of Causality, as I shall venture to relabel it, looks like a fourth dogma of empiricism'.¹⁸ If we guard against the unwitting grip of scientific prejudice then we can accept the possibility of instances of rational causes which fail to be subsumed under strict laws. Liberal naturalism gives us an ontological framework for making sense of this novel causal power. The brute natural irreducibility of this power is not suggestive of supernaturalism, but rather of our second natural potential to respond to reasons in thought and action.

I have offered an account of freedom as a second natural emergent phenomenon. Because freedom's explanation fails to conform to the explanatory paradigm of the physical sciences it fails to succumb to scepticism. Free actions are explained by reference to non-strict normative generalisations. This is actions' primitive explanatory basis, in accordance with my characterisation of freedom as an emergent second natural capacity. Because of this, it is vacuous to attempt to posit a more fundamental brute explanatory basis.

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¹⁸ John McDowell, 'Functionalism and Anomalous Monism', *Mind, Value and Reality* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 1998b), 340.