THE ONTOLOGY OF FREEDOM

JAMES TARTAGLIA

**Abstract**

I begin by clarifying Tallis’s revisionary terminology, showing how he redraws the lines of the traditional debate about free will by classifying himself as a compatibilist, when in standard terms he is an incompatibilist. I then examine what I take to be the two main lines of argument in *Freedom*, which I call the Mysterian Argument and the Intentionality Argument. I argue that neither can do the required work on its own, so I ask how they are supposed to combine. I then argue that a commitment to the ontological priority of everydayness, of the kind suggested in chapters 5 and 6 of *Freedom*, might combine the arguments in such a way as to secure Tallis’s conclusion. I conclude that the argument of *Freedom* requires positive metaphysical commitment of a kind Tallis has yet to provide.

1. **Natural Born Incompatibilist**

*Freedom* was written for academics and general readers alike, and both groups will appreciate its strong central message:

Intentionality is non-physical and its difference from the physical world is what allows us to scientifically investigate that world. So rather than our scientific picture of reality being at odds with freedom, the fact that we have this picture proves we are free.

What might puzzle the academic philosophers among Tallis’s readers, however, is that although this would be a neat argument for a libertarian dualist to make, Tallis rejects both dualism and libertarianism. Instead he endorses what he calls ‘compatibilism’, a term standardly used to refer to the view, popular among materialists, that we can be both free and determined. And yet Tallis also rejects materialism and determinism.

Thus whilst Tallis may identify as a compatibilist, he seems to have precious little in common with that tradition. For Hume, the archetypal compatibilist, the idea of a clash between free will and determinism is not to be taken seriously – it is a pseudo-problem generated by a philosophical confusion over the concept of free will (Hume 1748, p. 95). For Hobbes, the founder of the tradition in the modern era, the legitimate concept of freedom is such that the unobstructed flow of a river can be just as free as a human action (Hobbes 1654, p. 38). Tallis could hardly see things more differently.[[1]](#footnote-1) He never quibbles with the concept of freedom for which we are ‘genuine initiators’ (Tallis 2021, 130). He thinks consciousness is the key to freedom, and he takes the problem extremely seriously – it disturbed him as a teenager and he still thinks there is, ‘no more significant or profound philosophical question’ (Tallis 2021, xi). He defends freedom by rejecting determinism, the standard libertarian strategy, and even the book’s subtitle, ‘An Impossible Reality’, suggests incompatibilist tendencies: compatibilists try to remove the appearance of impossibility from freedom, Tallis puts it on his cover.

To me, Tallis looks like a natural born incompatibilist – the freedom-affirming variety (aka libertarian), as opposed to the determinism-affirming variety (aka hard determinist). So why call himself a compatibilist (aka soft determinist)? The simple answer is that he does not mean that freedom is compatible with determinism, he means that freedom is compatible with the ‘habits’ of nature. This raises the question: what is the difference between being determined and following ‘habits’?

1. **Laws and Habits**

The distinction between laws and habits is new with *Freedom*. It does not feature in the earlier discussions of free will in *Of Time and Lamentation* (2017: chapter 12) and *Seeing Ourselves* (2020: chapter 6). What it allows Tallis to do is underline the difference between the “uniform unfolding of nature that is not mandated from without” (Tallis 2021, p. 27), namely the habits, and the laws which human beings draw up in order to make generalizations about those habits. The “habits are not distinct from nature” (Tallis 2021, p. 173) but the laws are; they are “unnatural” and exist in a “virtual space outside of nature” (Tallis 2021, p. 29). The habits are “unpack[ed]” (Tallis 2021, xiv), “made visible” (Tallis 2021, p. 51), or “revealed” (Tallis 2021, p. 98) as laws. This process is always incomplete, however, since “at any given moment in the history of science there is a separation between the habits of nature and the laws of science” (Tallis 2021, p. 29). And the incompleteness is “not just a temporary state of affairs”, because “what is picked out by the laws of science or the sciences is *not* inherent in nature as its intrinsic habits or master-habit” (Tallis 2021, p. 47). Rather, what is picked out are aspects of nature’s habits as they relate to human interests – human perspectives on the habits.

Tallis is certainly right that laws, being theoretical generalizations about reality rather than features of it, can hardly make our decisions for us. That said, I doubt many have been confused on this point, as opposed to not entirely clear. Saying the laws bind us is just shorthand for saying we are bound by an inner impetus in nature, an impetus the laws try to describe. In Tallis’s terms, then, the real concern has always been that the “implacable” (Tallis 2021, p. 80) habits of nature are making our decisions for us, such that if nature unfolds in accordance with its habits, and we are part of nature, then our lives unfold in accordance with the habits and not through our own decisions. Even if we grant to Tallis that the laws provide necessarily incomplete and fragmentary human perspectives on the habits, the predicament remains, since whether known, unknown or unknowable, the habits might still be making our decisions for us. All that really matters is whether the way in which nature unfolds in accordance with its habits is compatible with freedom or not.

Tallis thinks it is, of course, which is why he calls himself a compatibilist; and it is interesting to note how his terminological innovations redraw the lines of the debate. One effect, ironically, is to brush aside as an irrelevance what is standardly called ‘compatibilism’, namely the Hobbes and Hume tradition. For if freedom is simply a matter of not being bound by chains (for a human) or obstructed by a dam (for a river), then it is obviously compatible with the habits of nature. Since for Tallis it is a substantive question whether or not freedom is compatible with these habits, then, traditional compatibilism is irrelevant. So whereas in the pre-Tallis incarnation of the debate there were two incompatibilist options (reject freedom or reject determinism) plus a compatibilist one (accept both), for Tallis there is only an incompatibilist and a compatibilist option, each descended from what were previously the two incompatibilist options.

The reason Tallis has redrawn the lines of the debate in this manner, I suggest, is that he only ever took the two incompatibilist options seriously, as you would expect from a natural born incompatibilist (in pre-Tallis terminology). He improves on these options, as he sees it, by rejecting determinism as a misreading of what the laws of nature tell us about the world, and in doing so removes the option of either accepting or rejecting determinism which had before generated two different incompatibilist positions. Then, in the place of determinism as a challenge to freedom, he gives us habits, such that the only remaining issue is whether or not freedom is compatible with those habits. So, all in a flash, the two options Tallis takes seriously are adjusted in line with his scepticism about laws to become the only options. The option he prefers gets to be called ‘compatibilism’, a label which always had connotations of moderateness and reconciliation, despite the fact that the option it replaces used to be called ‘incompatibilist libertarianism’, a label with offputtingly uncompromising and bold connotations. You have to admire the ingenuity, even if it does create a hazardous terrain for the unwary.

So why does Tallis think freedom is compatible with nature’s habits? He takes it for granted that it is incompatible with determinism, so why should the habits be any different? At least one answer he provides – the one emphasised in the book’s concluding ‘Coda’ – is that we could never know that the habits are incompatible with freedom, given that the laws of nature provide necessarily incomplete accounts of those habits. For all we could ever know, then, it might be that the habits do not completely account for how nature unfolds, thereby leaving space for human freedom to influence the unfolding. Or another related option would be that whether or not the habits completely account for the unfolding of nature, free will itself is a manifestation of some of these habits. So either the habits are not entirely responsible for how nature unfolds, or else they include our freedom in a way we could never understand.

This argument is essentially ‘Mysterian’, with freedom secured through an appeal to our constitutional ignorance.[[2]](#footnote-2) In short, there will always be a distance between our laws and the habits, so we could never know that the habits rule out freedom. Thus the Coda begins with Tallis describing the two options in the debate as follows: either freedom is an illusion (it is incompatible with the habits) or “natural science, and the simplified metaphysics we take from it, are incomplete” (Tallis 2021, p. 167). He then says, rather definitively, that “This volume has been *devoted* to arguing for the second conclusion” [my emphasis]. The Coda proceeds to further reinforce the Mysterian reading by explaining the subtitle: free will seems impossible to us, but we know it is a reality, so it is a mystery – one suitably expressed by the paradoxical formula, ‘impossible reality’.

If that really were the essence of Tallis’s solution, then I would find it both disappointing and perplexing. It would be disappointing because it could only secure the possibility of freedom, not its actuality. This is because claims to ignorance are two-sided: if we cannot know the habits are incompatible with freedom, we cannot know they are compatible with it either, so rather than affirming our freedom, a Pyrrhonian suspension of judgement would seem more appropriate. And it would be perplexing too, because although mystery dominates the Coda, and is proclaimed in the book’s subtitle, it was not Tallis’s emphasis in the ‘Overture’ at the beginning, nor indeed for the majority of the book thereafter, not so far as I could tell; apart from the subtitle, the mystery remains low key until the Coda. The majority of the book, in common with the previous treatments in *Of Time and Lamentation* and *Seeing Ourselves*, presents a far bolder and more robust solution, the key elements of which are intentionality, time and possibility.

1. **Intentionality, Time and Possibility**

Intentionality is at the heart of Tallis’s philosophy in general, so it is unsurprising to find it at the heart of his position on freedom. In his wider philosophy he uses it to bring attention to our uniqueness as *The Explicit Animal* (Tallis 1991), both in our distance from other animals and from the rest of the natural world. Intentionality plays a similar role in dissolving the challenge to free will, since it is the unique feature which allows us to step outside of nature, in thought and imagination, so as to divert it in a direction that suits our purposes. Intentionality is the feature which initially set us apart from nature and the other animals, and it has taken us further away ever since. As Tallis says, the virtual space of intentionality, in which our minds join in a historically expanding sphere of collective knowledge, is “vast and ever-expanding” (Tallis 2021, p. 156).

The intentionality of our conscious minds grants us “double status as parts of nature who act on nature from a virtual outside” (Tallis 2021, p. 55), where “virtual outside” is defined as “the distance between intentional consciousness and its objects” (Tallis 2021, p. 51). So if I think about it being a hot day, for instance, the hotness of the day is incorporated into the content of my propositional attitude. In this way, the intentionality of mind places nature in “inverted commas”, as Tallis puts it (Tallis 2021, p. 49), or pulls it into the “logical space of reasons”, to echo Sellars (Tallis 2021, p. 126), thereby allowing us to “exploit” (Tallis 2021, pp. 54, 132) the habits of nature from this virtual outside. My body is wired into the nature, such that on a hot day I start to sweat, for instance, but my mind keeps the heat at an intentional distance which provides me with options. Depending on my aims and purposes, I may decide to put up with the heat because I want to get a suntan, or I may head directly for the air-conditioned indoors because the heat is no longer pleasant and is putting me off my book.

It is only from the standpoint of the intentional mind, Tallis argues, that there is tensed time and possibility. On the face of it, then, you might jump to the conclusion that this single observation defuses the problem of free will in one fell swoop, since you can hardly worry that an open future of different possibilities to freely choose between is ruled out by the nature of the physical world, if both tensed time and possibility are completely absent from that world, being rather projections of mind. As Tallis puts it, “there are zero physical possible futures” (Tallis 2021, p. 100) but “once the future is possible [because nature has become the intentional object of conscious minds], more than one future is possible” (Tallis 2021, p. 101). Or more memorably: “We shape the future by making it first exist” (Tallis 2021, p. 101).

To see how this idea might be put into action, consider an everyday situation in which it seems you are free to choose tea or coffee; you like both, you just need to decide. The determinist challenge is that only one ‘choice’[[3]](#footnote-3) is possible, tea let us say, because given the physical state of the world at the time of the Big Bang, and given the laws of nature that led reality from the Big Bang to your ‘decision’, your hand was predetermined to reach for the tea at the moment you thought you were enacting a free decision. Freedom is an illusion because the only possible future is the one in which you ‘choose’ tea, says the hard determinist. But if tensed time and possibility are mental projections absent from nature, however, then this challenge starts to look dubious, since nature cannot be necessitating that one of two possible choices is going to be made in the future, if possibility and the future are absent from nature.

This conclusion would be too quick, however. Given that nature unfolds in accordance with its habits, and that we can never know what all its habits amount to, we could never be in a position to know that the different futures we envisage for ourselves really are possible. Viewed from the intentional stance which reveals a world of tensed time and possibility, our knowledge that nature unfolds in accordance with its own impersonal habits undermines our confidence in the options we can envisage, making us realise that their possibility may be merely apparent. This is why Tallis is careful to note that although the intentional introduction of tensed time into reality ensures that “when there is any future, there is a range of futures”, it remains the case that “None of them will be realized, of course, if they are contrary to the habits of nature” (Tallis 2021, p. 101). As such, he clearly does not think the Intentionality Argument defuses the challenge to freedom all on its own. He realises the problem can be reformulated to cross the boundary between nature inside and (relatively?) outside of intentionality.

Now the argument which Tallis emphasises throughout the book – the striking one which headlines in its press-releases, and which I opened this article with – is that the scientific laws we have discovered presuppose the ability of the intentional mind to detach itself from actuality in order to choose from possibilities. On reflection, however, this seems to be simply one consequence of the Intentionality Argument, albeit a highly significant and relevant one. Tallis’s headliner points out that the scientist must envisage possibilities and have aims in order to design experiments that isolate some factors while revealing others, thereby “teasing” (Tallis 2021, p. 37) laws from the undifferentiated morass of nature’s habits; “Experiments that go wrong are as natural as those that go right”, he says, but they are not “as respectful of the scientists’ intentions” (Tallis 2021, p. 40). But although you can see why Tallis would want to emphasise freedom’s role in scientific investigation, given that the laws which scientists discover are used in the standard determinist case against free will, this is only one example of the freedom facilitated by intentionality. And as we have just seen, an appeal to intentionality cannot solve the problem all by itself, because the traditional problem survives into Tallis’s distinction between nature in and (relatively?) out of intentionality. As such, it seems that Tallis’s headliner can be defused with the simple observation that absolutely everything the scientists do in order to tease laws from the habits of nature could just be part and parcel of nature following its impersonal and implacable habits.

Neither the Mysterian Argument nor the Intentionality Argument can work on their own, then, so it seems clear that to understand Tallis’s position, we will need to understand how they fit together. There is one clear connection, of course, which is that it is because of our intentional distance from the world that we can never fully understand nature’s habits in terms of scientific laws. But if that were the only connection, the mystery would simply be a consequence of the Intentionality Argument, with the latter left to do all the work in accounting for free will – which as we have just seen, it cannot. The Mysterian argument must have some important role to play, then, especially given Tallis’s Coda, which makes it perfectly clear that he considers it an extremely hard worker. There must be another piece to the puzzle.

1. **Connecting the Arguments**

In Chapter 5, the influence of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty becomes prominent, as Tallis engages in phenomenological reflection on our everyday engagement with the world. Using Merleau-Ponty’s terminology, he says we are “embodied subjects” who bring to our encounters with the world a “sedimentation of tensed time” (Tallis 2021, p. 145). Merleau-Ponty’s notion of embodied subjectivity was an attempt to distance us from ontology rooted in ‘objective thought’, which might be glossed as ontology based on our theories of how we *reason things must be*, rather than the messy and ambiguous way *they actually appear*. Thus the notion of embodied subjectivity is equally awkward for dualism, for which embodiment and subjectivity are distinct; idealism, for which subjectivity is primary; and materialism, for which embodiment is primary – yet as Merleau-Ponty sees it, the phenomenology presents our situation as being one of embodied subjectivity. Any adequate ontology must respect this phenomenology, he thinks – and perhaps Tallis does too. Another relevance of embodied subjectivity for Merleau-Ponty was to critique Sartre’s libertarian notion of unbounded freedom, since the freedom of an embodied subject is always limited by its embodiment; and Tallis certainly agrees about that (Tallis 2021, pp. 163-5).

Heidegger is probably the main philosophical influence on Tallis, however, and when he relates his position to Heidegger’s, saying that, “Our status as “beings whose being is an issue for itself” imports “becausation” into the universe” (Tallis 2021, p. 152), a substantive connection between the Intentionality and Mysterian arguments begins to emerge. Reflecting on the Heideggerian idea that everyday practical engagement has ontological priority over our scientific picture of the world, Tallis says he has been trying to restore notions such as free activity “to the place where they belong”, namely everyday life. “That people exert power, have capacities, face the world, etc.,’ he says, ‘are things that we can see and feel” (Tallis 2021, p. 152).

If we return to the Mysterian argument with these influences in mind, it appears in a new light. We can now interpret it not as the claim that ignorance holds open the possibility of freedom, but rather that the freedom central to our everyday engagement with the world can never be usurped by our scientific understanding. Our scientific understanding must always be incomplete, because it cannot incorporate intentionality, and it must always refer back to the everyday engagement which makes scientific understanding possible. If this interpretation is correct, then the connection between the two arguments is essentially a Heideggerian claim about the ontological priority of everydayness. Or a Merleau-Pontyan claim, since they were at one on this issue; as Merleau-Ponty memorably put it at the beginning of *Phenomenology of Perception*, “every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is” (Merleau-Ponty 1945, ix).

Reading Tallis this way not only explains the relevance of the Mysterian Argument, it also shores up the Intentionality Argument. For suppose we grant that there cannot be two possible futures in nature except when it comes under the gaze of intentional consciousness. Fair enough, but that does not mean they are genuine possibilities, nor that the consciousness envisaging them has any power over which one comes about; maybe that is entirely due to nature’s “habits of unfolding that are not negotiable” (Tallis 2021, p. 95). But if the everyday world of possibility and tensed time has ontological priority over nature and its habits, however, then this objection is undermined. For in that case, the world of freedom and possibility – the explicit and articulate one which intentional consciousness finds when it looks at nature – is the world which scientific understanding must answer to. To illustrate the idea boldly: if everyday life assures us both coffee and tea are options, then science could never be right to tell us that only tea is possible. The reason our scientific accounts of nature and its habits can never be completed in such a way as to conflict with our freedom is that science cannot account for intentionality, and hence it cannot account for a positive feature of the ontologically primary reality which intentionality reveals, that positive feature being freedom. The scientific picture is not just unthreatening as regards freedom, it is necessarily inadequate.

1. **Tell me more**

Without some kind of ontological prioritising of everyday life, we have seen that the Intentionality Argument leaves open the possibility that freedom is negated by the habits of nature – of the various apparent possibilities we might envisage for the future, nature’s habits might nevertheless ensure that only one is ever genuine. Similarly, unless everyday life is ontologically prioritized, all the Mysterian argument can show is that nature might be compatible with freedom *for all we know*, given that nature is something we can never completely understand. With an appropriate ontological claim in place, however, the situation is transformed. Now the Intentionality Argument will show not only that freedom is exclusively confined to the everyday realm of tensed time and possibility, but also that it is guaranteed a place there, in reality itself, by our common experience. The Mysterian Argument, on the other hand, will show that our scientific accounts of nature can never account for freedom, and consequently can never challenge it either.

If this analysis is along the right lines, then the argument of *Freedom* needs some metaphysical backing, and of the kind which prioritises the everyday in some manner or another. The problem, however, is that apart from in chapters 5 and 6, where the influences of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty come to the fore, it seems very much as if Tallis accords ontological priority to nature and its habits, rather than nature as seen through the temporal, modal and normative lens of intentionality. When he talks about “a world atomized by our interests” (Tallis 2021, p. 69) or “the irruption of viewpoint into a universe that has no privileged locations” (Tallis 2017, p. 422), the impression is of a metaphysical realist who distinguishes the human take on nature from nature itself, considering the latter to self-evidently possess ontological priority.

Flicking through various works by Tallis I find this impression reinforced time and again, but the strongest reinforcement, perhaps, comes from the Mysterian element of *Freedom* – for unless the independent nature which science tries to objectively describe has ontological priority, I can see no reason to describe freedom as inherently mysterious. In everyday life, freedom strikes me as quite unmysterious – when I finish this paragraph I will make either coffee or tea; I will decide when I get to the kitchen; no big deal. There is only a mystery if you presuppose an essentially scientific ontology, because then the mystery arises from there being something science should be able to explain but cannot. The mystery, in short, is only there from the perspective of science and naturalistic ontology. But I have argued that Tallis needs an ontology which privileges everyday life in order for his argument to go through.

The simplest question to ask at this junture is: what actually is Tallis’s ontology? It is a very good question, one I have often asked myself. He has definitely been heavily influenced by Heidegger, and Heidegger’s everyday-life-affirming ‘fundamental ontology’ might well do the job for the argument of *Freedom* – but Tallis wrote another book explaining why he rejects it. He reads Heidegger as equating the question of the nature of being with the question of the meaning of being, with the consequence that “the notion of the individual as a living, physical body is rejected”, thereby resulting in an unacceptable “emptying of the individual” (Tallis 2002, p. 183). So Heidegger’s ontology is out, then, and the motivation seems to flow directly from the commitment to realism we were just talking about.

Tallis clearly finds Merleau-Ponty’s ontology more conducive, given its emphasis on the body, while nevertheless worrying that it “sounds dangerously close to idealism” (Tallis 2020, p. 327).[[4]](#footnote-4) If that is indeed Tallis’s ontology, however, then I would love for him to explain what it basically amounts to, since I have never managed to work it out from either *The Structure of Behaviour* or *Phenomenology of Perception* (and not for want of trying); note that Merleau-Ponty was working on a new ontology when he died.

What about the more traditional metaphysical options, those which the likes of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty were reacting against? Well, Tallis is well-known for his rejection of materialism, but he also rejects dualism (Tallis 2018, pp. 65-6), panpsychism (Tallis 2018, pp. 111-4) and transcendental idealism (Tallis 2018, pp. 53-75); and as regards the last of these, he says he intends his essential misgivings with Kant’s idealism to apply to other forms of idealism too (Tallis 2018, p. 54).

The implicit ontology of *Freedom*, however, does seem to owe a great debt to Kant, especially when Tallis is “out-Humeing Hume” (Tallis 2021, p. 67) by arguing for a “splinter-and-reconnect” process (Tallis 2021, p. 65) in which the mind imposes distinctions upon nature, then reconnects what it pulled apart by projecting causal relations upon the world. The key difference, of course, is that Tallis’s “continually unfolding universe” (Tallis 2021, p. 67) with its “unbroken – and seemingly unbreakable – habits” (Tallis 2021, xiv), cannot be Kant’s unknowable things-in-themselves, given that Tallis knows things about it – that it unfolds, has habits, etc. In this respect, I find his Kantianism reminiscent of Sartre.[[5]](#footnote-5) Consider the well-known passage near the beginning of *Being and Nothingness* where Sartre tells us that “it is man who destroys his cities through the agency of earthquakes” (Sartre 1943, p. 9), since without the judgement of a conscious being, a natural event such as an earthquake will “merely modify the distribution of masses of being” (Sartre 1943, p. 8). Like Tallis, Sartre seems happy to take it for granted that there is some kind of minimally informative description of the physical world (masses, distribution) which is not infected by our splintering-and-reconnecting minds.

But how low does mind go? Tallis has this to say:

the world as we divide it up – and then connect [it] up – is not simply as it exists in itself in the absence of consciousness. How deep goes this ability to shape, through our interest-directed attention [to] that which we encounter as the Given, is not something I am qualified to say. Nor, so far as I can tell, is anyone else. (Tallis 2021, p. 70)

Maybe nobody knows, but Tallis makes some confident estimates. The mental influence cannot go so deep as to make ‘continually unfolding’ and ‘habits’ mere impositions of mind, otherwise these descriptions could not be used to draw a contrast with the (more) articulated world of possibility under the gaze of intentional consciousness. And yet unfolding according to habits sounds like a process to me. In *On Time and Lamentation*, Tallis tells us that,

Processes, just as much as events, are lifted out of the flow of the world, separated from a material substrate, by being cut out with perceptual or, more often, verbal scissors, in accordance with our interests and our judgement of saliency. (Tallis 2017, p. 314)

[I’ve changed this back because I want the ambiguity here]This ‘flow’ cannot be a flow in tensed time nor a process, and the terminology of ‘material substrate’ must have application to a mind-independent reality.

Perhaps Tallis is a principled agnostic on ontological matters, on the grounds that we are both ‘world-constituting and an object in the world’, with the result that a ‘paradox haunts any endeavour to assume a metaphysical standpoint’ (Tallis 2020: 335). That would make a lot of sense, because it would explain why he lays so much emphasis on everyday life, while nevertheless seeming to take metaphysical realism for granted. His headline argument, remember, is a reminder of the everydayness of scientists exploiting the habits of nature, so that they can isolate scientific laws which suit human purposes; that is why he is at pains to remind us that Robert Boyle was a ‘bewigged individual’ (Tallis 2021, p. 38), for instance. And yet what are these scientists exploiting in their everyday lives? Tallis’s answer is: the habits of a nature which exists independently of their interests. Perhaps this shifting of perspectives – from everyday life to (more-or-less) mind-independent nature and back again – reflects a principled metaphysical agnosticism adopted in recognition of our “double status as parts of nature who act on nature from a virtual outside” (Tallis 2021, p. 55).

That may be what Tallis has in mind, but it would be to the detriment of the argument of *Freedom*, if I am right that it is an argument which depends on ontologically privileging everyday life. Principled agnosticism seems unlikely to be Tallis’s considered view, however, considering that he tells us that his concern is with “the metaphysics rather than the drama of freedom” (Tallis 2021, p. 88) and that his account is “less ontologically expensive than Sartre’s system” (Tallis 2021, p. 235). But how much does Tallis think he has spent? How much does he think Sartre spent, for that matter?

1. **Interlude: A Visit to the Ice-Cream Shop**

‘Hiya, come to look at my ice-cream again, have you? Lovely to see you, as always. Are you going to tell me your favourite flavour today? I’ve got vanilla, strawberry, chocolate, pistachio and tutti frutti.’

‘You’re agnostic? You can’t be if you know you don’t like vanilla, strawberry or tutti frutti. Just try the other two and make up your mind. If you find you don’t like chocolate or pistachio either then I can always get others in – rum and raisin, bubble-gum, you name it. Why, you must know all of them, what with all the time you spend hanging around ice-cream shops! Or you could make up your own – didn’t know you could do that, did you? Ice-cream fanatics often do, I bet you’d come up with something really nice!’

1. **A Tip from the Ghosts of Metaphysic**

Tallis and I are both fans of F.H. Bradley, so I was pleased to see *Freedom* end (apart from the Appendices)[[6]](#footnote-6) with a quotation from Bradley: “Metaphysics is the finding of bad reasons for what we believe upon instinct, but to find these reasons is no less an instinct” (Bradley 1893: xiv). Bradley said that to lighten the mood in the preface to his masterpiece, *Appearance and Reality*; he wanted the reader to know that he did not take himself and his project too seriously. Bradley did not always feel so light-hearted, however, and elsewhere wrote that, “The shades nowhere speak without blood, and the ghosts of Metaphysic accept no substitute. They reveal themselves only to that victim whose life they have drained, and, to converse with shadows, he himself must become a shade” (Bradley 1914, p. 14).[[7]](#footnote-7) This suggests that, in certain moods at least, Bradley might not have approved of my comparison between metaphysics and ice-cream.

Tallis does not think there can be a complete scientific account of reality. He says:

as we progress to ever more fundamental and basic laws, the last drop of the particular is squeezed out and we have a featureless universe. A world entirely described or explained by or reduced to (for example) E=mc2 would not be a very enticing tourist destination. […] The Theory of Everything, as The Theory of Nothing-in-Particular, comes to look a bit like The Theory of Nothing. If the account of the universe seen through the lens of fundamental (mathematical) physics were the only true (or most nearly true) account of how things really are, then it would leave the rich variety of the experienced world unexplained. (Tallis 2021, p. 33)

Bradley thought that what Tallis calls the “rich variety of the experienced world” was ultimately just appearance, not the true reality. While Bradley and Tallis agree that the true reality could not be captured by science, however, only Bradley makes a positive metaphysical commitment to the true reality being of the same kind as the experienced world, but richer:

That the glory of this world in the end is appearance leaves the world more glorious, if we feel it a show of some fuller splendour; but the sensuous curtain is a deception and a cheat, if it hides some colourless movement of atoms, some spectral woof of impalpable abstractions, or unearthly ballet of bloodless categories. (Bradley 1883, p. 533)

Bradley was not according ontological priority to everyday life in the manner of Heidegger, to be sure, but Tallis does not like Heidegger’s approach anyway, finding that it sacrifices the individual to the general; and his criticism of Kant follows similar lines. In a different way from Heidegger, however, Bradley’s idealism does indeed accord a certain kind of ontological priority, or at least security, to everyday life, since what lies behind the “sensuous curtain” is not “some colourless movement of atoms”, but rather more of the same, only better. Everyday life is not a cheat. As he says, and I am sure Tallis would agree, “we may keep a fast hold upon this, that appearances exist. That is absolutely certain, and to deny it is nonsense. And whatever exists must belong to reality” (Bradley 1893, pp. 131-2).

1. **Conclusion**

The vision that inspires Tallis’s account of freedom, I think, is that if you consider something natural, like the formation of a glacial valley or a spider’s web, then it really does not look an awful lot like an exclusive yacht party for celebrities, or a government meeting to discuss the construction of a new infrastructure of 5G masts. On the face of it, something new and unnatural came along with human beings, and things have been getting more and more unnatural ever since, at least near the surface of planet Earth. The deterministic conviction that our movements are just as natural as those of glaciers or spiders seems to be the product of a misplaced faith in science to explain everything, a faith, or superstition, which results in completely inappropriate conviction being thrown behind a weird *a priori* argument about states of an inexplicable Big Bang which we know hardly anything about, causing a vast chain of subsequent states we know hardly anything about, in accordance with laws we know hardly anything about. It is always worth remembering that before freedom was challenged by faith in science, it was challenged by faith in God – once upon a time, the philosophical issue was whether free will is compatible with God’s knowledge of the future. What are the chances that rational reflection on God (a thousand years ago) and science (today) would reveal the same illusion? Tallis is on exceptionally strong ground in defending freedom, I think.

Nevertheless, I have argued that Tallis’s unique and unprecedented defence of freedom requires ontological commitment. I may be wrong, the argument may work in conjunction with any metaphysical unpinning whatsoever, it may be metaphysically neutral. Another option is that the metaphysics required by the argument is already in place and I have simply failed to spot it. But if I am right that more metaphysical commitment is required, only Tallis can make it. I have made some suggestions about the kind I think would work for the argument, but I may be quite mistaken.

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1. Hume features heavily in *Freedom* – but his views on causation, not freedom. Tallis will be replying to a Humean compatibilist in this symposium, namely Stephen Leach – I bet they find little to agree about. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ‘Mysterian’ is standardly used to describe a particular kind of materialist (non-)account of consciousness. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The disagreement between traditional compatibilism and hard determinism largely boils down to a disagreement about whether to place ‘choice’ in inverted commas, I am inclined to think. In this example I will favour the hard determinist’s linguistic intuitions, as I think Tallis instinctively would. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Although he worries that steering so close to idealism may ‘lose me a few philosophical friends’ (Tallis 2020, p. 326), Tallis nevertheless ends up defending Merleau-Ponty. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. You might say that just as our world is “haunted by the possible” [If this is a direct quote, change to double inverted commas it is] (Tallis 2021, p. 98), *Freedom* is haunted by Sartre. Or alternatively, that Sartre’s nothingness lies coiled at the heart of *Freedom* – like a worm. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Like John Coltrane, Tallis finds it hard to stop; a very good thing in both cases. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Bradley says that he wrote this in his notebook ‘some twenty years ago’, so it is contemporaneous with the note Tallis reproduced – I imagine both come from the notebooks he used while writing *Appearance and Reality*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)