

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF A HUMAN-SCALE BREADTH OF VIEW: READING TALLIS' *FREEDOM*

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Abstract: This paper is my commentary on Raymond Tallis' book *Freedom: An Impossible Reality* (2021). Tallis argues that the laws described by science are dependent on human agency which extracts them from nature. Consequently, human agency cannot be explained as an effect of natural laws. I agree with Tallis' main argument and I appreciate that he helps us understand the systematic importance of a human-scale breadth of view regarding any theoretical investigation. In the main part of the paper, I critically comment on Tallis' interpretation of several more loosely associated topics from a phenomenological perspective. Firstly, I reconsider Tallis' account of intentionality as a factor that opens a distance between the cognizer and the world. Whereas Tallis emphasizes that agency requisitions aspects of the world to achieve its goals, I point out that agency does not determine the meaning of things unidirectionally and independently of all context. A self-controlled agency is provisionally reached through a process of 'deindexicalization' of our passive intentional capacities, that is, by creating and maintaining new, different worldly contexts. Subsequently, I analyze Tallis' description of our intentional relation to spatiotemporally distant possibilities. In my view, Tallis underestimates the extent to which our intentional relation to possibilities is pre-reflexive and pre-predicative and hence independent of propositional attitudes. Finally, I consider Tallis' interpretation of nature and show that it is deeply influenced by the sciences of nature. In contrast, I argue that agency can be properly described only if we understand it as an intervention in a lifeworld already imbued with sense, not merely a physical or material nature.

Keywords: embodiment; intentionality; lifeworld; naturalization; nature; phenomenology.

Introduction

Raymond Tallis' recent book *Freedom: An Impossible Reality* (2021) is an excellent read. Before commenting on it, I acknowledge that I am not the ideal intended reader Tallis probably had in mind when embarking on this project. I already believed that humans are free agents, and it was not very high on my agenda to persuade those who believe the contrary. For this reason, I look at the problems discussed in the book from the side, as it were. Tallis' *Freedom* not only offers great insights into the dynamics of scientific research and the conditions of freedom but also reveals the importance of other topics such as the philosophy of nature, embodiment, and intentionality. Rather than commenting on Tallis' core argument in favour of free agency, which I find generally convincing, I select a handful of the more loosely associated topics which are interesting from my phenomenologically inspired perspective and describe what I perceive as a limitation in Tallis' way of treating

them. Some of these topics have been extensively discussed in Tallis' previous books, in particular *Seeing Ourselves* (2020), but I limit my comments to what is explicitly presented in *Freedom*.

Before getting to the topics that I selected for closer examination, I will summarize my reading of some aspects of Tallis' book that I find especially important and inspiring. My critical remarks presented later may be read as a radicalization of the ideas summarized.

Above all, I find it very important that Tallis reminds us why the physical world described by science is not simply a reality that is waiting "out there" to be discovered by our neutral gaze. Tallis uncovers, in a very nuanced and rigorous way, why the "laws of nature" described by science are in fact unnatural, or, as he also puts it, extra-natural. In my view, such a philosophical move bears resemblance to some of the arguments presented by phenomenologists. For example, commenting on Husserl's late philosophy, Merleau-Ponty (1952–60, p. 80) once noted that to acknowledge naturalism is an extreme form of idealism, for naturalism posits as primary a reality that is in fact constituted on the basis of human theoretical construction. In *Freedom*, Tallis demonstrates why such an observation is true and important especially in the context of contemporary science and its claims regarding humanity.

Tallis explains that the reality uncovered by science is in fact a correlate of a very complex and historically developed system of human intervention in the world and hence the effect of an *elaboration* of the world rather than a pre-existing reality. Measurements involve considerable manipulation with situations studied, such as the separation of variables and the maintenance of constant control conditions. The efforts involved in this manipulation and, more generally, the collaborative human endeavours by means of which scientific laws become evidenced, are "sedimented" in these laws. Therefore, the "natural world" of the sciences of nature is actually an idealization which is posited as a primary reality when we lose sight of the conditions of its production. Tallis helps us see more clearly the mechanism of this idealization.

For Tallis, the implications for human agency are crucial. Since scientific measurements and hence scientific laws themselves are products of human efforts rather than part of nature, it is impossible to claim that the measurements explain human agency. The physical world is not independent of human viewpoints and agendas and therefore cannot be posited as the primary foundation to which those viewpoints and agendas should, or ever could, be reduced. Moreover, Tallis *reverses* the argument according to which our agency is an effect of causes (and hence an illusion). The procedures that enable science to progress are *expressions of free will* rather than means for demonstrating its impossibility. Agents are not effects of causes but "cause-makers, transformers of events into causes, or requisitioners of events to be causes" (Tallis, 2021, p. 150). Laws of nature are "handles" for agents to act in the world (Tallis, 2021, pp. 22–23). Brain activity measurements which are supposed to prove a subject's lack of free will are in fact excellent demonstrations of their free agency. With his typical (and much appreciated) sense of humour, Tallis patiently explains that accepting to become a subject in such a study involves one's capacity to make and keep commitments, plan one's day to arrive to the laboratory on time, etc. Those who attempt to explain agency causally pass over these prerequisites of scientific enquiry, which amounts to engaging in "simplified metaphysics" (Tallis, 2021, p. 167) and, ultimately, "bad philosophy" (Tallis, 2021, p. 15).

On a more general level, I appreciate how insightfully Tallis demonstrates the importance of subject-relatedness. More specifically, he points to the necessity to consider the differences in viewpoints, breadth of perspective or scales of description, and the shifts between them. Causation becomes apparent at a certain scale of description: it involves the focus on as-narrow-as-possible segments of the world within which the initial existence of X necessarily implies a subsequent existence of Y (*ceteris paribus*). Hence, the effectiveness and universal applicability of science-based principles is fundamentally connected to the procedure through which the human-scale perspective is deliberately abandoned and replaced by a narrower one. However, Tallis reminds us that the scale of description at which causes become evident can neither be declared universal nor serve as the ultimate foundation for other types of description. The more general the descriptions are, and the narrower the breadth of view is, the farther away we get from the human-scale phenomena to be explained. At the scale of causal relations, agency and freedom are lost from our sight. When scientific findings are requisitioned for arguments that deny the existence of human agency and freedom, it is crucial to remind ourselves that these phenomena are situated outside of science's breadth of perspective. Following this idea, Tallis meticulously unmask the methodological blind spot of science which is due to its dependence on human agency. He retraces the reasons for which understanding agency requires adopting a human-scale view and carefully describes its different components. Above all, agency requires the subject to span certain spatial and temporal distances rather than being causally pushed through A/B "forks" existing only in the now. In Tallis' words, the scientific focus on causal mechanisms "overlooks what is central to action; namely the *possibilities* that agents aim to actualize and the co-presence of the past, present, and future which lies at their heart" (Tallis, 2021, p. 153).

Tallis proceeds in close proximity to science and offers detailed descriptions and analyses of scientific procedures rather than presenting merely a general philosophical argument. Even though he is technically not a phenomenologist, I am inclined to say that his very attentive descriptions of the differences between science-based and agency-based breadths of view have a definite phenomenological quality. By showing a systematic importance of human-scale theoretical investigation, Tallis' *Freedom* also offers an important impetus for phenomenology.

Revisiting intentionality

As I have noted, Tallis argues that the results of scientific investigations cannot explain away agency because they need to be considered as agency-dependent. This argument is closely related to one of the strongest claims of *Freedom*, according to which intentional agents are "outside of nature" (Tallis, 2021, pp. 35–36) or occupy a "virtual outside" (Tallis, 2021, p. 51). In Tallis' view, "we are able to operate on a material world with and in the service of our material bodies *from an outside opened up by intentionality*" (Tallis, 2021, pp. 203–204; emphasis added). Tallis demonstrates his idea with an intuitive example. Between a conscious subject and an element of the "material" world, "an 'I' and an 'it'" (Tallis, 2021, p. 55), there is a fundamental asymmetry. A cup, for example, is *for* me, but I am not *for* it; the cup is an intentional object for me, but I am not an intentional object for the cup. In physical

space we are outside of each other, but as an intentional agent I embrace physical objects from a virtual outside.

In *Freedom*, as well as in his previous books, Tallis speaks of intentionality as a “mystery.” I quite agree. Now, is this mystery best attended to by situating intentionality *outside* of the world? How should we understand the “spectatorial distance between ourselves and the universe” (Tallis, 2021, p. 154) or the “gap” (Tallis, 2021, p. 5) between the experiencing subject and the world experienced?

The seemingly clear-cut asymmetry between “the cup is an intentional object for me” and “I am not an intentional object for the cup” is far from self-evident. Presenting the relationship between a subject and a cup as pure asymmetry presupposes that we understand the cup as a “pure” object (Husserl spoke of *blosse Sachen*). However, we do not originally live in a world where cups appear to us as pure objects to which a value is then unilaterally ascribed. Rather, we are born into and live our lives in a “lifeworld” (*Lebenswelt*), a dimension in which my (and others’) intentionality is always already at work and we therefore do not typically encounter pure objects, value-less “its”. Similarly, other people are not intentional objects that my agency considers from the outside, they are my peers, collaborators or enemies, and I am theirs; nature is not given as a “material world”, but as the stable ground for my feet, a threat, a shelter;¹ animals and plants are not physical mechanisms, they are alive much like I am alive, I feed myself on them and they feed themselves on me. My agency is so closely tied to these ‘roles’ or values dispersed in the lifeworld that before I eventually decide upon them, reject them or endorse them, I live them and they largely constitute who I am. In this world imbued with sense, cups and other things originally appear as agenda-dependent, value-laden, intermingled with my own and other people’s intentions, such as to nurture or protect themselves. Crucially, this means that my intentions are originally *intermingled with* ‘objects’, they are experienced as certain values of *things* rather than as self-contained mental entities.

At the everyday-life level of our experience, which constitutes the necessary foundation for any scientific or philosophical enquiry, we do not access our intentions separately from how they shape objects and vice versa. Intentions and agendas can eventually be extracted and separated from objects, but this requires carrying out special cognitive operations. Having been born into a world imbued with sense, we need to first separate what comes from the ‘subject’, from the ‘object’, and from other factors. It is at such a level of abstraction that we arrive at a clear-cut asymmetry between intending and intended.

Tallis is of course aware of many of these nuances. He himself recognizes that human agency relies on multiple types of environmental factors. He notes, for example, that “[p]ositioning and niche construction are the relatively stable background of our capacity for voluntary action. We operate in a multitude of environmental niches [. . .] that we have individually and (more often) jointly created to support us in the fulfilment of our needs and actions” (Tallis, 2021, p. 149). However, he focuses more on emphasizing that “[w]

¹ Husserl went as far as claiming that the Earth “does not move and does not rest” (Husserl, 1940, p. 118) for all movement and rest only appear in relation to it. The Earth in this ‘transcendental’ sense is not just an *opportunity* for standing or walking, it is the preliminary framework that is required by our motor intentionality and all specific motor agendas.

hat agency draws on is a long way from the interactions that we typically associate with causation in the natural world” such as those described by physics, biology, and sociology (Tallis, 2021, p. 149). Correspondingly, Tallis claims that environmental affordances “*increase the disposition to certain actions*” (Tallis, 2021, p. 190, emphasis added) rather than determining their course.² For him, affordances are not such that they offer me a course of action before I decide upon it, they are something that I select, accept or reject, depending on the purpose of my action (Tallis, 2021, pp. 192–193).

I agree with Tallis that we can always find agenda-dependency in affordances and opportunities for actions and hence that we cannot accept the idea that environmental causal factors fully determine our actions. However, does this mean that we can find affordance-independent agendas? Tallis seems to believe so since his description of our relation to affordances is unilateral. For example, he first asserts that appeal to physical affordances “clearly cannot explain temporally extended planning agency” (Tallis, 2021, pp. 195–196; citing Schlosser, 2018, p. 2100), then adopts McClelland’s (2020) concept of “mental” affordances (supposedly involved in our capacity to pay attention) and concludes that these latter affordances “seem to be under our own control” (Tallis, 2021, p. 191). However, the passage from “physical” affordances to “mental” affordances effectively eliminates the question of why affordances facilitate one type of action rather than another and reinforces an action-reaction (i.e. subject-object) dualism. On this account, intentionality becomes an unrestrained power to attribute meaning, for natural and cultural objects are *just* opportunities for our actions and agency makes use of opportunities unilaterally, and rather magically, from outside of the world.

However, in my view, it remains unclear how our relative capacity to control our interaction with affordances supports the idea of an affordance-independent agenda. As it is presented in *Freedom*, the discussion of affordances only seems to demonstrate that agency is a capacity to *always make use of different points of environmental support*, not that it is ultimately independent of them and ‘outside’ of the world.³ When we try to theoretically grasp the agency on which the ultimate meaning of affordances is supposed to depend, it never seems to be given to us in a pure form, as “fully under our control”. Even if a particular preoccupation seems to be independent of a particular context (such as the perceptual context opened via sensorimotor interaction), it never seems to be accessible as context-independent.

In fact, Tallis’ concrete demonstrations mostly show how human agency depends on an array of environmental supports, such as language and shared intentionality. We are “increasingly (non-spatially) distanced from the natural world and its habits” as we enter the community of minds with its “many modes of joined intentionality” (Tallis, 2021, p. 90). Similarly, our “capacity literally and metaphorically to stand back, and to reflect, and plan” (Tallis, 2021, p. 206) is tied to our capacity for adopting propositional attitudes mediated by many intersubjective and cultural factors. Within these typically human contexts, our

² Tallis similarly claims that “[o]pportunities for action [. . .] are preoccupation- or agenda-dependent” (Tallis, 2021, p. 190).

³ I note that “mental” affordances are not situated outside of the world, they are an embodied subject’s experiences, which are linked to intersubjective material and immaterial artifacts. (Tallis uses the example of a doctor’s practice as a factor shaping these affordances.)

existence immersed in the lifeworld becomes “deindexicalized”, as Tallis aptly notes (Tallis, 2021, p. 234). For example, my relation to a context-dependent future (tensed time: “tomorrow”) becomes deindexicalized through the use of a shared calendar (post-tensed time: “on 12 May”) (Tallis, 2021, p. 103). The post-tensed time serves as an “exoskeleton” that supports a more complex organization of shared intentionality and allows more sophisticated collaboration (Tallis, 2021, pp. 103–104). Similarly, the “mental affordances” involved in a particular segment of human collective activities are “sedimented” in our cultural institutions, such as a hospital (Tallis, 2021, pp. 195–196; cf. p. 103). Hence, human artifacts can be viewed as complexes of environmental supports for human intentional interaction with the world through which they become specifically deindexicalized, and thereby shifted from a more immediate to a more mediated context.⁴

Not only is the deindexicalization an artifact tied to human creative efforts, it also always remains fragile, provisional, incomplete. When I get very sick or fall asleep, my intentional distance from the world collapses to a minimum. These and many similar phenomena attest that the distance which is correlative to our intentional relation to the world does not subsist in all contexts. The distance needs to be understood as context-dependent even if the contexts are not always immediately evident and can have very different forms. Sleep or sickness are not exactly *restraints to* my freedom, since they do not start impinging on it only *after* it has been established. On the contrary, in these conditions I *return* to a “minimal” or base-level degree of intentionality which had been provisionally “deindexicalized” and sublimated into a self-controlling and planning intentionality. Beyond that, our bodily relationship to the world seems never definitely integrated in our explicitly planned goals. As Tallis notes (Tallis, 2021, p. 149), we never own our actions completely, the appropriation is an ongoing process.

Moreover, the idea that propositional attitudes are best characterized as unilateral control of environmental supports contrasts with the phenomenon of shared agendas. As noted, Tallis emphasizes the role of shared intentionality in the establishment of human distance from the world. In other words, developing shared agendas (such as the usage of calendars that organize our post-tensed time) is a major contributor to the process of deindexicalizing one’s experiences. However, if we accept the idea that the meaning of affordances is decided upon by a “conscious subject’s” agenda, it is unclear how there can ever be *shared* intentionality and thus shared agendas. If affordances are agenda-dependent, how do my agendas relate to other peoples’ agendas? My perception of their agendas is not *unilaterally* dependent on my agendas or vice versa. Rather, my agenda is capable of incorporating agendas that are not mine and, paradoxically, other peoples’ behaviours sometimes realize intentions that I have not been able to successfully implement. It is by taking up others’ agendas, that is, by letting one’s own agenda be informed by one’s perception of others’ agendas, that we participate in the process of sharing agendas and increase our intentional distance from the world (cf. Tallis, 2021, pp. 189–190). My perception of other people’s agendas is indeed always dependent on my agenda, but my agenda is clearly also dependent on theirs, for otherwise there would be no shared agendas. Shared agendas are thus viewpoint-dependent, but this viewpoint is not *outside* of the world. My agenda is shaped

⁴ For Tallis, human cultural institutions such as a hospital represent a “sedimentation of collective attention” (Tallis, 2021, p. 195).

by how other people's agendas unfold in the incidentally evolving world I perceive, how they are structured at the level of my closest social group, my culture, my language, etc., which means that my intentionality is shaped by a perceived intentionality encountered *in the world*. Crucially, my agenda is passive toward others' agendas *as an agenda*, not merely as a psychological effect of social or cultural causes.

In Tallis' view, human agency is fundamentally linked to our capacity to adopt propositional attitudes and consequently envisage long-term goals and plans. Does this mean that our capacity to plan stands outside the process of deindexicalization or that agency unilaterally selects and controls its affordances? Tallis seems to believe so. However, as I read his explanations, the capacity to adopt propositional attitudes and correspondingly requisition innerworldly "its" for the realization of plans relies on an individual's incorporation of certain points of support. The "uncoupling" of human agency from the environment, the opening of an intentional distance from the world, involves *bringing into existence* points of support that afford an ever more deindexicalized relation to the world, rather than just *using* some affordances for its own purposes. The agency is not just relatively context-dependent, it is *characterized by* creating specific contexts.

In sum, when we attempt to retrace human agency to its origin, what we find is not a self-contained and affordance-independent intentionality, but rather an architecture of bodily, intersubjective, and cultural points of support for the realization of our pragmatic and cognitive activities. This architecture bears a trace of the process of deindexicalizing an existence immersed in the lifeworld and offers an opportunity for pursuing it further. The process of deindexicalization clearly is not unilaterally dependent on how it is grasped by a conscious subject situated in a virtual outside. The deindexicalized intentionality is tied to affordances that are not fully under my control, in particular, to the perspectives and material and immaterial cultural artifacts produced by other people. The dependency between opportunities for action and our preoccupation seems to be circular rather than unilateral. Importantly, acknowledging such circular dependency does not amount to returning to the claim that our agenda is *causally dependent* on the aspects of our perceived environment because the two claims are situated at different scales of description.

Relating to possibilities

A similar 'archaeological' analysis of our intentional relationships with the world can be carried out at other levels. A closer look at how bodily intentionality opens up possibilities for us may be instructive.

I subscribe to Tallis' key idea that authentically human actions rely on propositional attitudes. I appreciate his reversal of perspective as it helps us understand why causally deterministic claims need to be considered in light of a human-scale description, in particular with respect to human agents' capacity to relate to possibilities of existence beyond 'what-is.' Thus, on my view, it is out of the question to "marginalize" the role of propositional attitudes in our agency (cf. Tallis, 2021, p. 204). However, when Tallis answers to a possible objection that the role of propositional attention is perhaps overstated in his account (cf. Tallis, 2021, pp. 92; 204), he contents himself with contrasting explicit planning to *automatized* or quasi-mechanical behaviour, and with admitting that the former can be

transformed into the latter. On my view, this response does not resolve the crucial question. The difficulty is not to choose between a propositional intentionality-based explanation (individual planning) at the expense of mechanical explanation (absorbed coping, automatism) (cf. Tallis, 2021, pp. 204–206) but rather to properly consider the possibility of an intentionality that is independent of propositional attitudes and to situate these different types in relation to each other.

When Tallis introduces the idea of intentionality, he explains that a key role in constituting the intentional distance from the world is played by our relation to possibilities. This relation opens up the room for free agency because it is situated on a different ontological level than laws and causes. Tallis then illustrates the concept of possibility by referring to horizontal features of the perceived world, such as the hidden aspects of visible objects and anticipated future events. Possibility is situated in a non-existent future, or in a space that is not immediately given to our senses, whereas physical reality is enclosed in ‘what-is’. However, Tallis does not clearly explain that these two capacities are not exclusively tied to the higher-order intentionality which makes use of our capacity for adopting propositional attitudes.

Tallis’ account of perception in *Freedom* has an intellectualist undertone. In general, he seems to endorse the early-Heideggerian view that intentionality is practical rather than contemplative, theoretical, and intellectual (Tallis, 2021, p. 235, note 30). He also explains that “how we perceive the world is structured by the possibilities for interaction with it: perception is action-orientated” (Tallis, 2021, p. 190). However, when he attempts to clarify the fact that our visual field “is haunted by absences”, he asserts that the conscious subject is “supplementing what is seen with what is *inferred* and hence with a sense of that which might be” (Tallis, 2021, p. 101; emphasis added). Yet if perception is action-orientated, the “absences” in the visual field are precisely not “inferred.” The use of this word does not seem to be an isolated lapse. Tallis typically claims that possibilities are “envisaged” by a “conscious subject,” but such a description corresponds better to reflective and explicit mental operations than to our perceptual relation to possibilities.

Inference is a sophisticated, “deindexicalized” intellectual operation requiring language, cultural learning, intersubjective collaboration, etc.. In contrast, what is involved in my perception of hidden aspects of objects is an array of context-dependent, “indexical” bodily capacities, in particular my passive sensitivity to light and my capacity to explore the environment via physical movement. Seeing, walking, grasping is evidently not a matter of adopting propositional attitudes since it is hard to see how I could authentically envisage the possibility of grasping on the basis of a propositional attitude if I had never had a hand capable of grasping (or an analogical limb). The way in which our body is organized and geared into the environment *opens up* some possibilities, including one’s sense of objects having spatial volume, and a specific structure, even in areas that are not factually sensed. The action-orientation of our perception is not originally correlative to our capacity to interact with the perceived objects based on long-term explicit planning, but to the passively instituted existence of a bodily field in which some possibilities for action and interaction are first deployed as possibilities.

It also does not seem to be accurate to claim that the body is “the primary instrument of our agency, the most proximal means to chosen ends” (Tallis, 2021, p. 155). For an

unimpaired adult subject, the body is usually *also* such an instrument, and possibilities *can be* envisaged apart from how they are opened up in relation to the body. However, the capacity for entertaining possibilities in the form of explicit goals and using one's body to fulfil them grows out of the pre-constituted field of my bodily capacities. Such capacity takes the bodily capacities up and uses them, rather than existing apart from them in the first place. Once again, it is important to note that acknowledging that our intentionality is passive to some degree does not require returning to a causal theory of perception (cf. Tallis, 2021, p. 155). Scientific explanations of bodily processes via "biology, chemistry, and physics" (Tallis, 2021, p. 155) cannot replace a proper description of bodily capacities as intentional factors.

Interestingly, our bodily capacities open up a specific type of generality, an aspect that Tallis highlights as one of the distinctive characteristics of propositional attitudes and thus human intentionality (Tallis, 2021, p. 124). For example, once I have mastered the skill of walking, I can walk on different surfaces and slopes, at different speeds, with different types of shoes, without any need to adopt propositional attitudes. Consequently, my capacity for interacting with my surroundings via walking can be realized *in multiple physical ways*, it allows a single type of oriented and meaningful relation to the world to be transposed across different physical states of my body and my environment.⁵ As such, walking is an intentional activity that is neither an effect of my adopting a propositional attitude nor a mechanism, or automatism, that can be exhaustively described in causal terms. Moreover, bodily interaction with the environment involves anticipation, such as when a skilled walker pre-reflectively evaluates the path in front of them as suitable or unsuitable for walking and determines how they should adjust their posture to maintain stability, etc..⁶

Therefore, I agree with Tallis that time is assigned in reference to a viewpoint (Tallis, 2021, p. 101), but this viewpoint is not exactly a "conscious" subject's viewpoint, as he asserts. The temporal possibilities are not exclusively linked to human capacity for adopting propositional attitudes and explicit consideration of goals and plans, but are open already at the level of oriented physical interaction with an environment, such as in walking. To use Tallis' own example, when I anticipate seeing a dog in a garden after I have heard it barking (Tallis, 2021, p. 101), this capacity has no essential link to my capacity for adopting propositional attitudes. Wouldn't a cat anticipate encountering a dog as well? Tallis acknowledges that there is future-oriented behaviour in animals (Tallis, 2021, p. 104) but emphasizes that this future-orientation is not an explicit envisaging, as it is with humans. While I agree with this last point, I believe that we should not pass over the evident continuity between human bodily behaviour and animal behaviour (e.g., anticipatory behaviour, walking). It seems that according to Tallis, there is nothing between "the rational, deliberate activity" that guides human behaviour, on the one hand, and, on the other, the "biologically mediated causes" (Tallis, 2021, p. 134), "the instincts, imprinted responses,

⁵ Tallis highlights that the goals envisaged through propositional attitudes could "be fulfilled [. . .] through different physical events" (Tallis, 2021, p. 124) but does not comment on the generality of bodily intentional activities.

⁶ For a more extensive treatment of these topics in the context of physiotherapy, see Halák & Kříž (2022).

tropisms, drives, conditioned and unconditioned reflexes, that prompt animal behaviour” (Tallis, 2021, p. 207). Tallis is of course aware that there are different degrees of freedom (cf. Tallis, 2021, p. 162), but he seems to only allow for one way for intentionality to be intentionality.

Moreover, to argue that animal behaviour can be exhaustively described in mechanical terms, as actuality-driven, “growing out of an actual prior state of the world” (Tallis, 2021, p. 104) is to resort to a particular scientific explanation rather than to provide an accurate description. Whereas at a general level, Tallis un.masks scientific theories as viewpoint-dependent, he seems to endorse one particular explanation of animal behaviour and considers it a viewpoint-independent truth. However, in our everyday interaction with animals, we “empathize” with them, at least to some degree – we perceive them as perceiving, and perception is a type of intentionality. In Tallis’ framework, this phenomenon may need to be rejected as an error of judgment and replaced by a mechanistic explanation. Doesn’t this mean that we are using a double standard for describing human and animal behaviour?

The opposition between explicit envisaging and mechanism does not seem to accurately capture what is at stake with intentionality and thus agency. The question is certainly not whether we should attribute propositional attitudes and deliberate planning to animals (as Tallis discusses in Appendix C of *Freedom*). I agree with Tallis that the future-orientation of animals surely “does not disprove the uniqueness of human agency” (Tallis, 2021, p. 104). However, there seems to be a root of human intentionality that is context-dependent, indexical, passively tied to objects in the world (my body, my peers). Human agency then grows from the world rather than entering it from outside.

The concept of nature

Throughout the book, Tallis refers to “nature” or the “natural world”, arguing that human agency is “extra-natural” (e.g., Tallis, 2021, p. 35). However, it is important to notice that the concept of nature employed in the book is quite remote from our everyday understanding of nature. When human agency is at stake, Tallis warns us against focusing too narrowly on the causal nexus at the expense of a human-scale description. He does not take the same approach towards the “natural world”. While Tallis’ descriptions of human behaviour seem to often contribute to a better understanding of the lifeworld, his descriptions of nature are fundamentally shaped by scientific explanations. For him, nature is equivalent to the “material world” (Tallis, 2021, p. 144), “physical world” (Tallis, 2021, p. 72), “insentient universe” (Tallis, 2021, p. 58), “worldless, subjectless universe” (Tallis, 2021, p. 83). On this view, sentient beings such as animals paradoxically do not constitute an essential component of nature. In other words, there is nothing in nature that differentiates its insentient aspects from the sentient, and the sentient can be explained through the insentient. In this universe, humans constitute a rather unintuitive exception.

Tallis also claims that there is no signal/noise difference in nature (Tallis, 2021, p. 38). On his view, signal/noise differences exist only for human agents, in particular for scientists who carry out experiments. I have already touched upon the reasons why I believe that such a description of nature does not accurately capture its mode of being. In fact, many authors

view living beings precisely as signal/noise distinguishers.⁷ Tallis notes that my decision not to go out when it rains is related to “the value I place on not getting wet” compared with my other aims (Tallis, 2021, p. 112). However, the value-driven distinction involved in such behaviour is not necessarily based on a propositional attitude. Organisms actively maintain their boundaries by means of interacting with their surroundings in accordance with what is relevant *for them*.⁸ The interaction between an organism’s physical constituents and its vicinity is mediated by the organism as a whole and this creates a certain ‘distance’ between physical events and behaviour. However, these claims only make sense if we agree to consider organisms as wholes rather than endorsing mechanistic-causal explanations of them. Suffice it to refer to Tallis’ own argument against the priority of micro-level explanations: by accepting such explanations, we may well lose sight of the phenomenon to be explained, in this case the living beings perceived as behaving according to signal/noise distinctions or in any oriented way. Tallis’ argument also seems to provide a useful resource for undermining attempts to “naturalize” the “aboutness” of living organisms’ behaviours (cf. Tallis, 2021, p. 208). There still remains a lot to be said to clarify how the living beings’ orientated behaviour relates to “intentionality” as Tallis understands it, but it is not satisfactory to claim that here aboutness is present and there it is absent.

While the status of living organisms continues to be debated, it is clear that the decision to exclude signal/noise differentiations from nature is based on a very abstract and theoretically laden idea of nature. The separation of ‘what-is’ from what ought to be is a conceptual construction. In other words, ‘free agency’ and ‘material world’ are theoretical correlates. The idea of a ‘material nature’ is not viewpoint-independent and should not be presented as such. By identifying nature with ‘material world’, Tallis in fact adopts a physicist’s point of view with regard to nature, at the same time as he attempts to demonstrate that this view is agenda-dependent and thus relative. Instead of implicitly referring to an irrelative, agenda-independent nature (“habits of nature”, “material nature”), we should perhaps generalize Tallis’ own attempt to implement the idea of agenda-dependency and accept it as the only legitimate starting point. In my opinion, this amounts

⁷ The contemporary organizational accounts of living organisms are relevant but may not be philosophically satisfactory since they typically claim to be able to naturalize teleology and normativity. In philosophy, the situation is more ambiguous and more promising, as attested to by discussions (e.g., Brender, 2013) around the works of Merleau-Ponty (1963), Thompson (2007), or Varela, Thompson & Rosch (2016). In any case, Tallis seems to reject the idea that living beings’ responses to stimuli are truly *responses*, that is, behaviour that is regulated by the organism as a whole and hence dependent on a breadth of view that transcends the level of physical causality. He claims that apart from what human intentionality may contribute to it, an organism’s response is “caused by something that happens to it” (Tallis, 2021, p. 212).

⁸ Thompson, for example, illustrates this idea by referring to a bacterium swimming toward a higher density of nutrition (Thompson, 2007, pp. 74–75, 154, 157–58). Tallis refuses to understand such behaviour as intentionality-driven and claims that it “has *nothing to do* with intentionality” (Tallis, 2021, p. 214, note 3; emphasis added). I agree with Tallis when he refuses to see intentionality as “a physical property absorbed in the law-governed causal network of the natural or physical world” (Tallis, 2021, p. 208), but on my view, this *does not* prevent us from claiming that single-cell organisms “have ‘directedness’ toward certain features of the environment” (Tallis, 2021, p. 208). Here and elsewhere, Tallis seems to accept a causal explanation of life, despite the fact that this contradicts what he tells us about the epistemological status of causality.

to describing human agency related to a lifeworld imbued with sense (in which animal behaviour appears orientated), rather than an ‘outworldly’ agency that introduces ‘ought’ into ‘what-is’ only to subsequently find itself limited in this activity.

Finally, there is one more important implication. When Tallis claims that human agents are *outside of the world*, we may in fact need to understand this as a claim that they are *outside of science*.⁹ These are two very different claims, of course, but Tallis seems to pass from the latter to the former without notice. Evidence that human intentionality and freedom remain outside of the scope of scientific theoretical models of nature does not support the idea that humans are ‘metaphysically’ outside of nature. The reason Tallis passes from one claim to the other seems to be connected with his tendency to identify nature with a certain scientific interpretation of nature, namely the physicalist interpretation.

Nevertheless, Tallis’ position with regard to the epistemological and ontological status of nature is more complicated. In some passages, he resorts to ontologically realistic claims, such as that “[c]hange, instability, the generation of events is [. . .] in nature’s starter pack, implicit in the Big Bang, and is present in all that follows” (Tallis, 2021, p. 82) or that scientific “speculation is free but nature calls the shots when it is a matter of separating true from false” (Tallis, 2021, p. 50). Even a seemingly negative claim that the “privileges or differentiations” introduced by scientific investigation cannot be attributed to “nature itself” (Tallis, 2021, p. 56) is actually an ontologically realistic claim. The fact that some aspects of nature are introduced into it on the basis of a human-originated scientific manipulation does not provide any foundation for claims about “nature itself.” These claims are presented as viewpoint-independent and hence pass over in silence their own agenda-dependency. Similarly, the ambiguous concept of the “habits of nature,” “the uniformity of [nature’s] manner of unfolding” (Tallis, 2021, p. 173), seems problematic since it again contradicts the idea of the agenda-dependency of our knowledge of nature. At least in some passages, Tallis interprets the concept realistically, for example when he claims that free agents step outside the habits of nature (Tallis, 2021, p. 50). He also seems to sometimes lean toward a realistic reading of the results of science. For example, he speaks about “the material world with its habits captured in the laws of science” (Tallis, 2021, p. 144) and notes that progress in science is “closing in” on the habits on nature (Tallis, 2021, p. 52).

Although ontologically realistic claims are quite frequent in the book, Tallis eventually explains that he aims to hold that *causes* are not in nature itself (Tallis, 2021, p. 70) which is less radical and less problematic. Tallis also clarifies that he adheres to a *negative* concept of nature and that he understands it as a limit of our knowledge (Tallis, 2021, pp. 69–70). Similarly, in Appendix A, Tallis explicitly rejects both realist and anti-realist interpretations of the laws of nature. Despite these elucidations, however, Tallis does not go so far as to acknowledge that the scientific picture of nature is not measured merely against the (presumably) agenda-independent dimensions of nature “itself”, “habits of nature”, or an ineffable limit, but rather against a human-scale agenda-dependent lifeworld.

⁹ Tallis corrects himself when he writes that “*the scientific gaze cannot accommodate free will*” (Tallis, 2021, p. 167; emphasis added).

Conclusion

The considerations presented in the previous sections do not undermine Tallis' arguments for the existence of free agency. He captures an important aspect of human existence when he invites us to see the "material world" as a pool of potential "handles" for our agency. However, there is an almost hyperbolic (early-Heideggerian, Sartrean?) pragmatism in this humanism. Our capacity to requisition elements of our environment for the realization of our agendas does not seem to substantiate the idea that agency is unilaterally shaping a "material" nature from its virtual outside. I agree with Tallis that things appear as agenda-dependent, but I do not follow him when he depicts this dependency as unidirectional. To view agency as ultimately independent of affordances comes close to viewing it *from nowhere*, which is an approach against which Tallis warns us when the question is of naturalization. Agency is not situated outside of the world, it is rather characterized by what Plessner described as excentric positionality.

Connectedly, even if there seems to be no good reason to claim that animals have a capacity for adopting propositional attitudes, we may need to carefully consider what motivates Tallis' refusal to understand their relation to the environment as a rudimentary form of intentionality. Drawing the distinction between living beings' orientation toward their environment and human agency as strictly as he does is motivated by his concern that intentionality not be reduced to the effect of causes. That is, emphasizing the discontinuity between animal and human behaviour is a vehicle to counterweight the science-derived tendency to collapse the distance between agency and events in the world. The flip side of this emphasis, however, is that we lose sight of important aspects of intentionality and agency, such as their original passivity, or the continuity between animal and human bodily behaviour.

To appreciate these aspects one would also have to implement a different idea of nature than that presented in modern physics. Tallis convincingly explains why the laws of nature described by science must be understood as viewpoint- and agency-dependent and therefore why they cannot explain agency. I believe that this central claim of the Tallis' *Freedom* needs to be generalized and applied to all of our claims about nature. The laws of natural science are unnatural, but so is the "material world" requisitioned by Tallis' "conscious subject" as a handle for its actions. The agency driven by propositional attitudes does not intervene in an agenda-free, "material" world, but rather takes up and transforms the non-scientific and non-theoretical agendas that are dispersed in the lifeworld as the everyday relevances of things.

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