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Doing and Being: A Metaphysic of Persons from an Ontology of Action

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Abstract

A significant and worrying lacuna lies at the heart of neuroethics: viz., a coherent conception of personal identity. Philosophically, the consequences are serious; morally, they are disastrous. The entire discourse is constrained by a narrow empiricism, oblivious to its own metaphysical and epistemological presuppositions; worse still, it remains hostage to a latent Cartesianism, which logically and ontologically isolates neuroethicists from their subjects. Little wonder neuroethics lacks an anchor for its normative judgements. This chapter aims to supply that anchor. The key lies in action: action as essentially personal; acts owned; acts intended; and acts that embody those intentions that embody *meaning*. Such acts are the primary manifestation of 'personhood'; they are also socially oriented, therefore morally interesting. Action locates persons in a world of objects and, most importantly, others. Crucially, relocating neuroethics within this context of personal activity supplies the logical and ontological foundations for both its judgements and its participants.

Keywords: action, agency, anti-metaphysical, applied metaphysics, Austin Farrer, intending, intentionality, interaction, interpersonal, Ludwig Feuerbach, neuroethics, personal identity, personalism, personalist metaphysics, persons

1. Introduction

A significant and worrying lacuna lies at the heart of neuroethical debate. What it lacks is the anchor of a *desideratum*: namely, a full and proper understanding of persons. Given that persons and personal relations are the neuroethicist's primary subjects, both of observation and judgement, this is no minor omission. Philosophically, its consequences are serious; morally, they are disastrous. They leave neuroethics caught on the prongs of a fork quite as uncomfortable as any David Hume might proffer. On one side, the entire discourse is constrained by a kind of empiricism, narrowly reductive and oblivious to its own metaphysical and epistemological presuppositions; an empiricism constituted not by controlled experiment but by the products of an outdated and radically abstract rationalism-cum-realism. On the other, and pointing uncomfortably in the opposite direction, is a latent Cartesianism that logically and ontologically isolates the neuroethicist from her subjects. Ultimately, both sides can only end by eliminating the moral subject, so drive the discourse into literal non-sense. Little wonder, then, that neuroethics lacks an anchor for its normative judgements.

This chapter aims to supply that anchor, to articulate a conception of persons that will overcome this piercingly divisive dichotomy. It does so, not by privileging one side over the other; a pointless exercise in any event, since neither one is coherent and, besides, they terminate in the coinciding of reductive and flattened abstractions with inflationary, transcendentalised ones. Rather, the dichotomy is overcome by a conception of consciousness grounded in action: action as essentially personal; actions owned, intended; actions that embody those intentions, embody *meaning*. Such actions are the most fundamental manifestation of ‘personhood.’ They are also socially oriented, therefore morally interesting. Action locates persons in a world of objects and, most importantly, others. Crucially, locating neuroethics within this context of personal activity supplies the logical and ontological foundations for both its judgements and its participants.

It is in this empirical sense—the philosophically well-brought-up reader may be reassured to learn—that our conception of persons is to be understood as metaphysical. Our aim, in short, is not to critique the neurosciences or rebut their discoveries. It is no part of our case to deny the role played by understanding the brain and brain-function in understanding consciousness and ‘personhood.’ We wish, rather, simply to demonstrate that—if we may be forgiven—there is more to persons than meets the fMRI.

Personal action is ontologically primitive; it is also empirically, which is to say experientially, irrefragable. I cannot deny the reality of my actions without self-stultification, let alone self-contradiction; no more can I deny the actions of others, actions in which my own are but one ingredient. Action is the foundation, the condition, of experience, so meets Ockham’s razor, edge to edge. As such, action is also *anti*-metaphysical. It refutes absolutely those classical abstractions that claim existence beyond or apart from our experience, the being or essence, secure in its ontological priority, which, having no effect upon us, makes no claim on our knowledge.

Put simply, personal action is an anti-metaphysical metaphysics. As such, it is also an *applied* metaphysics. It supplies the clue to real existence, such as the ephemera of mere appearance and classical being-concepts cannot do. In the words of the Oxford philosopher and theologian, Austin Farrer, *esse est operari*: to be is to act, better still, to *interact* [1, p. 21].

There is one further point before embarking on the discussion proper. What follows operates solely from a philosophical perspective; for it is this perspective, we are reliably informed, that neuroethics most sorely needs. As such, we hope to introduce to current neuroethical debates several thinkers with whom the reader may be unfamiliar but who may, nevertheless, have a valuable contribution to make.

2. Empiricism, realism, and absence

Let us begin with an account, in general terms, of the philosophical problem circumscribed by this lacuna in the discourse.

It is tempting, at first, to state the obvious and assert that the dichotomy threatening to tear neuroethics asunder is a product of reductive physicalism or philosophical materialism. Such reductivism is, after all, characteristic of the scientific method that determines the course of neuroscience and so must inform the neuroethicist’s outlook. In consequence, said neuroethicist will inevitably identify consciousness with the neurological, i.e. physical, processes mapped by fMRI scans and, therefore, persons with brains. All this may be true. And yet, we would do well to remember that the obvious does not always stand on solid philosophical ground; besides which, the assertion is easily countered.

During the last century, the physical sciences have seen such extraordinary—one might even say *miraculous*—advances in almost every area of human knowledge that their efficacy is not seriously to be gainsaid. The origins and nature of our species, of the universe, of life itself, have been brought within the purview of human understanding, thanks in no small part to the rigorous and systematic application of scientific method. That method's powers of description and prediction have repeatedly and with remarkable consistency proved their worth; that the exercise of such powers stands firmly upon evidence which can, by and large, be replicated and validated surely settles the matter. Under the circumstances, it is difficult to imagine what more scientific method and its practitioners could reasonably do to demonstrate their epistemic credentials.

So much for tilting at windmills. In reality, we surrender to that first temptation and point our superior philosophical finger at the neuroscientist, only to commit the very mistake we accuse her of, thereby reinforcing an already apparently intractable conflict between two different modes of thinking. Fortunately, it is an important principle of our anti-metaphysical metaphysics that pointing fingers point in two directions at once: acts unfold in consequences, so identify the objects on which they bear; simultaneously, however, they reveal intentions and, crucially, the agent of intentions. The root of the problem, that is, lies not in a faulty science, but in bad philosophy; our obvious assertion is itself symptomatic of the very confused and erroneous thinking that gives rise to the problem. We have, in short, transformed method into metaphysic, and a wholly incompatible metaphysic at that.

The results are incompatible because the transformation issues in some form of realism. It is not, perhaps, that naïve realism which supposes, in Russell's pithy phrase, 'things are what they seem.' Nevertheless, it is close cousin to that self-same 'plebeian illusion' which Einstein described, 'according to which things "are" as they are perceived by us through our senses,' excepting that, in this instance, experiment and observation substitute for sensory perceptions [2, p. 20]. In fact, this substitution means that our method-cum-metaphysic mirrors most closely Peter Byrne's 'innocent realism' [3]. This, we are told, 'merely reflects on the content of our empirical claims, notes that most of them do not speak about how the world looks from a human perspective and concludes that the world, its things and properties, is for the most part independent of us and our representations' [3, p. 40]. That we do not articulate our presuppositions, it does not, of course, follow that there are none to articulate. However, the point is clear: no matter what the epistemic medium may be, we are still claiming to identify, to know about, a world that lies, logically and ontologically, beyond the reach of any actual or possible experience.

Any such claim must prove deeply problematic for the empirically minded, not least because it marks an attempt to found scientific knowledge on that which is *a priori* unknowable.¹ The realist claim to know the world as it is *in itself* is one for which no evidence, for or against, can be found. We do not have the epistemic tools needed to "get behind" our experiences even to establish *that* such a world exists, let alone what it might be like. Logically speaking, therefore, the claim is evidently not false as such, but meaningless. To gloss over such implications, as Byrne does, with an airy expression such as 'minimally dualist' cannot help us [3, p. 35]. Minimal or maximal, it makes no difference; the breach is opened between our experience of the world and the world as it *really* is.

Per contra, empirical investigation deals in the products of experience; scientific method, in those of experiment. Those products are, in effect, maps of the physical

¹ The realist is faced with, in Farrer's words, 'an X absolutely undefined;' and so must answer the question, 'How do I know that it is not the snort of a hippopotamus or the left great toe of an archangel or the taste of asparagus?' [4, p. 88].

universe, diagrams, not of the world as it is *in se*, but as it is diagrammatisable: known and knowable by those who explore and explain it. This may seem clearest in those fields, such as quantum physics and speculative cosmology, where mathematics is the *lingua franca*. It should, perhaps, be clearer still in those where computer modelling has become a vital tool, as in the cognitive and, specifically, neurosciences themselves.

Those maps, models, and diagrams are endowed with objectivity by the formulation and application of rules for their construction, rules that constitute the theoretical framework within which any scientific enquiry must be pursued. The more completely and systematically those rules can be defined, the more likely it is they will supply objective facts; but they are not and cannot be ‘independent of us and our representations’ as the realist imagines. They are objective insofar as they overcome the limitations of the individual enquirer’s perspective by abstracting from the subjective immediacy of ordinary sense experience. As the philosopher and physical chemist, Michael Polanyi explained, rules disregard the individual’s ‘normal approach to experience,’ so remain ‘unaffected by the state of the person accepting... [them].’ They come ‘between our senses and the things of which our senses otherwise would have gained a more immediate impression,’ so regulate the organisation and interpretation of those impressions. What is more, and in some ways more important, those rules are open to evaluation by all those qualified and equipped to do so: viz., the community of enquirers. Hence, their objectivity is underwritten by universal acceptance: the acceptance of all those participating in scientific research, whatever their field [5, pp. 3–4].

To suggest, as we have done, that empiricism and metaphysical realism are incompatible may be strictly true, but it is also, in one rather limited sense, somewhat misleading. In fact, there comes a point within the rationalist’s abstract conceptualising when the opportunity arises for, not merely for compatibility, but for full-blown coincidence. This is the precise point at which realism becomes idealism and vice versa.

For realism, the point arrives when it finally acknowledges the implications of its supposedly ‘minimal dualism’: ‘how we say things are is one thing, how things *really* are is another’ [3, p. 115]. Empiricism, by contrast, reaches this point when it conceives itself as a kind of phenomenalism or sense datum theory. In search of absolute objectivity, it adopts the pose of the passive observer, there only to discover that its ‘only contact with objects, and with the world of physical things, is through perception, in which objects are presented to...[the] passive mind’ [6, p. 50].² Stuart Hampshire called this the ‘deepest mistake in empiricist theories descending from Berkeley and Hume;’ that is, the ‘representation of human beings as passive observers receiving impressions from “outside” of the mind, where the “outside” includes their own bodies’ [6, p. 47]. Faced, not with real things, but only appearances, phenomena, the products of our sensory apparatus, the empiricist, like the realist, is forced to admit that ‘we know nothing about that part of the world existing independently of us’ [3, p. 44].

The root cause of this metaphysical mistake lies in the assumption that the neuroscientist’s models and diagrams obtain a precise correspondence with the objects modelled and diagrammatised. In representing the biochemical processes of the brain, it is supposed, the fMRI scanner supplies a literal image of, not the corollary of consciousness, but of consciousness itself. Persons, then, are at most a product of, and at least equivalent to, those biochemical processes.

² See also Farrer: ‘Abuse of the analogy between sight and understanding is one of the great philosophical delusions’ [7, p. 29].

The difficulties that beset such reductive conceptualising are both numerous and notorious; not least, is the tendency to eliminate the moral subject, thereby rendering the whole neuroethical debate redundant. There is little profit to be had from arguing about the moral properties and capabilities of physical processes which are incapable of choice and therefore of responsibility. Any attempt to do so can be no more than anthropomorphic projection: the imaginative conception of impersonal forces as personal ones, which are themselves, we must remember, reducible to the very forces being imaginatively conceived. The rank confusion and, indeed, circularity, entailed by such a move is, we trust, entirely obvious.

A more serious problem, however, may be that equating persons to sheer physical process threatens to eliminate the possibility of meaningful discourse. It does so because, in and of themselves, physical processes do not possess logical properties. The firing of neurones may occur or it may not, but such an event cannot be *true* or *false*. There is, as Farrer points out, ‘no physical act... which consists in [affirming or] negating,’ [8, p. 41] only the actualising of one particular process or another, the impact of one force or another. Determine conscious, personal actions, such as the forming of hypotheses or the performing of experiments, as nothing but physical processes functioning according to causal regularities, however, and we refute the ‘whole assumption of logical study. In effect, we deny that ‘meaning governs the formation of discourse’ [8, p. 79]. Not only does this put paid to all forms of systematic enquiry, such as the sciences and philosophy, it leaves us, as P.F. Strawson pointed out, unable to explain the meaning or function of personal pronouns such as ‘I’ and ‘my’, ‘you’ and ‘your’ [9, p. 98]. The realist, in short, lacks the means to identify herself or anyone else.

It is worth repeating, for clarity’s sake, that it is not the reductive materialism, so called, of the neuroscientist or her *methodology* at fault here; it is the realism of the philosopher. The moral and metaphysical consequences of that are quite serious enough to be going on with, not least because they tempt us into that latent Cartesianism alluded to at the beginning of this chapter.

Put simply, the neuroscientist may, if she chooses, conceive of the subjects of her research in purely physical terms, but she cannot conceive herself in the same way. Deny this, and she must concede that her own descriptions of neurological phenomena and all the activities that give rise to them are themselves purely physical phenomena. As such, they must be governed by the same laws of cause and effect that govern all other physical phenomena. There can be no exceptions: the formulation of hypotheses, the devising and performing of experiments to test them, the analysing of results; the sharing of ideas: none of these events can be governed by meaning.

But that is absurd. The neuroscientist’s experiments do not occur, either by accident, or as a function of causal impacts; no more than do the institutions in which neuroscientists work. They are intended activities that *someone*—as opposed to *something*—*meant* to do.³ Their enactment is governed, as all personal actions are governed, by the ideas being expressed and explored; specifically, they are governed by the meaning of the terms in which they and the methodology used for exploring them are expressed. Ultimately, they are governed by the rules, the conventions and traditions, of the scholarly community to which the neuroscientist belongs. That is the social and intellectual framework in which her work is undertaken and without which would not be possible, let alone meaningful. Logically speaking, then, what is true of persons and brains in general cannot be true of the neuroscientist herself in

³ See Robert Spaemann: ‘[t]o be ‘someone’ is not a property of a thing, whether animate or inanimate; it is not a predicate of some previously identified subject. Whatever we identify, is identified either as someone or as something from the word go’ [10, p. 237].

particular. To avoid self-contradiction, she must, as Farrer put it, take herself 'clean out of the system of nature' [8, p. 79].⁴ She cannot be physical as the subjects of her research are physical because physicality reduces to causal uniformity. *Ontologically* speaking, therefore, she must conceive of herself as utterly unlike the persons and brains found in her neuroscientific descriptions. She is, by necessity, a different order of being.

Having styled herself, no doubt unwittingly, after Descartes' *res cogitans*, the neuroscientist-cum-neuroethicist finds herself without a physical *modus operandi*: i.e. a body. She has logically and ontologically disconnected from her sensory apparatus and, consequently, all conceivable objects of experience. Her thoughts, then, whatever they may be about, have no experiential content; what remains but thought thinking itself in isolation? Most poignantly, perhaps, her thoughts can have no moral content either, for she has neither means nor opportunity to encounter moral selves. She cannot, in fact, even be sure that any others *like herself* exist, as Descartes himself memorably observed [11, p. 85]. Finally, and perhaps worst of all, along with her physicality, she has surrendered even the most basic forms of *self-reference* and *self-knowledge*. In abstraction from its *modus operandi*, thought thinking itself lacks the 'directedness' or 'aboutness', which makes it what it is. In abstraction, consciousness cannot act deliberately or intentionally. The attempt to preserve some notion of meaningful activity from physical reduction has backfired. Real relations have been surrendered to arbitrary connections, the random collisions and mutual modifications of impersonal forces: no consciousness required. Echoing Hampshire, the neuroscientist is forced to admit that 'I do not know how I would identify myself as a disembodied being and I do not know what this hypothesis means' ([6], p. 50; see also [9], p. 102).

The bridge between consciousness and the world is broken. We no longer have the means to identify other persons or even ourselves, let alone effect any kind of moral impact. The question we must face, then, is this: under such circumstances of Cartesian ego-isolation, what, in the end, is neuroethics actually *about*?

3. Empiricism, action, and presence

To answer that question, we need only return to our empirical starting point. Consciousness must be reconnected with the world; an easy task since we have, the sciences remind us, the very tools to hand. As Ludwig Feuerbach put it, 'the necessity of this connection is only sensation' [12, p. 52]. So saying, Feuerbach admonishes us to reject the demand for mind-independent reality and turn instead to those engaged in exploring and explaining the world, those for whom '[t]ruth, reality and sensation are identical' [12, p. 51]. Only there we shall find the conditions of real knowledge. In their activities, he argued, we may plainly see that '[o]nly a sensuous being is a true and real being. Only through the senses and not through thought for [or in] itself is an object given in a true sense.' Crucially, we must be as rigorous as Feuerbach in the application of this principle, so insist that 'not only the external

⁴ This, as Farrer observed, gives rise to a whole host of curious questions, not the least of which concerns the place of the neuroscientist herself in evolutionary history. How, that is, did the neuroscientist's own mind evolve? Since it is no longer a feature of the natural universe, neither is it subject to the requirements of 'natural utility' or 'survival value' as these terms are currently understood. According to Farrer, it seems that the neuroscientist can only consider the existence of her own mind as being some kind of 'treat' or gift bestowed upon her by nature. Such a supposition, however, evidently requires the kind and degree of personification of the natural world that is hardly tenable [8, p. 78].

but also the internal, not only the flesh but also the mind, not only the object but also the ego are objects of the senses' [12, p. 58].

That 'sensuousness' lays the foundations for a more cogent and, ultimately, altogether practical epistemology. At the same time, it provides the terms for constructing—or perhaps more accurately, *construing*—an empirically sound metaphysics. According to Marx Wartofsky, the key to both epistemology and metaphysics may be found in a 'much-inflated yet workaday German expression' [13, p. 18]. With it, he argues, Feuerbach could unlock the significance of sensuousness and sensory experience while resisting the Cartesian lure to transform empiricism into phenomenalism and physical reduction into realism. In Feuerbach's hands, that is, sensory experience is not 'to be understood...on the "observer" or "perceiving subject" or "spectator" model of [traditional or simple] empiricist epistemology.' By extension, consciousness is neither 'a conglomerate of physical atoms, nor...a bundle of sense impressions' [13, p. 5]. Rather, Feuerbach's empiricism, his sense and sensibility, points to a conception or 'model of a being that is already involved in the world by its very nature. The context of *sensation* is therefore this primary involvement, this *Dasein*' [13, p. 377].

While it is perfectly true that, for Feuerbach as for Heidegger, '[t]o-be-here [*Dasein*] is the primary being, the primary determination,' [12, p. 61] this *Dasein* is not, *nota bene*, that later and better known manifestation: Heidegger's neutral substrate, which apparently lacks the virtue of being any particular being, any particular where; in David's Jasper's words, 'not...my being or any specific "being"... [but] simply "being there" in the universe' [14, p. 104]. Contrariwise, Feuerbach's *Dasein* is a philosophical baseline, for *Dasein* or 'being *here*' is active existence. Wartofsky explains: it denotes 'the original locus of being itself, as a *spatio-temporal here and now*, a concrete *being here and now*' [13, p. 376; emphasis added].

Metaphysically speaking, it follows from this that consciousness and the world are ontologically co-terminus: the two cannot be separated, are not 'abstractable in isolation as a subject that has then to be put in relation to an object' [13, p. 377]. Instead, Hampshire agreed, we are all of us *only* aware of ourselves as 'one item of furniture in the world,' 'one physical fact among others' [6, pp. 45, 46]. It is, moreover, *only* by identifying those other physical facts that we are able to fix our own situation *in* the world. In such identifications lie the most basic existential conditions for both subject and object. This is because 'here' and 'there' are not absolute positions in space, but relative locations; more, they are concrete stages of interaction.

Otherwise put, the very possibility of self-identification depends logically on being one 'self-moving body among other bodies' [6, p. 46]. The 'being' that is *here* must, if it is to identify itself *as a self* at all, be able to change its position in relation to those other physical facts: move from *here* to *there*. The coherent conception of 'subject' and 'object' demand it, for only by being able to change its position in relation to other objects can it control its access to the world, its point of view. Further, only by controlling that point of view can it claim ownership of it, of, that is, its perceptions; and only by controlling and claiming ownership of its point of view, can it direct its attention to particular features of its environment. Last, but by no means least, only by doing all of that can any 'being' distinguish itself from the other physical features which constitute its environment. At its simplest, perhaps, '[o]nly by the exclusion of others from the space it occupies does personality prove itself to be real' [15, p. 91]. In this, it differs absolutely from the 'abstract, vague, empty personalities' of Cartesian realism.

All of which means that our Feuerbachian *Dasein*, 'being *here*', is necessarily 'being' in the operative mode, fully expressed or actualised in 'doing *that*', whatever 'that' may be. In short, consciousness is a mode of activity: not *a* being, but a *way* of being.

What we have on our hands, philosophically speaking, is a logically and ontologically primitive conception of human being as physically (and, ultimately therefore, socially) embodied. Embodiment delimits the worldly physical fact that consciousness, personality, is, so determines the self, locating it in one place *rather* than any other. It supplies what Feuerbach would call the essential ‘property of impenetrability,’ which distinguishes the self as one *object* rather than any other.

The body alone is that negating, limiting, concentrating, circumscribing force, without which no personality is conceivable. Take away from your personality its body and you take away that which holds it together. The body is the basis, the subject of personality. Only by the body is a real personality distinguished from the imaginary one of a spectre [15, p. 91].

No inert substance, then, but the locus of a self-moving, self-directing agency; bodily existence is the focal point from which the impacts and interactions wherein consciousness elaborates and extemporises itself are expressed. Hence, Feuerbach’s avowal: ‘I am a real, sensuous being, and, indeed, the body in its totality is my ego, my essence itself.’ Otherwise put, the body supplies consciousness with that much-needed *modus operandi* whereby experience is granted and thought filled with experiential content. It is for this very reason that Feuerbach would so vehemently repudiate ‘those philosophers who pluck out their eyes that they may see’—or as Wartofsky tellingly translates it, ‘*think*’—‘better’. ‘[F]or my thought,’ he insisted, ‘I require the senses, especially sight; I found my ideas on materials that can be appropriated only through the activity of the senses’ [13, p. 368, 15, p. xxxiv].

If consciousness is to be sufficiently determinate to know anything or do anything, then it must, in Farrer’s phrase, be ‘perfectly embodied;’ at once, both subject and object of experience, consciousness is a feature of the world and so ‘does nothing here without the body’ [8, p. 60]. Crucially, it is this capacity for doing that supplies the ontological and epistemological foundations of a concrete—i.e. combinatorial—ego-profile. That is the ground upon which we shall build our anti-metaphysical metaphysics. Put simply, the physical extensions of consciousness supply our criterion of real being. They do so, because our first and most fundamental experiences are, as the empiricist knows full well, objects ‘of the senses, perception and feeling’ [12, p. 55]. So saying, Feuerbach would use action, more properly *interaction*, to elevate empirical principle. Real beings are known, he argued, only ‘where my self-activity finds its boundary or resistance in the activity of another being’ [12, p. 51]. That is why, first Farrer would identify ‘the primitive sense [as] “touch”’ [1, p. 232] and then Hampshire would do likewise, describing ‘[t]ouch, and not sight, [as]... primitively the most authoritative of the senses, the natural criterion of physical reality’ [6, p. 48]. For both men, the reasoning was the same: ‘because acting upon objects necessarily involves touching, the contact of my body with the resisting body that is not my own’ [6, p. 48]. Thus, our very conception of ‘real’ is conditioned by contact, designating the boundaries laid by ‘resisting bodies’ as they impact on our activities.

In accessing our environment, so to speak, we are not simply pushing on an open door. We are not, as Farrer put it, ‘swimming in a perfectly featureless medium;’ there is no action *in vacuo* [1, p. 233]. We are, of course, ‘walking the earth among all sorts of obstacles,’ obstacles which evoke or elicit our actions, either by resisting our efforts to achieve some goal or by providing the means to overcome resistance. Those obstacles, those resistances, thereby determine the boundary conditions for conscious activity; without them, we could do nothing at all. Indeed, we can only walk because the ground beneath our feet provides friction and talk because other objects reflect the sounds we make. This is not to say, however, that, in setting the

boundaries of our actions, those obstacles also determine their limits. They may exhort us in the strongest possible terms not to attempt to imitate the birds; but properly managed and controlled, they enable us to build the apparatus which does just that. Their resistance, then, is the force against which intentional consciousness, 'self-activity', actively defines itself.

It follows from this that the resistance activity by which our environment is known cannot be random or arbitrary as such; otherwise our attempts to understand and ultimately control it would be fruitless. Without regularity and predictability, consciousness would have no purchase on the world. Hence, as Farrer pointed out, '[o]ur conscious experiences find themselves from the start framed by this system' this regularity and predictability [1, p. 67]. Consequently, experience of resistance, and our engagement with it, take the form of systematic intercourse or controlled interference; that, in turn, supplies consciousness with 'shape' or 'form'. In other words, the interplay between self-activity and resistance activity supplies what Farrer described as the 'natural unit of thought' [16, p. 210]. Apart, that is, 'from my experience of impinging upon, and being impinged upon by, other things or forces, I have no conceivable clue to physical existence, or physical force, or physical interaction' [16, p. 210]. This is Farrer's 'causal solution' to the problems of realism, 'minimal dualism'. The world, he reminds us, 'is not known but as the playground of human thews and human thoughts; were there no free play, there would be no knowledge' [8, p. 171]. Subject and object are therefore disclosed to one another only as agents of 'free play'; the features or furniture that occupy our field of action alongside us 'only become features and so perceptible in so far as they disturb and diversify the field' [1, p. 234]. In short, the world is (recognisable as) a field of conscious activity and real knowledge is a product of our encounters in and with this field: one may come to know an object 'only in so far as it varies the disturbances of... [one's] field—[one] knows it as a class of disturbances.' We encounter 'real being' as it exercises resistance activity; we recognise it by the 'imprint' it leaves on our exploratory activities.

To speak 'objectively', then, the world is no more or less than the combination of forces that are continuous with our active explorations. This means that the resistance activities by which the world is known to us and the controlled interference that constitutes our knowing acts are necessarily coeval: consciousness-and-the-world—if we may reiterate a central point—are co-constructed, actualised *in pari materia*. 'The bond to nature, to an objective world,' as Wartofsky puts it, 'lies in the very form of consciousness as requiring an other, that is, in the subject-object relation that is the essential form of human consciousness' [13, pp. 337–338]. This is important; it means that 'real being' is no more a corollary of physical effects than it is a by-product of conscious projection (as realist philosophers will no doubt suppose). 'Real being' is the constitutive activity of conscious physical agency, of human being.

This takes us to the ground level of a coherent epistemology. It is also the foundation stone of our metaphysics. To explain: from all that has gone before, it follows that reality as it is known, both by ordinary agents and the most scientifically well-equipped investigators, is to be found, not in inert stuff or substance, but in dynamic process. In Farrer's Latin phrase, *esse est operari*: 'real being' is full-bodied being-in-action [1, p. 21]. Being fully operational, 'being' is also fully interactive, for 'an *operatio, energia*, has a plurality of elements to it.' The universe and its furniture are not made of 'solid and stupid lumps of physical matter,' but of relatively stable patterns of energy, 'infinitely complicated, minute rhythms of active process, without which process, nothing would exist at all' [17, p. 40]. Pressing the point, Farrer explicitly aligned his metaphysics with the great Einsteinian advance of the twentieth century, designating '[e]nergy, rather than stuff... our

ultimate' [8, p. 52].⁵ Such sentiments cannot fail to resonate with the astrophysicist and speculative cosmologist, indeed, with every scientifically enlightened thinker of the modern age. They resonate, too, with that other great metaphysician of the time, Alfred North Whitehead, for whom 'the actual world is a process, and that process is the becoming of actual occasions' [18, p. 22]. In essence, process and *energia* mean the same thing: reciprocal interference, actualities disturbing a field of activity comprised of other actualities. Real things, then, are *in and as* the mutual interplay of resistance activity or, as Farrer dubbed it, 'disturbance-effect' [1, p. 235].

Action, disturbance-effect, is our metaphysical ultimate; *esse est operari*: to be is to act, better, to interact. If this is true of the physical universe, which frames our every thought and deed—and the sciences attest that it most assuredly is—then it is no less true of the conscious, physical agents who explore and explain that universe. In Feuerbachian terms, 'the mind of man is nothing but the essential mode of his activity' [15, p. 171]. Disturbance-effect is the key to consciousness: 'that to which the personal act corresponds is not, indeed, any system of stuff, however fine-drawn, but a sequence of activity' [8, p. 26].

Thus, to identify what philosophers of mind used to call the 'seat of consciousness,' Farrer averred, we need only allow consciousness to pick its own seat by sitting in it [8, p. 24]. Do so, and we shall find that the physical 'seat', or more dynamically, 'vehicle', of consciousness is located, not in any one phase or feature of the bodily process *per se*, but in the action-pattern as a whole, the full-scale sweep of bodily movement personally executed. Consciousness is actualised or enacted in what the agent actually does: the reading of a book, the writing of an essay, the meeting or missing of a deadline. Simultaneously, of course, the action-pattern *is* the operation of all the physical processes involved, including the microscopic motions constituting the entire neurological system. That system, in each and every phase of its activity, supplies the building blocks of conscious agency. Consciousness itself, however, does not bear directly upon those building blocks; no more, of course than it bears on the large-scale extensions of the physical organism. Consciousness, as we understand and experience it concerns what we *intend to do*. Otherwise put, we do not consciously or intentionally operate the system of electrochemical processes running from brain to fingertips any more that we consciously or intentionally operate the muscles in our arms and hands. What we *do* is write an essay: our consciousness concentrates upon and is concentrated *in* those large-scale intentions, trusting the system to discharge the neurological patterns that will embody it.

This is not, if we may repeat ourselves for a second time, in anyway intended to deny or even diminish the role of the brain in conscious, personal agency. Rather, it is to bestow upon the brain its rightful role and place within the larger, bodily process, which *is* conscious agency. To illustrate, Farrer offered an analogy: 'an immensely tenuous, elongated plant, rooted in several different regions of the brain, passing its stem through the spinal column, and flowering into performance in the hand' [8, p. 26]. Consciousness, then, is not to be restricted to any particular phase of the process: it is not *in* the firing nerves, the flexing muscles, or the moving hand. Consciousness 'flowers' or comes into focus in what agents *do*, but what they *do* is embodied by the *entire* 'action plant' from root to tip. Thus, the 'whole nerve-plant from brain to hand is the vehicle or instrument of the behaviour' [8, p. 26].

This is true even when that vehicle does not appear to be moving very much at all. Thinking, for example, about how to frame this sentence is an action and so

⁵ See also, Farrer: 'The notion of energies in a pure or simple state, prior to mutual engagement is physical nonsense. All activity is mutual, as between energies, and all activity thus mutually engaged changes and redistributes itself' [7, p. 82].

requires a 'nerve-plant' to embody it, however foreshortened the 'plant' may be. For thinking, Farrer, reminds us, is the 'shadow of doing' and so 'must be interpreted by a full-blooded doing' [8, p. 39]. (One suspects that this is the point where many a neuroscientist and neuroethicist commits their fatal error, mistaking this act of interpretation by means of the clue or model of bodily action for ostensive indication or direct denotative reference; and that way, as we have seen, lies metaphysical realism.) For thought apart from overt behaviour, Farrer found an interpretive key right under our noses, so to speak. 'The best sort of characterisation of thinking is that it is a sort of talking to ourselves' [7, 29]. The 'shadow-patterns' of thought follow same route as speaking, from brain to mouth, taking in lips, jaws, tongue, vocal chords and so on. But they do not get so far: the action-pattern is not fully enacted and the 'nerve-plant' fails to flower in 'full-blooded doing.' In this way, the act of thinking 'ghosts' the act of speaking, stops short of engaging the full physical apparatus of bone and muscle.

The risk of physical reduction here is palpable. As we trace out the route of our action plant, it ill behoves us to ignore the ontological dangers that lie in wait: the abstractions and disjunctions, the dissolution of consciousness into confusion and self-contradiction. Forewarned is forearmed, however; almost literally in this case for, as Farrer pithily put it, we 'still have mind on our hands just as much as matter' [8, p. 7].

In fact we have already hinted at the answer more than a little. It lies in the fundamental requirement to make sense of human action as meaningful; to recognise and understand it as governed, not by the diagrammatic laws of cause and effect, but by the rules of discourse and the conventions of the community in which we act. It lies, in short, in the logic of intending. Such logic is essentially presuppositional. It means that the very concept of action in the full and personal sense—the sense, that is, in which we experience it directly in ourselves and the other persons with whom we interact—is only complete when coupled to an intending agent: the owner of the act. In acting, the agent instantiates both the intentional and consequential motifs that make agency what it is: the 'before' and 'after' of an *esse* that actualises itself purposively, that is, teleologically, by means of some *operari*. Therein lies meaning: both theme and content of the process, without which any act is reduced to mere physical event. Stripped of this purposive structure, this 'before' and 'after', the very concept of 'action' is unintelligible. Hence Farrer reminds us, the intending that arises only in those circumstances to which the physical, bodily pattern 'reacts and only in reacting to them... has neither sense nor function.' Contain consciousness within the bounds of flattened naturalism, that is, and the 'reaction which consciousness should direct takes place in the occurrence of consciousness;' and that is no consciousness at all [1, p. 235].

Evidently, we have no wish to re-open a logical and ontological chasm so recently closed; equally, no simple reduction will do. Instead, Farrer held out for an agency 'overplus' or 'prior actuality', insisting that '[t]he *intending* is ahead of the *intended*, though it be but a hairsbreadth' [8, p. 48].⁶ Note the repetition; it is as important as the differentiation it represents, for it refutes absolutely the separatist tendencies of metaphysical realism, demanding instead continuity between *intending* agent and acts *intended*. Put simply, actions, in the full and personal sense, *are* intentional; they require an agent of *sufficient* priority to intend them. Like 'a hairsbreadth', 'sufficient' denotes the briefest logical pause between becoming aware of one's circumstances and responding to them: sufficient, that is, to displace merely reflex action while the owner-*esse* of intending consciousness takes her seat, putting the intended pattern of physical action in gear and driving it off.

⁶ I am indebted to Charles Conti for pointing out the significance of the double reference here.

We are not, as all of us are no doubt aware, acting and intending in a vacuum. Action and, indeed, everything we have said about it, locates us in a physical *and* a social situation. For, as we have already observed, action is always and necessarily interaction, so involves a ‘plurality of elements.’ All of those elements are, in a sense, physical objects; many of them are also personal others, intending agents like ourselves. The logic of intending reminds us of this, while also circumscribing the minimal requirements of prior actuality: the demands placed upon us by the presence of other persons. So much can be clearly seen, J.L. Austin has demonstrated, from the language of apology and excuses [19]. That we need and, fortunately, are able to apologise for our actions, not only reveals the personal nature of the context in which we act, but also throws the logical emphasis back upon the intending by allowing us to express what we *meant* to do.

Put simply, acting persons aspire to a lively moral perspicuity by adopting what Charles Conti describes as a ‘metaphysical [i.e. ethically informed] vantage point’ [20, p. 185]. We seek thereby to oversee the means towards realising consequences we actually intend and so avoid colliding with other agents. We view our proceedings, then, not as a ‘Cartesian cogitator but as actor-self and monitor-self simultaneously;’ and so ‘perform our being as we experience it’ [20, p. 185]. In such performances the Cartesian *cogito* is revised and returned, chastened by experience and recruited by agency metaphysics to do its duty *metaphorically*. Physical extension coupled with social orientation symbolically transform the realist’s non-perspectival perspective [3, p. 40] into a concrete analogue for self-transcendence *in and as* ‘the “owner-occupier” of deeds done; the “performer-director” of the drama of its life’ [20, p. 184]. This is the ‘I’ of the act, the self that listens to itself, hopefully *before* speaking, but often as not through an in-built ‘moral “playback” function’ [20, p. 187]. Registering the reaction on the face of the other, the self seeks to make amends by resubmitting its acts for review, reinterpreting them with a view to qualifying intentions and mitigating unintended effects. Such are the lessons we all learn to invest in our proceedings, gathering ‘the rosebuds of experience in daily reflection so as to remove the thorns of further disgrace’ [20, p. 187].

The social orientation of action coincides—and does occasionally collide—with the ‘internal’ world of conscious deliberation: ‘We sense our compresence with others, so intuit the obligation to act’ [20, p. 186]. Alive to that ‘compresence’, conscious agency is quickened by the possibilities of physical interaction, personal intercourse. That defines the obligation *in* action: simultaneously enacted—obligations undertaken – and intrinsic to the logic of action—the ‘ought’ of my intending. Therein, Conti concludes, lies the teleology of action: being ‘retrospective and reflective all at once,’ [20, p. 184] end-oriented acts factor means, motive, and opportunity into intended execution.

Unearthing the roots of thought and action, we find that the logic of intending underwrites the concept ‘person’ as a social reality. Logic is not, however, always the most reliable guide to what does and does not exist.⁷ In view of our much-vaunted empiricism, something a little more concrete would, no doubt, be appreciated. After all, as Farrer reminds us, ‘[i]t is not as though we believed in our neighbour’s personality *because* logical philosophers are able to exhibit the self-contradiction involved in denying it’ [7, p. 128; emphasis added]. No more, of course, than we should expect logical proof of our parents personhood; do so and we surely add the insult of unnecessary demonstration to the injury of inexcusable doubt. Neighbours and parents, friends, lovers, even teachers: they do not constitute a logical puzzle for us to solve. Their presence, their reality, is a matter of practical urgency;

⁷ This, as J.N. Findlay reminds us, is because logic provides a guide to the use (and abuse) of language, not what does or does not exist [21]. Cf. Waismann: [22, 23].

incontrovertibly so, since our first encounter with other persons finds us supremely helpless. John Macmurray put the point with paradoxical perspicuity when he pointed out how well ‘adapted... to being unadapted’ we are, ‘adapted,’ that is, ‘to a complete dependence’ on others [24, p. 48]. In short, we are ‘made to be cared for’; and cared for we must be if we are to survive. Being so ‘adapted,’ how fortuitous then that we are born into a manifold of personal agencies or, to warm the face of such schematics, a world of families and friends, of intrinsically personal love-relationships. Farrer concurred: ‘[f]rom first infancy,’ he said, ‘our elders loved us, played us, served us and talked us into knowing them’ [25, p. 74]. Had they failed us, we would not be here to question their reality or cast aspersions on the meaning of their being. Indeed, we only learned to talk ‘because they talked to us;’ and in that talk, consciousness took its first stuttering, stumbling steps: ‘[b]ecause we could first talk, we can now think; that is, we can talk silently to the images of the absent, or... pretend to be our own twin, and talk to ourself’ [25, p. 74].

Consciousness, then, is awakened, better still *invested*, in us by those who supply the mental and physical resources with which we explore our world, shape our place and part in it. Otherwise put, our parents and teachers—among many, many others—supply the primary conditions of our conduct, both mode and circumstance of developing personality. We can think, that is, talk to ourselves, because they first talked to us and taught us to reply. Sometimes, we can even think objectively, that is, abstract from the immediacy of experience because they taught us rules for consistently organising and interpreting it. Those rules, as we have seen, they called theories: scientific, philosophical, psychological, etc.; they mitigate the particularity of my perspective by co-opting me into a community of explorers, so make *me* one of *them*.

In this way, others supply the terms and conditions of our actions and transactions, thereby staking their claim to the very self they helped create, instilling it with what Feuerbach called ‘the inner life of man’: our social self, our ‘species being’ [15, p. 2]. Like her talk, the other is internalised, metaphysically and morally incorporated into the structure of the self. This process displaces the subjectivity of the subject: its needs, activities, perspective—all felt as intrinsically, immediately present and real, *as its self*—these are *first* ‘filtered’ by a more basic presence in the shape of the ‘otherness’ ‘inside’. Being ‘filtered’, the self evaluates and re-evaluates itself, conceiving and constructing, re-conceiving and re-constructing, itself *in and as* relation. The self learns to double itself, so play the part of the other within it. In the vernacular, we might say I become a self by learning to put myself in the place of another: I become *a* self, an *I*, by re-enacting that place, that primary otherness; I become a self by being appropriated by others and learning to appropriate them in turn. In this way, the transactional structure of social conscience and conscious action are built-into the mode and manifestations of self-construction *by the other*. This overrules any ontological privilege or priority the ‘I’ might seek to claim over deeper interpersonal connections. Prior actuality cannot belong *essentially* to the self, for, as Farrer avers, ‘mentality *always* was a social, not a solitary, thing’ [25, p. 74]. Both metaphysically and psychologically, priority resides *in* the other for that is where the self is born.

Taking this one step further, it is, perhaps, sufficiently well known that the derivation of the word ‘person’ lies in the Latin *persona*, meaning ‘an actor’s mask.’ A vital metaphor, this: agent and alter-ego in one. The metaphysical hint is unmistakable. Give someone a mask, as Oscar Wilde quipped, and they reveal their true selves; and in revealing, we add, so they become. As consciousness is bodied forth by the other (inside) so it is embodied *in* the self. Theirs is the mask we wear, the *persona* we appropriate and transform into a self, a conscious, personal reality, commissioned by the other. Thus does ‘[m]ind... everywhere flow into mind’ [26, p. 143] and I learn to play my part in the exchange of perspectives on my self-enactment.

Our first performance, then, is no monologue but a dialogue with the other. In such transactions, are we made to be self-making.

The essence of consciousness, of 'personhood', is fragmentary, consolidated by these exchanged perspectives. This is a commonplace of postmodern identity theories as well as the 'metaphysical personalism' (as Conti's titled his exegesis of Farrer) that we have been mapping here. The 'unity' we call a self is actually a function of that primary dialectic of perspectives, the love-relationships into which we are born. In this way, those who had and held us have inexorably bound themselves, their image, into our *every* experience of consciousness. We are who we are by their gift; wherein, St. Paul reminds us, works the grace of God [27].⁸ Others give us the tools with which to make or 'mend' ourselves (as Eugene O'Neill suggests) using that grace as 'glue' [28, p. 101].⁹ They give us the language, the symbols, in which we think our thoughts and live our lives.

4. Conclusion

It seems we have, at last, reached the philosophical bottom-line. These first and most fertile encounters shape the development of conscious thought and action; they are the grounds which supply form and purpose, sometimes even content, to our explorations and explanations. This is the well-spring of human being, in Martin Buber's poignant phrase, the 'cradle of real life' [22, 29].

Here, then, is an opportune moment to take stock. Let us make the point of moral application plain. Immediately obvious is the absence of any ethical theory, our conception of persons as active agents offers no system or set of rules for the formulation of normative judgements. Being rooted in the personal relations wherein we all, quite literally, find ourselves, our anti-metaphysical, *applied* metaphysics is profoundly averse, even hostile, to such things. Indeed, as the history of Western philosophy—and any decent textbook—will show, such theorising and systematising is always inherently flawed, unable as it is to accommodate the messy and complicated cases that moral practice inevitably throws up. Real life is never black and white; for every rule there is an exception; although even the best system-builders frequently forget this, preferring as they do to exalt their abstract conceptual constructs such as reason and utility.

Applied metaphysics may leave us without a moral theory, but it does not leave us empty-handed. Instead, it supplies the very anchor that our normative judgements demanded from the start: concrete personal connection, the embodiment of moral agency. This rebuts absolutely that Cartesian ghost in—or rather *out of*—the machine, that 'being-beyond,' which remains forever quarantined from physical experience, physical knowledge, physical reality. And so the transcending ego, which passes judgement on a reality it can neither experience nor, consequently, understand, is exorcised at last. Along with it, goes the flattened naturalism which reduces personal reality to causal mechanism. In their place stands, not a concept, but a person, a conscious physical agent. This is the other with whom I am intimately and intrinsically interconnected, the living, breathing reality at the very heart of my own existence: co-constituent of my becoming, whose rightful claim upon me demands that I reciprocate, respond in kind and participate in his or her becoming. We demur at our own risk, for that way lies self-stultification; worse still, perhaps annihilation. Deny the presence of the other and coherence is corrupted:

⁸ 'But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.'

⁹ 'Man is born broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God is glue!'

our entire moral discourse will rot. Reject their claims upon us and our very existence may be in dire peril. Regard them as mere objects, as a function of physical process or even interpenetrating forces, and we transform ourselves likewise. Action is reflexive: it reveals the nature of the agent and in revealing, actualises. Bluntly, that is, I am who and what I am through the grace (and glue) of others; without them, I am not. Therein lies the moral imperative of our anti-metaphysical metaphysics.

Philosophically speaking, of course, we have found more than a moral anchor; we also have a coherent logical and ontological framework for our discourse. Personal action supplies the context in which we may clearly see both the particular and the general: first, the analyses and judgements of neuroethics; second, the discipline as a whole and all its participants. Within this framework we may recognise, then understand, and finally overcome the ‘self-sufficing speculation,’ [15, p. xxxiv] which threatens to undermine our efforts. On the one hand, we recall the personal presuppositions of our empiricism: the epistemological requirements of exploring agents that reconnect experience with action, real knowledge with the controlled interference which is the neuroscientist’s stock in trade. On the other, it reveals and resists the temptation to align methodology too closely with metaphysics. This, in turn, allows us to reconcile those binary oppositions—mind and body, intending and intended, subject and object—which do so much to incapacitate every branch of moral philosophy. Reconciliation comes, not by over-inflating empiricism with the transcendental pretensions of metaphysical realism, but by returning us to the only place where those abstract notions can possibly make sense. Mind is a mode of bodily action, body the physical manifestation of mind. Intending and intended are phases of that manifestation, conceptually separable but in reality, i.e. in action, continuous. Subjectivity is essentially other-oriented by virtue of being a reflection of the other who invokes and evokes it in us. Ethically, it denotes obligations owned: my responsibilities as presupposed and, moreover, delimited by my capacity to act in response to a physical and social or personal environment. Being a communal act, objectivity is coeval with this environment: it represents the truth-conditions and epistemic norms laid down by the community of knowing persons. Thus, subject and object are not independent as such, but theoretical perspectives, ways of seeing, of thinking about and understanding the world, the use of which is sanctioned by that community. This does not detract from their truth-value but merely reminds us of the context in which they are first negotiated and defined; that is, transacted with the world by the community of thinkers. Both ethically and epistemologically, then, these theoretical perspectives represent, in their contrasting but congruent ways, the very ‘claimingness’ of others that is our anchor.

Ultimately, then, being firmly anchored by our concept of persons to the solid, social, and inherently ethical ground that entails it, uncouples neuroethical analyses from the arbitrary dictates and philosophical fiats of classical rationalism-cum-realism. Diverted from the rabbit hole of incoherence and irrelevance, which awaits so much philosophical discourse, and possessed of a renewed social conscience, our thoughts and actions are oriented back towards the communities in which even neuroethicists must live and work. Most immediately, perhaps, is the scholarly community whose job it is to map out and delineate our discipline. Beyond that, is the academy itself, whose traditions, standards, and requirements we have imbibed, deploying them rigorously in our own practice. And if we care to look still further, beyond the halls of academe, we may even see the society whose various institutions—from the logico-linguistic to the socio-political—make our investigations possible and before which our contributions will no doubt be held to account.

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