

Our unique place in the cosmos?

Against scientific reductionism

DAVID PAPINEAU

FREEDOM

An impossible reality

RAYMOND TALLIS

280pp. Agenda. £25.



Raymond Tallis, 2013

READERS OF A CERTAIN AGE will remember when Raymond Tallis first emerged onto the intellectual stage. In 1988 his book *Not Sausage* was reviewed in the *TLS* by John Sturrock, the then-deputy editor and a distinguished exponent of French post-structuralist thought. As Sturrock explained, Tallis was a consultant in geriatric medicine in Liverpool who had become so agitated by the excesses of French literary theory that he had written a 100,000-word volume about its follies. While Sturrock unsurprisingly felt that the arguments of this “unlikely book” were less than compelling, he allowed that it exposed “real weaknesses and contradictions” in its targets and displayed a “remarkable talent for the confident summarizing of difficult philosophical ideas”.

Since then, Tallis has been a frequent presence in this paper. An archive search finds roughly two hundred items, in which he features as the reviewer as well as reviewee, not to mention as an indefatigable letter writer (starting with a robust two-column response to Sturrock’s review), and even as an anthologized poet (“should find enthusiastic readers for his stern, ingenious iambics” *TLS*, August 25, 1989). Tallis retired from medicine in 2006 to devote himself full-time to writing, and his oeuvre now amounts to thirty-eight published books. His efforts have not gone unrecognized. He has been awarded three honorary doctorates, and in 2014 he served as the lay member on the government panel which assessed philosophy departments for “research excellence” funding.

In his last couple of dozen books or so, Tallis has turned away from literary theory to engage with a new enemy. In his view, the battle with French post-structuralism has largely been won. The new menace in the academy is kowtowing to science. Tallis has no time for those who think that the natural sciences are about to unlock the secrets of human nature. As he sees it, the human mind, blessed with consciousness and informed by culture, operates in ways that escape any scientific analysis. Tallis’s particular targets are those who think that Darwin and neuroscience are about to revolutionize the humanities. In his view, to portray humans as mere products of biological evolution or, even worse, as complexes of neural machinery, is to ignore the very features that make us special.

Tallis has had the better of many skirmishes in this campaign. Enthusiasts for science are often “greedy reductionists”, in Daniel Dennett’s phrase, and Tallis has a sharp eye for their foibles. When advocates of “evolutionary psychology” assert that human behaviour is driven by instincts we share with animals, and that men choose female partners because of their waist-to-hip ratio, Tallis is able to instance the vast

range of human accomplishments that have no counterpart in the animal world. And when those dazzled by new magnetic brain imagery claim that we are now able to understand emotion and crime in neural terms, not to mention music, and literature and art, Tallis can point to the vast gap that remains between contemporary accounts of neural functioning and any detailed explanation of human mentality.

Tallis does not stop with these relatively easy points, however. He objects not just to those greedy reductionists that belittle humans in order to bring them within reach of contemporary science, but to reductionism of any kind. Science’s limitations aren’t temporary. The whole naturalist project of understanding humans scientifically is misguided from the start, says Tallis, for the simple reason that humans stand outside the realm studied by natural science. Humans transcend nature, in his view, because of the way the world is revealed to us in consciousness. When we are awake and active, our minds light up with the glow of awareness, and this enables us to grasp aspects of the complex world around us and order our lives accordingly. Animals have at best a rudimentary version of these gifts. They might have some sense of their immediate surroundings, but this falls well short of the conscious comprehension that suffuses our lives. Our conscious awareness means that we have a “distinctive nature and unique place in the cosmos”, as Tallis puts it, and he insists that no scientific story can explain this away.

As Tallis is well aware, this anti-reductionism runs counter to contemporary philosophical orthodoxy. The majority of philosophers, in the English-speaking world at least, take the view that consciousness is itself part of the material world. Tallis has no patience with this stance. He takes it to be obvious that a physical system of nerves and muscles cannot on its own deliver conscious awareness of anything, and he dismisses any suggestions to the contrary with scorn and a liberal scattering of italics. Many will no doubt share Tallis’s impatience on this issue, and view the consensus among philosophers as just another instance of the way foolish academics have been blinded by the spurious status of the natural sciences. But this underestimates the strength of the case for materialism. The rise of materialist views over the past century is more than a matter of shallow fashion, and Tallis does himself a disservice by dismissing them so quickly.

The reason so many philosophers are materialists is that they don’t see how consciousness can influence the physical world if it isn’t part of it. Contemporary science seems to leave no room for non-physical minds to make any difference to what happens in the brain or the body. It was not always so. Scientific thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries was happy to countenance various kinds of mental forces with the power to affect the movements of our bodies. But more recent advances in biochemistry and physiology seem to leave no room for such an independent mind. You would be hard-pressed nowadays to find a physiologist who does not hold that all mental and bodily activity is entirely driven by electrical and chemical processes. So even if you did believe that non-physical minds existed, they wouldn’t seem to do any causal work. Such minds would be epiphenomenal dangles, impotent effusions that observe the passing show but can do nothing to alter it.

Tallis’s previous writings have skirted this issue, but his new book addresses it head-on. His strategy is to argue that his view is needed to make room for free will. Materialist minds governed by the relentless laws of physics would seem to leave us with no real freedom of choice. In Tallis’s view, only minds that float free of the physical world can truly be said to be free. His materialist opponents will of course dispute this. They will say that placing consciousness inside the physical world, rather than outside it, is precisely the way to explain how our choices make a difference to the course of nature. But Tallis quickly dismisses this stance as yet more materialist casuistry.

So this now leaves us with the question of how Tallis’s transcendent minds manage to influence the material realm. And at this point things get weird. Tallis argues that conscious minds play an active role when scientists investigate nature and discover scientific laws, and so conscious minds must be able to exploit these laws in turn to produce effects in the material world. It is hard to know what to make of this. The argument seems to assume what it needs to prove, and so ends up piling one mystery on top of another. In the end, Tallis himself seems to agree it’s all a terrible puzzle. His book’s subtitle characterizes freedom as “an impossible reality” and by the end of the book he is talking about “the dark heart” of “the mystery of freedom”.

Ultimately, Tallis paints himself into a theoretical corner. Over the years his writing has been a force for good, exposing overblown claims made on behalf of science and puncturing the pretensions of those who oversimplify complex human realities. But here he allows his suspicion of science to run away with him and land him in a metaphysical mess. Confident impatience with the opposition is not always the best recipe for philosophical success. Tallis might have done better to reflect on the reasons that have persuaded many metaphysicians to make their peace with materialism. ■

David Papineau’s most recent book is The Metaphysics of Sensory Experience, which was published last year