

How Can I Possibly Be Free?

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This essay is an attempt to persuade you of something that in practice you cannot really doubt: your belief that you have free will. It will try to reassure you that it is not naïve to feel that you are responsible, and indeed morally responsible, for your actions. And it will provide you with arguments that will help you answer those increasing numbers of people who say that our free will is an illusion, or that belief in it is an adaptive delusion implanted by evolution.

The case presented will not be a knock-down proof—indeed, it outlines an understanding of free will that is rather elusive. It is of course much easier to construct simple theoretical proofs purporting to show that we are not free than it is to see how, in practice, we really are. For this reason, the argument here will take you on something of a journey.

That journey will provide reasons for resisting the claim that a deterministic view of the material universe is incompatible with free will. Much of the apparent power of deterministic arguments comes from their focusing on isolated actions, or even components of actions, that have been excised from their context in the world of the self, so that they are more easily caught in the net of material causation.

There is another challenge arising from a deeper argument, which seems to hold even if the universe is not deterministic—namely, that unless we are *self-caused*, we cannot be held responsible for what we do. To answer this challenge, we must find the key to freedom in first-person being—in the very “I” for whom freedom is an issue, the “I” who is capable of orchestrating the sophisticated intentions, choices, and actions required to, for instance, publish an essay denying its own freedom. The demand for *complete self-causation* places impossible requirements upon someone before he can count as free—requirements, what is more, that would actually empty freedom of its content and hence of any meaning.

Central to the defense of freedom against the challenges of determinism and the requirement for total self-determination will be to see how it is that we are, rather, *self-developing*—as when we consciously train the mechanisms of our own bodies to carry out our wishes even without

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conscious thought—so that we are able to make natural events pushed by natural causes the result of human actions led by human reasons.

We must start by characterizing the freedom that we are concerned with. First, if I am truly free, I am the *origin* of those events I deem to be my actions. Consequently, I am *accountable* for them: I have ownership of them; I own up to them. Second, 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, and expressed aims. My actions can be made sense of biographically.

But it is not enough that my actions originate with, and are expressive of, me. I would not be free if all my willing just brought about what was already inevitable. A truly free act is also one that *deflects* the course of events. So I am free if, as a result of many actions that are themselves free to deflect the course of events, and of which I am the origin, I have an important hand in shaping my life. This is what is meant by “being free.”

Freedom, Determinism, and Moral Responsibility

There are many versions of the deterministic argument against free will, but the most straightforward one is as follows. Since every event has a cause, actions, which are simply a subcategory of events, also have causes. Furthermore, the causal ancestry of actions is not confined to what we would regard as ourselves, because we ourselves are the products of causes that are in turn the products of other causes *ad infinitum*. The passage from cause to effect is determined by unalterable laws of nature. For a determinist, even intentions are simply another means by which the laws of nature operate through us. In short, we are not the origins of our actions and we do not deflect the course of events, but are merely conduits through which the processes of nature operate, little parishes of a boundless causal web arising from the Big Bang and perhaps terminating in the Big Crunch.

Most philosophers, then, think that physical determinism is incompatible with free will. The incompatibilists fall into two camps: the libertarians who save freedom by denying determinism, and the skeptics who affirm determinism and so deny freedom. As we will see, however, there is reason to believe that determinism and free will are compatible, since determinism applies only to the material world understood in material terms.

The traditional deterministic arguments against free will have recently been dressed up in some very fancy clothes. Evolutionary theory, genetics,

and neuroscience have been invoked in combination to create what we might dub “biodeterminism.” According to biodeterministic thinking, our behavior originates in the evolutionary imperative of survival: it is the unchosen result of the fact that we, and in particular our brains, are so designed as to maximize the chances of replicating our genome. Primarily through their phenotypical expression in our brains, it is our genes, not we, that call the shots.

The attacks on free will that arise from neuroscience go beyond evolutionary psychology, and any adequate account of them would require far more than the space of this essay. But there is one particular set of observations that has captured the deterministic imagination and deserves special scrutiny: those made by the late University of California, San Francisco neurophysiologist Benjamin Libet on the relationship between intention and action. For a long time, it has been known that the mental preparation to act is correlated with a particular brain wave—the so-called “readiness potential.” In Libet’s experiment, the action studied 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 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, much of it over the methodology. Some have argued that, since the brain activity associated with certain voluntary actions *precedes* the conscious intention to perform the actions, we therefore do not truly initiate them. At best, we can only inhibit ongoing activity: we have “free won’t” rather than “free will.” But many others have denied even this margin of negative freedom and have seen Libet’s experiments as confirming what we feared: that our brains are calling the shots. We are merely the *site* of those events we call “actions.”

Another attack on the notion of free will, from Galen Strawson, a professor of philosophy at the University of Reading, goes beyond the arguments from determinism and purports to prove the inherent impossibility of freedom and moral responsibility so long as we are not self-caused. Strawson’s basic argument, articulated in numerous articles and books, can be understood as a syllogism: First, in order to be truly morally responsible for one’s actions, one would have to be *causa sui*, the cause of oneself. Second, nothing can be *causa sui*, the cause of itself. Therefore no one can be truly morally responsible. Performing acts for which one

is morally responsible requires, Strawson argues, that we should be self-determining—but this is impossible because the notion of true self-determination runs into an infinite regress.

Strawson's argument is flawed, as we shall see, because its premises are flawed. But it is nevertheless useful because it clarifies the underlying force of deterministic arguments: that whatever I am has been caused by events, processes, and laws that I am not—and that in order to be free, I have to escape having been 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—but in order to have brought myself into being, of course, I have to be God. If I am to be responsible for anything that I do, I have to be responsible for everything that I *am*, including my very existence. Since I cannot pre-exist my own existence so as to bring my existence about, this is a requirement that cannot be met.

This argument from self-determination will be dealt with by looking a little harder at the question of whether or not a self is *causa sui*, and, closely related, at whether a self's actions can be seen as expressing itself. A self is certainly not the cause of itself *overall* and *ultimately*—but it is the cause of itself in a way that is sufficient to underpin free will.

The Origins of Actions in the Contents of Consciousness

The case for determinism will prevail over the case for freedom so long as we look for freedom in a world devoid of the first-person understanding—and so we will have to reacquaint ourselves with the perspective that comes most naturally to us. Recall that, if we are to be correct in our intuition that we are free, the issue of whether or not we are the *origin* of our actions is central. Seen as pieces of the material world, we appear to be stitched into a boundless causal net extending from the beginning of time through eternity. How on earth can we then be points of origin? We seem to be a sensory input linked to motor output, with nothing much different in between. So how on earth can the *actor* truly initiate anything? How can he say that the act in a very important sense begins with him, that he owns it and is accountable for it—that “The buck starts here”?

The key to this ownership lies in *intentionality*. This is not to be confused with intentions, the purposes of actions. “Intentionality” designates the way that we are conscious *of* something, and that the contents of our consciousness are thus *about* something. Intentionality, in its fully

developed form, is unique to human beings, who alone are fully-fledged subjects explicitly related to objects. It is the seed of the self and of freedom. It is, as of now, entirely mysterious—which is not to say that it is supernatural or in principle beyond our understanding, but rather that it cannot be explained entirely in terms of the processes and laws that operate in the material world. Its relevance here is that it is the beginning of the process by which human beings transcend the material world, without losing contact with it. Human freedom begins with this *about*-ness of human consciousness.

That intentionality cannot be understood in terms of the laws of physics may seem a rather startling claim. It will help to explore a very basic example: 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—and, moreover, my seeing the object is *nothing more than* this neural activity. But this story is incomplete. For while the passage of light into the brain is an instance of standard physical causation, the gaze that looks out most certainly is not. It is different from a physical causal chain in two respects. First, whereas the directionality of the phenomenon of light passing into the brain is “downstream” from cause to effect (from the object that deflected the light to the neural activity in the brain), the directionality of the gaze is “upstream,” from the effect to its cause (the neural activity to the object of the perception). And second, whereas the “forward arrow” of the causal chain that includes the triggering of neural activity by the light extends without limit forward into the causal nexus, the “reverse arrow” of the gaze is finite: it refers to and so comes to a rest on the object, and does not, for example, refer or look beyond the object to the earlier history of the light.

This “bounce back,” this causal reversal, has crucial consequences. The object that is picked out by the gaze has some notable features, the most important of which is that in human beings and not in any other sort of beings, it *explicitly* exceeds the experience of it. The perception is not just *of* the appearance of the object but *about* the object as something that is more than its present appearances. It is experienced as a source of future *possible* experiences. These possible experiences have a generic character, quite different from the definite particularity of the items in the material world. Objects of perception open up, and hold open, what we might call a Space of Possibility that exists explicitly for embodied subjects such as you and I. The object is also public, accessible by any

other embodied subject; it is therefore the ground floor of a *shared* Space of Possibility—what the American philosopher Donald Davidson called “the community of minds.” This is the human world that unfolds through the joint and shared attention we pay to things. It is outside of material causation. Indeed, it is in this shared human world that, as the German philosopher Friedrich Schelling put it, “Nature opens her eyes and sees that she exists.”

The key points are that intentionality is in a direction opposite to the flow of causality and that it underpins the sense of an object *out there* related to *me here* as an embodied subject. This sense lies at the root of the process whereby the individual conscious person comes to lie at the center of a world of his own, a world pitched in space and time that would otherwise be boundless and centerless and lack points of reference. The flag of “here and now” has been planted in a material world that, on its own, has no here and now, that is without origin and limits. This bounded personal world is then open to being collectivized as “the human world”—the world of language and culture, among other things.

The Existential Intuition

Central also to the case that we are free agents is what we might call the Existential Intuition—the sense that one exists, the sense that “I *am* (this thing, body, person).” It is the assumption of a piece of the world, a living body, as something that someone is—or, rather, “am.” This Intuition is not a proposition. It is rather like a blush that spreads over one’s body, as in one’s early months one assumes that body as one’s self.*

The Existential Intuition is rooted, of course, in bodily awareness—in the sensations that arise from your body. Although you are permanently identified with your body as that which you “am,” you colonize (or inhabit) your body, as it were, to a variable degree. Different parts are colonized 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.

But the Intuition goes beyond bodily awareness, and this is essential to the sense of your self as something substantial, something that

* I have developed the concept of the Existential Intuition at much greater length elsewhere, including in my “Handkind” trilogy of books: *The Hand: A Philosophical Inquiry into Human Being* (2003), *I Am: A Philosophical Inquiry into First-Person Being* (2004), and *The Knowing Animal: A Philosophical Inquiry into Knowledge and Truth* (2005), all published by Edinburgh University Press.

is more than the succession of your sensations. Bodily self-awareness is permanently haunted by the sense of more to come, or the sense that *what I am* is surrounded by an aura of *what I might be*. The sense of what I am exceeds the sensations through which I experience what I am. Put another way, *what I am* is more than the sensations of that body that I assume as me. My bodily sensations are thus *about* something they explicitly *are* not. I therefore have a sense that I *am* something that transcends what I am experiencing as me. This sense of the self being more than what it experiences supplies what Kant looked to the “transcendental ego” to supply—but it is meatier, and is located in space-time and its causal net. What is more, the Existential Intuition opens up the sense of transcendent objects that are, by analogy with the embodied self, more than what the self experiences of them. This sense makes one’s own body a place where possibility takes root. And this sense of possibility is projected into objects other than one’s self—and so is the source of something we have just seen: the acknowledgement that material objects are more than their present appearances to us. Quite early on in life, one is already in a world that at its most primitive is a network of objects that irradiate possibility.

We can see now that there are two cracks in the prison of “is” and the materialist deterministic window on the world, and they both arise out of intentionality: one appropriates one’s own body as “myself,” and surrounding objects as “my world.” These appropriations are both connected with the awakening of “am,” and, consequent upon this, the opening up of the Space of Possibility. The natural world does not deal in either *am* or, being deterministic, in possibility.

And here 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, and the transcendence that comes from intentionality, are massively expanded through experience shared with others as a Space of Possibility, as the theater of a life that is *led* rather than merely organically *experienced*.

As we fully develop our understanding of intentionality, we can see its consequences for the emergence of freedom. Intentionality that is implicit in creatures that merely sense becomes explicit in man, the creature that perceives. And it is made yet more explicit through the multitude of sign systems that fill our waking consciousness—most importantly in language but also present in artifacts, tools, rituals, and all the higher systems of culture that weave together the boundless human world—a “semiosphere” that supplements the biosphere. The transcendence that begins with the intentionality of sense experience grows into something

that is only indirectly related to the body. The invisible and often intangible world into which my language points lies even further beyond immediate sensation. In this space is to be found knowledge that is not—as positivist thinkers and, more generally, materialists would claim—merely piled up or compressed sense experience.

To summarize: There is an increasing divide between, on the one hand, the realm of sensation and the body-as-organism, and on the other, the self and the human world that is the theater of our lives. It is in the latter, the first-person (singular and plural) world, that we find our freedom. By means of intentionality—the gaze that looks out and comes to rest on an object that is specified as its cause—the self, the embodied subject, can get a purchase on a particular world, the theater of its existence. Here, then, is how we are points of origin, and how there can be events—actions—that originate with us and are *expressive* of us. We shall return to this second requirement for a free or responsible action presently.

Deflecting Events, Remaking the World

Let us now address the third requirement for freedom: that we can genuinely *deflect* the course of events. To understand how this is possible, let us turn to an idea first put forward in John Stuart Mill's paper "Nature," published posthumously in the collection *Three Essays on Religion* (1874). Mill was exercised throughout most of his life with trying to reconcile his materialism with his passion for liberty. How can there be free agents, he asked, when we are material parts of a material world, and so subject to laws of nature that are by definition unbreakable? He argued that, yes, we have to obey the laws of nature, but 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 do this by acting from the virtual outside-of-nature that is the human world opened up by intentionality, so as to align with those laws that lead to our goals. Created collectively by humankind over history, this is an enormous space into which to withdraw from particular laws of

nature. It makes it possible, as Mill said, paraphrasing Francis Bacon, to “obey nature in such a manner as to command it.” This commanding is possible because we are coming at a particular piece of nature from the outside: it begins with the transcendence of intentionality, and is built up through the expanding Space of Possibility, the first-person plural reality constructed through the joint endeavors of all the members of the human race, whose products have accumulated since hominids first awoke to their own existence. The ultimate expression of this power to act as from without the material world is our use of the laws of nature in technology, applying the scientific knowledge that we have accumulated into the community of minds that is our collective selves.

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 to at times virtually conceal the natural one. As was said of Christopher Wren, “*Si monumentum requiris, circumspice*” (“If you seek his monument, look about you”), so of humanity as a whole. The artifacts of cities, which cover the surface of the earth with man-made objects; the human institutions that structure so much of our lives; and the extra-natural social facts and preoccupations that fill our waking hours, to which there is no material correlate—these are all eloquent testimony to how we collectively deflect the course of events and operate from within a space outside of the material world construed according to the laws of physics. We get ever greater purchase on the natural world by building an ever greater arena outside of it.

A Second Look at Dr. Libet’s Experiment

In order for events in which we are implicated to be true actions, we identified a further requirement: that they be *expressive* of what we are. The most obvious sign of this is that they be relevant to our explicit goals, motives, and intentions. Curiously, this is the most difficult area for those who want to defend the intuition that we are free. Everyone knows the determinists’ argument: I do things because I am motivated to do them; but I do not choose my motives. So while, for example, we may withdraw into the extra-natural arena that is the human world, that which withdraws—including our motives and so forth—is a piece of nature and subject to natural laws. And these natural laws are not, according to determinists, particularly special ones.

Biodeterminists would argue that even the most abstract and elevated motives are simply transformed instincts, which in turn are an expression

of the unconscious imperative of our organic being, designed to ensure the replication of the genetic material it carries. There is a half-truth in this: namely, that the motives of our actions lie deep. But 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 subjective and personalized depths (even if the latter ultimately stand on biological need).

We can defend this claim by taking the argument into enemy territory, as it were, and revisiting Benjamin Libet's experiments, because they—or the interpretation that some have put on them—show how we tend to overlook the personalized depths from which our actions arise. Recall that Libet observed that the timing that people ascribed to their intention to flex their wrist seemed to locate it *after* the onset of the neurological activities associated by neuroscientists with the initiation of movement. This timing raised the disturbing possibility that our actions are not the result of our intentions.

Let us remind ourselves, however, of the actual circumstances of Libet's subjects, and of the whole action they performed. Their action did not consist simply of flexing their wrists, but of getting up in the morning to visit Dr. Libet's laboratory; 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 behaviors—getting on and off buses, looking for the laboratory, canceling 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 ought to seem less disturbing, as the general intention to make a movement of the required kind had been there since 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 participate in them because they seemed so interesting. The specific intention to flex the wrist belongs to an entire web of intention that has temporal depth and is connected with

great swathes of the world of the self—motives, principles, knowing-how, knowing-that, and so forth.

The Characteristics of a Whole Action

Understanding the full extent of the intention required of the subjects of Dr. Libet's experiments exposes a major objection to the deterministic argument: that it traduces the nature of action. One way to make voluntary actions seem involuntary is to strip away their context and dissolve them into their components. This dissolution can be taken even further. For example, I can decompose the action of writing this paper into its physiological elements, such as the transmission of signals along my nerve fibers to my muscles. It is perfectly obvious that "I" cannot do this—I would not know how to send a transmission along my nerve fibers as such if I tried—but it does not follow that I am not writing this essay freely.

Recall that 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 that is the framework, theater, and rationale of our activity is an infinitely complex nexus that is composed of many layers, which distance an action from biological and material causes. 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 comparable to that of instinct—cannot easily be applied. What is the cause of my writing this essay? 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; rather, it is there as an explicit presence—a million components of knowing-that and knowing-how—and not simply as a deposit of effects in my brain that then becomes a cause. The only way of synthesizing 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 is not to be found by looking backward into some putative biological substrate, but that is a forward-looking affirmation of, assertion of, and expression of myself.

It is wrong to think of actions (as opposed to material events) as the effects of simple causes, if only because even ordinary simple acts are

composed of vast numbers of material events that are inseparable from one another. Think of actions that are as straightforward as “walking down the street to an appointment,” or “taking a plane to New York” (less straightforward), or “preparing for a vacation” (still less straightforward), or “becoming a competent psychiatrist” or “debating free will” (even less straightforward). The countless events of which they are composed cannot be generated, even less orchestrated, by ordinary causation, nor their coherence understood in terms of drives or motives that are themselves seen as quasi-material causes. Wishes, intentions, and other propositional attitudes adequate to actions are not caused simply, nor are they simply causes. Like the actions that can be at least partially understood by means of them, these propositional attitudes 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 *reasons*, which pull us *toward* goals we have ourselves envisaged and articulated, and which shape the succession of components of action we undertake. A reason, or something looser such as a motivation, is the hidden glue binding together the countless constituents that make up components of action, the countless components of action that make up whole actions (such as taking a plane to New York), and the countless whole actions that make up our lives, understood as something we consciously and effortfully lead rather than merely organically live or experience. The reverse view, which sees actions as *cause-pushed* rather than *reason-driven*, prepares them to be reinserted into a causal chain extending backward from a present material event to the Big Bang—and this is wrong.

Let us suppose that, in the middle of writing this essay, I had an epileptic fit. I might fall to the ground, and someone entering the room would see twitching movements. Note, first, that this event can be understood in terms of the activity of my brain. A record of this activity, such as an EEG, would show changes correlating with, first, my loss of consciousness, and then with my tonic and clonic movements. Second, note that this event would cut right across my biography: it would be an impersonal sequence of events that had nothing specific to me about it except inasmuch as I suffer from epilepsy—that is, its successive components and their connection into a sequence could belong to anyone, or, more precisely, to “anybrain.”

Contrast this with the activity that was interrupted by the hypothetical fit: my writing this essay; 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—all of these would reflect my individuality, varying according to the kind of person I

am, my dispositions and attitudes and emotional makeup; and they would delve deep into my biography, drawing on the experiences and knowledge that are particular to me, and that inform my decisions and make me able to act on them. We could summarize the difference between, on the one hand, the writing I am doing before I have the fit and my responses to the fit when I come around, and, on the other, the fit itself, by saying that the former are actions that are temporally deep, personal to me, and rooted in my biography and character, while the latter is an event that is entirely of the present moment, is impersonal, and cuts across my biography. The biodeterminist position must refuse to recognize these fundamental qualitative distinctions, and the difference in kind between the *action* of writing an essay and the *having* of an epileptic fit.

We might put this differently by saying that, unlike the events that comprise an epileptic fit, a true action belongs to an entire *field* of actions and intentions rooted in our selves. An expressive action makes sense only with respect to a frame of reference—the present-past of memory, the present-future of imagination—and it belongs to a field of actions that is unique to ourselves, even though it may share features with those in which our fellows operate. This is what it means to say that my actions are free in the sense of being expressive of myself: they are modes of self-*assertion*, and so of self-*expression*. Here, then, we have the final requirement for being free agents: actions that are genuinely expressive of the actor.

Quite a Catch

It is easy to lose sight of the hinterland of the self behind behavior if we focus on individual actions lifted out of their context. Consider the act of catching a ball: the more brilliant the catch, the less it seems voluntary. You seem to do it without thinking, without *deciding* to do it. Indeed, when one considers what catching a ball involves, it seems impossible to perform it as a wholly voluntary act. You have to fling yourself across empty space as your outstretched hand intercepts the ball. The hand has to be sufficiently open at the time of contact to admit the entry of the ball, but not so open that it slips out. Then your fingers have to close rapidly around the ball. You also have to allow a certain amount of “give” so that your prey does not at once bounce out of your 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, it seems, *you* did not catch the ball—your *body* did, and you were just a fortunate bystander who took the credit.

But this is not so. First of all, in order to catch the ball, you had to participate in a ball game (let's say a game of baseball). This requires that you should have voluntarily turned up to a particular place on a particular day; that you understood and assented to the rules of the game; and that you understood the role of the outfielder. And crucially, in order to make the virtuoso catch, you would have to have *practiced*—you would have to have spent time preparing yourself for this moment that would bring such glory upon you. To do this, you would have to have so ordered your affairs that you would be able to practice—scheduling with your teammates, negotiating the traffic, and so on. You would have to have listened hard to your coaches' advice, and done your best to translate it into action.

In other words, behind the quasi-involuntary action of catching a ball, there is a huge back-story of complex actions—actions that it is very difficult to imagine happening without your deliberate intent, and that tap into great stretches of your self. You would have engaged in a vast quantity of voluntary activity in order to enable yourself to perform an action that might in isolation seem involuntary. Much of this preparatory work would have involved positioning yourself to have experience and acquire requisite knowledge—taking many intermediate steps in order to do so. So much of our life consists of this extended web of action—of acting on ourselves in order to change ourselves: from going to a pub to have a drink to cheer yourself up, to improving your ability to cut a figure in Paris by paying good money to polish your French.

If you really must be neuroscientific about it and talk about “neuroplasticity” (the research showing that there are changes in the brain when one acquires a skill), then 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 intentional world greatly expanded through language and culture. And we could extend the application of the term “plasticity” far beyond *neuroplasticity*: 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 of selves (as when I decide to cooperate with others to ensure that one of us makes that so-important catch). It is a mistake to try to stuff all of that back into the brain and see it solely in terms of changes in synaptic connections 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 then tiptoeing back to determinism.

Escaping the Prison of “Is”

It should be evident from the case presented so far that the self that is expressed in actions has temporal depth, and so we should look again at the temporal dimension of the Space of Possibility, the realm of the intentional world that is shared between people and so forms the basis of the semiosphere. We are explicitly aware of having had past experiences, of having in the past contracted obligations that are presently valid and should shape our continuing behavior. Neuroscientists try to reduce this explicit past to its implicit presence in the current structure of the brain—the altered neural connectivity that results from experience and learning. And they try to reduce the future to the properties of structures such as the frontal lobes, which constrain the behavior of the human organism to purportedly 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 it is just as resistant as the intentionality of perception to being fitted into the materialist world picture. In fact, as physicists often remind us, the strictly physicalist account of the universe does not accommodate distinctions between past, present, and future. It is no wonder, then, that 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 tenseless present—and this helps to reduce us to the status of animals that simply pinball, rather than explicitly plan their way, through the world.

We should look upon time as a form of intentionality that goes beyond what is presently before us to what is no longer before us and what is yet to come. And while it might be possible in principle to trace the causal chain of events that brought about the present state of my synapses, it is not at all easy to understand in material or causal terms how the memories ostensibly encoded in that synaptic state *refer intentionally* to those events—how that synaptic state does not just result from, but 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—and should be a *memory* of the experience—is utterly mysterious and inexplicable in materialist terms. And yet it is this referentiality that places the “now” in the middle of boundless time, and divides time into the past and the future. Most importantly, the field of intentions, of self-hood,

and of self-expression to which our actions belong, has a temporal depth. Just about every piece of behavior draws on an explicit personal past and an explicit personal future, thereby distancing us from the material world: tensed time can break the prison of “is.”

Self-Construction

The example of catching a ball illustrates several points 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 immediate control. First, it shows that we *need* causation and the law-like behavior of the universe—including our bodies—in order to be free. Otherwise, practice and training would be pointless. Each situation and its sequence of events would be unique. Far from the world’s unfolding according to the laws of nature being merely *compatible* with freedom, it is in fact a *necessary condition* of freedom. The laws of nature, that is, are an enabling constraint of freedom.

Further, the example of catching a ball shows that we actively seek out those things that will change us—that will make us better, more experienced, more effective, and more competent. In this sense, we are *self-constructed*. Effort, diligence, placing ourselves where we can learn and be changed—such 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, our inclination to perform them, and our competence to do so. The more we have had a hand in bringing about those things, the more they become the “ourselves” that is built up of many layers of past choices, and the more they may be seen as expressive of our selves and as originating from within us. There comes then a point in our development at which our actions involve so much of our selves that (again, unlike an epileptic fit) they are not separate from our selves. We must not think of this as the acquisition by some pre-existing self of the ability to perform actions that express itself, but rather as the *emergence* of the self and its ends, in parallel with the ability to perform them. What emerges, then, is an agentive self. (We will not understand either selfhood or agency unless we see the two as sides of the same coin.)

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 discovery is only the start. Self-driven development takes place with the help of our fellow human beings—those who co-inhabit our lived worlds, 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 has emerged from us, and that we have made our collective human achievement. My development occurs within the community of minds of which I am a part—the world that has been built up by the sharing of the transcendence that begins with intentionality, and which is embodied in culture and the functioning of artifacts and institutions such as baseball games, airports, streets, and so forth. Our selves are 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 also work together at many levels. I catch the collective bus to hasten me to my private goal.

A Contingent Freedom

We are now ready to meet Galen Strawson's challenge to freedom and moral responsibility. Recall Strawson's premise that, unless we are *causa sui*, the cause of ourselves, we cannot be held morally responsible for our actions. But we have come to see, in answer to this challenge, that the first-person is self-appropriating—a progressive unfolding, beginning with the primordial appearance of the Existential Intuition. That Intuition is the point at which “am” emerges from “is”—at which “I” become a singular point of departure from the material world, set off from the endless cosmic game of particle billiards and into the grasped theater of the led life. Like the Cartesian *cogito*, the Existential Intuition is a kind of tautology. But the Intuition has a scope beyond the *cogito* argument's self-proving truth, beyond the naked assertion of existence of the “I.” No one can gainsay my intuition that my body is me and its actions mine. It is not just the point of emergence of the self, but of its attendant agency: for any such singular “am” must include within it—must be not only the owner but the origin of—actions that are “mine.” And it is that agency which allows the self to extend its purview over itself by extending what it can grasp *of* the world with its eyes and *in* the world with its hands. My actions, that is, have grown out of all those processes, events, and items—beginning with my body—that I have appropriated in the service of my increasingly self-conscious, other-conscious, and world-conscious ends. And so we can say in a fashion that my actions have grown out of a soil that I have cultivated. My role in this cultivation is sufficient *causa sui* for me to be justly held

responsible for my actions. And this is the version of *causa sui* that should answer anything meaningful in Strawson's demand.

Strawson's demand that in order to be morally responsible for its actions the self should have requisitioned itself from nothing, is, of course, impossible. But it is also unnecessary and in fact inappropriate. Freedom—and moral responsibility—have to operate within some kind of given, or else they would have no content. The co-evolution of the self and freedom means that freedom *gradually acquires* a content, and that the self need not look back in shame to a time when it was not free—when it was in volitional training wheels, as it were.

This understanding of freedom may leave some people unhappy. They may still feel unsatisfied with a freedom tethered to something as messily particular as an individual, with all its (initially) unchosen baggage—material, biological, cultural, and biographical. But without baggage, there would be no content. There would be no world of prior purposes and potential actions to give meaning to freely chosen actions, and the choice of one action over another (if we can conceive of such a thing in a world without givens) would be more like something random rather than truly volitional. Without constraints, beginning with that of being the particular body one appropriates as one's self, with all its individual characteristics, including having been born in a particular time and place, and so also being bound to a particular culture and history and the sorts of actions and ways of being it makes possible—without those constraints, freedom would simply be an emptiness in search of content, rather like Sartre's Nothingness. There would be nothing for the self to be free *from, about, for, or toward*. More fundamentally, Strawson's requirement that we cannot truly be held responsible for our actions unless we are responsible for bringing about our selves *in their entirety*—and this would include (among other things) making our own bodies—actually presupposes that we cannot be free unless we lack a particular, inherited, given locus of our freedom.

Freedom as envisaged in the account given in this essay is particular, and, hence, conditioned. Any notion of entirely unconditional freedom will be 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, or drugs, or by illness that clouds my consciousness or (as in injuries to the frontal lobes) my judgment and understanding.

Strawson's argument unintentionally helps us to see and deal with the impossible criteria for freedom that are set by some incompatibilist

determinists. They argue that we can be free only if we were always free; or that, if we were not always free and freedom really has to be acquired, then it should be acquired all at once by a sudden miraculous change of state. The 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—either in ourselves individually or in the human race over its history—fails to appreciate two points. The first is that, as we have seen earlier, we *do* have a central role in shaping ourselves, as well as our intentions and our ability to act on them. In short, we have individually and together contributed to creating the conditions in which we can freely act in the triple sense of being the *originators* of our actions that are *expressive* of ourselves and that *deflect* the course of events.

The deeper point that Strawson's way of thinking misses is that freedom and the self grow in parallel. The appropriation of the body and the world as the theater of meaningful action is both the acquisition of the *self* and the acquisition of *freedom*—the acquisition of the conditions necessary for that freedom, and of the particular content it has. The self should not be sniffy about its freedom on the grounds that it was not acquired entirely freely any more than it should be sniffy about its selfhood because it did not grow entirely out of itself.

We gradually become ourselves through appropriation of what we are not (or not yet) in the process of self-shaping: we have a hand in creating our freedom and the theater of our freedom. Before freedom, we do not have an unfree self—we just do not have a self. We could say of a fetus that it is not free, but it could not intuit of itself “I am not free.” Certainly there is no freedom for the creature forming 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 burned 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. Strawson, by locating the self in a linear causal chain, and reducing it to a sequence of (material) events—so that he can then allow the self freedom only if it is the sole cause of itself—removes the layeredness of the self that distances us from material causation. He creates difficulties for the notion of moral responsibility by thinking of the self as an entity that is compressed into a single cause that is at most the effect of past causes—a kind of sediment of their accumulated effects. When one thinks in this incorrect way,

he starts to conceive of moral responsibility as requiring a moral agent who exists before himself; who has to bring himself wholly into being out of something that precedes him; who 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; that are expressive of ourselves; and that deflect the course of events. And, as we have seen, we have good reason to believe that we are capable of such actions.

The notion of freedom presented here begins with a transcendence that is rooted in the human body. It is the conscious body appropriating itself as its self. It thus avoids the vacuity of Sartre's Nothingness as well as the problems alluded to earlier with Kant's transcendental ego, which it is difficult to conceive of as being able to get a grasp on the empirical reality where actual actions are carried out. Contrary to Kant, my transcendent self is an "I am" rather than an entity accompanying my perceptions. This "I am," then, is distinct but not separate from the sense that my hand is me, that the nail I am biting is mine. And, above all (though this is another very big story), this "I am" is not separate from the sense that *the hand that is grasping is my hand* and *the agent of my agency*—reinforcing the sense that this body is *mine* and that at least some of my events are proto-actions. On the basis of the Existential Intuition, a process of growth of the self into the individual (and the shared) Space of Possibility is initiated. That basis, and not self-creation out of nothing, is all that is needed for freedom.

My references to the fact that the Space of Possibility is collectively created may set off alarm bells for some: Is *my* freedom simply a collective manifestation? 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, and the reason lies in this: our freedom has twin sources and each protect it against the limitations imposed by the other. The pooling of transcendence that is the human world lifts us from the grip of the biological, of natural material processes. And the unique trajectory of our individual organism through the material and cultural world distances us in turn from the collective. Thus, the awakening of the organism into an embodied subject, grounded in intentionality, makes each of us a singular point of departure—and with each of us, beginning with the appropriation of our own bodies as ourselves, a new world is born.