XI*—MENTAL BALLISTICS OR THE INVOLUNTARINESS OF SPONTANEITY

by Galen Strawson

‘The mind only begins a train of thinking or keeps it in one particular track, but the thoughts introduce one another successively... Whoever will carefully observe what he does when he sets himself down to study, may perceive that he produces none of the thoughts in his mind.’ Abraham Tucker

Abstract It is sometimes said that reasoning, thought and judgement essentially involve action. It is sometimes said that they involve spontaneity, where spontaneity is taken to be connected in some constitutive way with action—intentional, voluntary and indeed free action. There is, however, a fundamental respect in which reason, thought and judgement neither are nor can be a matter of action; and any spontaneity they involve can be connected with freedom only when the word ‘freedom’ is used in the Spinozan-Kantian sense according to which freedom is a matter of ‘rational necessitation’, determination by reason.

I

It is sometimes said that reasoning, thought and judgement essentially involve action. It is sometimes said, in Kantian style, that they involve spontaneity, where spontaneity is taken to be connected in some constitutive way with action: intentional, voluntary and indeed free action. There is, however, a fundamental respect in which reason, thought and judgement neither are nor can be a matter of intentional action; and the same goes (a fortiori) for belief and belief-formation. I think the point is

1. 1765: 14–15. When I cite a work I give its original publication date (or sometimes the date of its completion), while the page reference is to the edition listed in the bibliography.
2. For recent examples see Burge, 1998 and Peacocke, 1999.
3. McDowell, 1994, 1998a, 1998b stresses the notion of spontaneity in judgement and links it to the notion of freedom, but there is I think no incompatibility between the account of spontaneity given here and the Kantian core of McDowell’s view (see Section X below).
4. So that the thesis of ‘doxastic voluntarism’ is false in any remotely robust formulation. For a good recent discussion, see Audi, 1999. See also Wiggins, 1970.

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obvious, and perhaps no one disagrees with it; but it may be worth an airing.

II

Actually, I don’t think that a reasoning, thinking, judging self-conscious creature need be an agent at all. Nothing in what follows depends on this view—but there is no incoherence in the idea of a Pure Observer, a motionless, cognitively well-equipped, highly receptive, self-conscious, rational, subtle creature that is well informed about its surroundings and has, perhaps, a full and vivid sense of itself as an observer although it has no capacity for any sort of intentional action, nor even any conception of the possibility of intentional action (from now on I use ‘action’ to mean intentional action). Things impinge on a Pure Observer. It forms beliefs, hypotheses, expectations, it is host to—it is the entertainer of—trains of reasoning that are as automatic as most of our own. But none of this is in any way a matter of action. It is excessively unlikely that any such creature could evolve naturally, but that is another matter.5

—The Pure Observers are impossible because thought of any sort already necessarily involves mental action, mental agency—mental activity that is a matter of action. This decides the case against the Pure Observers even before we ask whether it is intelligible to suppose that there could be mentally complex creatures that were constitutionally incapable of any large-scale intentional bodily movement.

I disagree. Obviously thought involves—is—mental activity, but activity, whether mental, chemical or volcanic, does not always involve action. And if we consider things plainly, we find, I think, that most of our thoughts—our thought-contents—just happen.

5. Compare the ‘Weather Watchers’ discussed in Strawson, 1994, Ch. 9. The Pure Observer’s inability to act does not mean that it cannot experience movement through space of the sort sometimes said to be essential to a grasp of the three-dimensionality of space. Its sister, resident on a giant drifting lily pad, may have exactly the same mental and bodily equipment and experience movement through space. Its second cousin, one of the Weather Watchers, may have complicated preferences and desires, a marked personality, and still lack any capacity for, or conception of, action. See also the ‘Spectator Subject’ and the ‘Natural Epicureans’ in Strawson, 1986, Chs. 12 and 13; and Camus’s Meursault (Camus, 1942). I hope no one still thinks that ‘Wittgensteinian’ objections to the Pure Observer have any force.
In this sense they are spontaneous: ‘instinctive’, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* has it, ‘involuntary, not due to conscious volition’, not actions at all. Contents occur, spring up—the process is largely automatic. Even when our thoughts are most appropriate to our situation and our needs as agents, action and intention need have little or nothing to do with their occurrence.

The case of thought in conversation is striking, for one does not act to generate material for one’s reply, as the other is speaking. It just comes, often before the other has finished speaking, and one often knows—in a flash, for ‘thought is quick’—both that the essential content of the reply is ready to hand in the mind, and, in some ineffably compressed manner, what its content is, before one has run through all its detail in any way.

This is how it is for me, at any rate. Some claim to experience things differently, and I am sure they are sincere. So I want to consider not only the extent to which human mental goings on are in fact a matter of action, but also the extent to which they are experienced as action.

III

When I consider my mental life I find that things constantly impinge on me. I remember that I have to do X—it strikes me that Y is true. I want some coffee—I wonder where the filter papers are. I know I have to go to Charing Cross—I find myself thinking about the best way to travel. Thought, it seems, is often a matter of things just happening, and the passive or non-agentive nature of the ordinary experience of thought is vividly expressed in many of our idioms: ‘I realized that p’, ‘It struck me that q’, ‘I had an idea’, ‘I noticed that r’, ‘Then I understood’, ‘The scales fell from my eyes’, ‘The thought crossed my mind’; ‘I saw the answer’, ‘It suddenly came to me’, ‘It occurred to me—it dawned on me’, ‘I remembered that s’, ‘It hit me that t’, ‘I

8. This, I take it, is what Wegner calls the ‘abstract cognitive plan that reflects the gist or intention’ of what the speaker will say (2002: 87, citing Hoffman, 1986). As one starts speaking one often elaborates on what had already come to mind, and adds new material.
found myself thinking that $u$, ‘$v$!—of course—how stupid of me!’

It’s just started to rain, and I’ve just thought that Harry is going to get wet, and we naturally say that this is something I do. But we also say this about sneezing, yawning and tripping over, and my spontaneous and involuntary thought about Harry is certainly not a matter of action. And yet some seem to think—or feel—that having a thought or taking a step in thought is standardly a matter of action, something crucially located in the general domain of action.

The cases of judging and reasoning—directed thought in general—are central for those who hold this view, and there are a number of idioms that seem to support the idea that an agentic view of the matter is at least as natural as a non-agentic view: ‘I’ve worked it out’, ‘I judged that $p$’, ‘My considered judgement is that $p$’, ‘After reflection I endorsed the view that $q$’, ‘I reasoned that $r$’, ‘I decided that $s$’, ‘I came to the conclusion that $t$’, ‘I assented to the proposition that $u$’, ‘I speculated, hypothesized, that $v$, and judged that if $v$, then $w$’, ‘I accept that $x$.’

All these more agentic idioms have an easy and natural passive reading, in fact, while the preceding passive idioms do not have any natural agentic reading, but the issue is not to be decided by appeal to idioms, let alone their relative weight of numbers, and when we put the idioms aside, what is left over, it seems, is simply a difference of attitude or temperament. Some people standardly figure having a thought or taking a step in thought as a matter of action; others figure it as something that just happens. Some seem pervasively committed to the idea that the occurrence of new content in thinking, judging, reasoning, is itself a matter of action; others like myself find this mystifying. This, I think, is another of those deep differences among human beings—another of the great dividers of the human race—that exist independently of philosophical training or any specific theoretical commitment.9

9. For recent examples of the ‘thought is action’ view see Burge, 1998; Peacocke, 1999. Peacocke is forthright. He claims that ‘judgements are in fact actions, a species of mental action’ (1999: 238; see also 19–20). Burge claims that ‘events guided by reasons issuing from a thinker’s uncoopted central rational powers are acts’; ‘To understand reasoning ... one must regard reasons as effective in one’s judgements, inferences, and other activity. Doing so amounts to an acknowledgement of one’s agency’ (1998: 251). This last claim seems to be a non sequitur, and it is striking that Burge’s paper shifts constantly between active and passive characterizations of thought and reasoning. It is as if he keeps trying to coax his subtle, correct, but
What might explain it? I don’t think it stems from a dramatic difference between those who really do routinely operate as conscious intentional agents in major parts of their mental lives and those who don’t. The deep difference, I think, is just the difference of opinion or rather feeling—between those who are inclined to experience themselves primarily as agents in their mental lives, and those who aren’t. The strength and reach of ‘the tendency to attribute control to self is a personality trait’, as Wegner says, and in some the sense of control—or origination—extends further than in others. Some of us are much more likely than others to experience what he calls an ‘emotion of authorship’ in reason, thought and judgement. I never experience anything of the sort.

There is of course such thing as mental action. There is mental action in every sense in which there is bodily action. And there may well be significant differences between people when it comes to the question of how much their mental lives are a matter of action. But those who take it, perhaps very unreflectively, that much or most of their thinking is a matter of action are, I believe, deluded.

IV

The central point is this: the role of genuine action in thought is at best indirect. It is entirely prefatory, it is essentially—merely—catalytic. For what actually happens, when one wants to think about some issue or work something out? If the issue is a difficult one, then there may well be a distinct, and distinctive, phenomenon of setting one’s mind at the problem, and this phenomenon, I think, may well be a matter of action. It may involve rapidly and silently imaging key words or sentences to oneself, rehearsing inferential transitions, refreshing images of a scene, and these acts of priming, which may be regularly repeated once things are under way, are likely to be fully fledged actions.

What else is there, in the way of action? Well, sometimes one has to shepherd or dragoon one’s wandering mind back to the

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previous thought-content in order for the train of thought to be restarted or continued, and this too may be a matter of action. We talk of concerted thought, and this *concertion*, which is again a catalytic matter, may be (but need not be) a matter of action: it may involve tremendous effort and focused concentration of will. Sometimes thoughts about the answer to a question come so fast that they have to be as it were stopped and piled and then taken up and gone through one by one; and this, again, can be a matter of action. Sometimes one has a clear sense that there is a relevant consideration that is not in play, although one doesn’t know what it is. One initiates a kind of actively receptive blanking of the mind in order to give any missing elements a chance to arise. This too can be a matter of action, a curious weighted intentional holding open of the field of thought. Attention, too, can be a matter of action, of maintaining attention; but ‘attention creates no idea’, as William James remarked. In itself it delivers no new content, and it need not be a matter of action at all, any more than being keyed up and tensely expectant are. One may be gripped, fascinated, absorbed, swept away, one’s attention may be held: all these descriptions correctly imply lack of action.

No doubt there are other such preparatory, ground-setting, tuning, retuning, shepherding, active moves or intentional initiations. But action, in thinking, really goes no further than this. The rest is waiting, seeing if anything happens, waiting for content to come to mind, for the ‘natural causality of reason’ to operate in one. This operation is indeed spontaneous, but in the sense of ‘involuntary, not due to conscious volition’. There is I believe no action at all in reasoning and judging considered independently of the preparatory, catalytic phenomena just mentioned, considered in respect of their being a matter of specific

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12. I am thinking of the speed and wealth of sober focused thought when one is alert, not the mental torrent of illness or the drugged or drunken mind, where typically nothing can be done about the content.
13. 1890: 1.450.
14. Sophisticated automobile engines are said to retune themselves several thousand times a second. Perhaps something similar to this goes on, at comparatively leisurely speeds, in concentrated thought—something similar to the constant refreshal of a computer monitor.
15. I use this expression in Strawson, 1986, e.g. 93–4, 105. See also Hume, 1748: 163–8, ‘Of the reason of animals’; and Brewer, 1995.
content-production or of inferential moves between particular contents.

To this extent Philo was radically understating things when he said that ‘a man’s thoughts are sometimes not due to himself but come without his will’. It is not just that ‘the faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment’, as William James remarked; although that is also true. It is that this catalytic bringing back is all there is in the way of action, in judgement. This, just this, is the true extent of what Descartes called ‘directio ingenii’, the direction of the mind in thought—‘the voluntary ... decision to direct the mind in ways which will allow its natural rational powers to operate properly and productively’. Call what goes on mental spontaneity if you like, allow the arising of contents to be a matter of spontaneity; but admit, then, that spontaneity has nothing particularly to do with action or will, and nothing at all to do with freedom of choice.

‘The solution of problems is the most characteristic ... sort of voluntary thinking.’ James seems to be right about this too (although there is also directed daydreaming to consider). He suggests that trying to solve a problem is in many ways like trying to remember a forgotten name or idea, and the comparison is telling. There is plenty of action—catalytic, priming action—in trying to remember a name, but there is nothing voluntary about what new content comes to mind. Pointers arise, as we press the mind, but they ‘arise independently of the will, by the spontaneous [nb] process we know so well. All that the will does is to emphasize and linger over those which seem pertinent, and ignore the rest ... Even though there be a mental spontaneity, it can certainly not create ideas.’

So too, all the cognitive work that thought involves, all the computation in the largest and most human sense, all the essential

16. 20–50 AD: V.266.
17. 1890: 1.424. The root is not, I take it, the essence.
18. Cottingham, 2002: 352. This accurate description attributes no intentional agency to the operation of reason.
19. 1890: 1.584.
20. 1890: 1.586, 594. See also James’s brilliant description of trying to remember something on 1.251–2.
content-work of reasoning and judgement, all the motion or progress of judgement and thought considered (so to say) in its contentual essence—the actual confrontations and engagements between contents, the collaborations and competitions between them, the transitions between them—is not only not a matter of action but also non-conscious or sub-experiential.\(^{21}\) It is not itself a phenomenon of consciousness, however much it is catalysed by conscious primings. Rather, the content outcomes are delivered into consciousness so as to be available in their turn for use by the catalytic machinery that is under intentional control. One knows that P is true and wonders whether \([P \rightarrow Q]\), holding this content in consciousness. Into consciousness comes ‘No; possibly \([P \land \neg Q]\); immediately followed, perhaps, by ‘But R, and \([P \land R] \rightarrow Q\), so Q’.\(^{22}\)

This non-consciousness is itself an important fact, I think, and invites reflection. Some may think that it amounts already to the point that the essence of thinking (as opposed to the supporting work of catalysis and priming) is not a matter of action. This may not be the right reaction, all things considered (see Section VIII below), but the main claim remains: no ordinary thinking of a particular thought-content, conscious or otherwise, is ever an action. No actual natural thinking of a thought, no actual having of a particular thought-content, is ever itself an action. Mental action in thinking is restricted to the fostering of conditions hospitable to contents’ coming to mind. The coming to mind itself—the actual occurrence of thoughts, conscious or non-conscious—is not a matter of action.

— I’m now going to think that grass is green, and my thinking that grass is green is going to be a premeditated action: grass is green. There. And now I’m going to think something—I don’t yet know what—and my thinking it is going to be a premeditated action: swifts live their lives on the wing. Both these actions disprove your last claim.

\(^{21}\) ‘Sub-personal’, as some say; but the distinction holds in dogs as much as in human beings.

\(^{22}\) Certainly associationism of Tucker’s kind takes away nothing from our powers of reasoning.
Well, they are hardly natural cases of thought, but let us consider them. In the first case, that of thinking *grass is green*, it may seem that there is an especially concentrated, fully fledged action of comprehension-involving entertaining of a content. But is this really so? Is there really any such thing as an *action* of comprehension-involving entertaining of a content? What one finds, I think, if one reflects, does at one stage involve some sort of action, but this is just a matter of a silent mental imaging of words (as sounds or visual marks, say): the actual *comprehending thinking of the content* is something that just happens thereafter or perhaps concurrently.

In this case a comprehending entertaining of *grass is green* has already occurred previously—it has already been held in mind as an intended object of thought. Another event of (particularly emphatic) comprehending entertaining is then brought about by one’s doing something of the priming or catalytic kind, such as generating a silent acoustic image of ‘Grass is green’ to oneself in some way—something that has already been allowed to be a genuine instance of mental action. But the event of entertaining itself is not an action, any more than falling is once one has jumped off a wall.

In the case of *swifts live their lives on the wing* there is again a certain sort of action: an action of setting oneself to produce some content or other. But what happens then is—a content just comes. Which particular content it is is not intentionally controlled; it is not a matter of action. It cannot be a matter of action unless the content is already there, available for consideration and adoption for intentional production. But if it is already there to be considered and adopted it must already have ‘just come’ at some previous time in order to be so available. And this takes us back to the first case, while throwing more light on the general respect in which the occurrence of a particular event of entertaining and consciously comprehending a particular thought content neither is nor can be an action, still less an action in which the intention is to comprehendingly entertain that very thought-content. One can make such an event occur, but only by doing something else.

—Actions have many true descriptions and it is a familiar point that they can be redescribed in terms of their consequences,
intended or not. I cross the threshold, activate the lighting, illuminate the conservatory, alarm the parrot, wake the burglar. I move my leg, kick the ball, score the goal. So too I aim to think some thought or other, I make millions of neurons fire, I think *swifts live their lives on the wing*; or I aim to work out the truth about some specific matter, and finish up thinking P. Why aren’t these cases of the same sort? Why can’t all intentional mental actions of catalysis and focusing be truly described in terms of their consequences, so that when I focus my mind in order to try to work out what the truth is, and end up thinking P, my entertaining this content is correctly said to be an action?

If you think the cases are the same, fine. Certainly one is not thereby obliged to assimilate the case of coming up with the particular thought-content one does to the case of waking the parrot—although it is very important that the upshot targeted in intention can be specified only generally in the normal case, either as just: thinking some thought or other; or, in the case of trying work something out, as: thinking whatever is the truth about the question under consideration. Given this way of describing things, perhaps the only error that some people make, in considering these matters, is to conceive of the issuing of a particular thought-content as a ‘basic’ action: something one does, and does intentionally, and does not do by doing anything else. Here as elsewhere I think it is the psychological difference between those who feel thought as action and those who don’t that is most interesting—each side finding the other remarkable.

— Suppose you initiate a line of thought that will lead you to the answer to the question ‘Is a F or G?’. You already know the answer (a is G), but you can’t remember the course of the argument that gets you to it. But you know the premisses, and you know that going through the argument will lead you to the answer, so that you will finish up thinking vividly that a is G. Isn’t this, at least, a case in which entertaining a particular thought is an action in which the intention is to produce that very thought-content?

Your thought that a is G is precipitated by the staging of an argument in thought. You cause the thought to come about by action. You actively initiate the line of argument by bringing the
premisses to mind, and maintain it in being as necessary (it may run by itself). Once again, though, the final occurrence—your explicit and convinced thinking that \( a \) is \( G \)—is not itself an action, still less an action in which the intention is to produce that particular thought-content. Your thinking that \( a \) is \( G \) can be allowed to be the product of an action or actions performed with the intention to produce that particular thought-content, but it is not itself an action, any more than an increase in one’s physical fitness is when one goes in for regular exercise. In many respects thinking is like seeing. Opening one’s eyes, turning one’s head in the direction of \( X \), concentrating on the scene in the attempt to pick out \( X \)—all these things can be a matter of action, but seeing \( X \) can’t be.

—Just ask me to think about God, the number 1,000,000, or democracy (or the concepts of God, the number 1,000,000 or democracy), and I will. Just ask me to consider the proposition \( P \), and I will. 23

Certainly these are things we can do at will and on demand, things we can do and do and do intentionally. And these are cases in which we do not have a fully pre-given content, like \textit{grass is green}, only a pre-given topic. But the component of action is the same as before. It is the setting of the mind at a given topic (triggered in one’s mind by another’s speech) and waiting for content to come.

What do I do when asked to think about democracy? Let me try. I find I bring the word ‘democracy’ before my mind in the familiar, superfast, insubstantial, quasi-acoustic way. What happens then? Nothing comes immediately, apart from a mood-flash of boredom at the idea of democracy, which arises in spite of the fact that I’m all for it, and a concurrent sense that a passable dictionary definition of democracy is ‘access-conscious’ in Block’s sense—immediately available to thought—although I do not spell it out to myself (it is as it were ‘compressed’ in the sense of a computer file). I try to give things a push—again this is a matter of action of the catalytic sort discussed above—and I get a muddled bundle of things: some Greek etymology, the name Churchill, a primitive sketch of his remark about democracy, a

23. Ward Jones’s challenge, for which I am grateful.
thought about communism.24 But none of these comings and entertainings of content are themselves a matter of action.

We can replace ‘judgement’ by ‘thought’ in the passage quoted earlier from William James: ‘the faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of thought’, the very root of a person’s concerted thinking about something. Is the root of a thing its essence or that from which it grows? The latter, no doubt; but if you think it is the former, then you can say that thought—concerted thought—is action through and through. The point remains: no actual passage to judgement, no actual accession to a new belief, is itself a matter of action. It is just what happens after the exercise of the faculty of bringing back one’s wandering attention to the matter at hand.

‘Every kind of reasoning is nothing, in its simplest form, but attention’, as Shadworth Hodgson remarked.25 It is a laying open of oneself to the ‘natural causality of reason’, an induction of oneself into a receptive, actively passive state, tuned this way or that. And everything that applies in the case of thought, reason, and judgement applies equally in the case of belief and belief-formation. So here I am in direct disagreement with the proponents of ‘doxastic voluntarism’. I am directly opposed to Peacocke, for example, who advances from the claim that ‘judgements are in fact actions’ and the claim that ‘to make a judgement is the fundamental way to form a belief’ to the conclusion that coming to form a belief is also standardly a matter of action.26 Peacocke allows that ‘not every case of coming to believe something is an action’, but the view defended in this paper is that no normal cases of coming to believe something are actions.27

24. ‘No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time’ (speech in the House of Commons, 11 November 1947).
25. 1870: 1.400, quoted in James, 1890: 1.589.
27. ‘Belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures’, according to Hume (1739, 183), but belief-formation is not a matter of action in either case (no interesting objections arise from visits to the hypnotist to acquire the belief that P, or the phenomena of ‘self-deception’, or cases like the one in which one opens a box in order to acquire a belief about what is inside).
VI

—Even if reason, judgement, thought and belief-formation are not in their contentual essence—their intrinsic contentual evolution and outcome—a matter of action, imagination is, and so are choices and decisions. Reason, judgement, thought and belief-formation aim at truth—they all operate under the constraint of truth. For this reason alone they cannot plausibly be supposed to be exercises of spontaneity in any sense that connects spontaneity interestingly with freedom of choice; and this is a point that holds quite independently of most of the claims that you have made so far. But imagination and decision are not like this at all. It is clear—to begin with the former—that imagining really is, quite straightforwardly, a matter of action. The production and entertaining of new content in imagination is itself, and quite directly, a matter of action, in a way that has and can have no parallel in the case of truth-aimed cognition. Summon up an image of a giraffe now, and have it turn round and run away. This is a matter of action, something you can do and control and develop.

Imagination can have a remarkable effortlessness or fluency, and can seem like a paradigm case of action—something we do and do intentionally—and indeed like a matter of ‘basic’ action—something we do intentionally and do not do by doing anything else. And my principal present aim is merely to resist the idea that reasoning, thought, judgement and belief-formation are in their contentual progression a matter of action (their contentual progression considered just as such, as when, believing that P, one has the thought that Q after realizing that \(P \rightarrow Q\)). But let me try very briefly to extend the passivist proposal a little. Even in the case of imagination there seems to be a sense in which the entertaining of content is not itself any sort of action, but, rather, a kind of involuntary response that we are prone to experience as action, as something we do intentionally, when it occurs (as it normally does) without any sort of resistance.28

28. I take imagination to involve non-conceptual content (by which I mean representation in some not purely conceptual medium) essentially. I am concerned with whatever content imagining a silver horse adds to merely thinking silver horse, something that may vary greatly from one individual to another.
If I ask you to conjure up in imagination a tree, a bottle, a naked body, a pink elephant, a zebra-striped giraffe, you can probably do it effortlessly, in whatever way it is that you do imagine things—however sketchily or schematically, however non-pictorially, however impoverished your visual imagination. But if I ask you instead not to conjure up a black-and-white-striped giraffe, you may find it hard to comply. Obviously you have to grasp what ‘black-and-white-striped giraffe’ means, and so have the concept of a black-and-white-striped giraffe in mind, in order to know what I am asking you not to conjure up. The further claim is that you are very likely to be unable not to conjure up a black-and-white-striped giraffe, at least momentarily (for thought is quick), in whatever way you do conjure things. Even if one has mastered a special thought-blocking technique (whose initiation may be a matter of action), one is likely to be able to close the door of imagination only after it has already intimated something black-and-white-striped-giraffish.

Now this imagining is evidently not a matter of action—it is involuntary, a reflex mental response—and one may ask whether anything similar might be true in the case in which one has set oneself to imagine something. Is what then occurs straightforwardly something one does and does intentionally? Isn’t it rather an automatic occurrence of content which, welcome as it is, meeting no resistance, is (in many people) invested with a glow of ease that makes it feel like some sort of intentional achievement? The dear self may like to claim what then occurs as its own intentional performance, but it may be that the sense of intentional authorship arises merely from the resistlessness, together with the ambient sense of agency involved in any catalytic activity that may also be going on.

29. People vary enormously in the vividness and experiential modalities of their imagining. William James’s discussion of this is probably still as good as any (1890: Ch. 18).
30. It is probably already too late. Experimental psychologists know this as the ‘pink-elephant phenomenon’.
31. One might as well try not to understand the sentence ‘this giraffe is tall’ when one hears it clearly enunciated (on the involuntariness of linguistic understanding, see Strawson, 1994: 6–7).
32. ‘The dear self is always turning up’, Kant, Grundlegung, 1785: Ch. 1. Compare the way in which some, most strangely, behave—feel—as if they deserve to be given credit for their natural talent.
Might it also arise also from some an extremely fast, automatic, rubber-stamping nihil-obstaring of what simply happens given the initial imaginative project and the fact that one has no objection to it? Perhaps—but if this has any mental reality I think it is not itself something conscious, even if it leaves a wake in consciousness; and sometimes the passage from project to delivery may be too fast for any lightning fiat or nihil obstat.

If the process as a whole is largely automatic, is the particular content of one’s imagining, at least, an intentional production? When one has set oneself to imagine something one must obviously start from some conceptual or linguistic specification of the content (spangled pink elephant), and given that one’s imagining duly fits the specification one may say that it is intentionally produced. But there isn’t intentional control in any further sense: the rest is a matter of ballistics, mental ballistics. One entertains the verbal specification and waits for the mechanism of imagination—the (involuntary) spontaneity of imagination—to deliver the image.

The pro-action camp may grant this, or some of it, while continuing to insist that the sustaining and developing of imaginings are another matter. And it seems clear that such sustainings and developments can involve action. But it should be noted, first, that imagining or fantasy has, notoriously, an internal (and again ‘spontaneous’) dynamic of its own that is not a matter of action; it can run riot, agreeably or disagreeably, without any input in the form of intentional direction, and indeed in spite of any such input.

Note, also, that the occurring of an idea about what to add to an imagined scene is not itself a matter of action, although it may well be triggered by intentional, directed, catalytic processes of attention and focusing; nor, I think, is what then actually happens in imagination by way of addition and development. Although the sustaining or facilitation of what happens may again involve catalytic action, the imaginative content itself is, again, up to one’s Muse, given that it is something over and above any explicitly cognitively prefigured content, e.g. spangled

33. In the technical (psychophysiological) sense in which the motion of one’s leg, after one has done whatever one does neurally in initiating a kick, is merely ballistic—as ballistic as the motion of the ball after it has ceased to be in contact with one’s foot.
pink + elephant.\(^{34}\) When one sets oneself to imagine anything there comes a moment when what one does is precisely to relinquish control. To think that the actual content-issuing and content-entertaining that are the heart of imagining are themselves a matter of action seems like thinking, when one has thrown a dart, that the dart’s entering the dartboard is itself an action.

In these directed cases, one has the intended content in mind under one fairly precise mental identifier: as likely as not, actual images of words (visual or acoustic) are somehow present to mind, along with understanding of their meaning. And one can indeed be said to be doing just what one intends to do in imagining what one imagines. And in this sense, at least, it may be said, imagining is as robust a case of action as any. So too when one aims at the bullseye and hits it, one’s hitting it is an action on one’s part. But all the previous points about the limits on mental action remain in place.

A final remark: although imagination does not operate under the constraint of truth in the way that reason, judgement, thought and belief-formation do, it is standardly employed in the search for truth, in trying to work out what is likely to happen, what will happen if X, what probably has happened given Y; in rehearsing possibilities of action, anticipating dangers, planning well. In this core use it is integral to effective truth-seeking thought, reasoning, judgement and belief-formation.\(^{35}\) But it is not always directly answerable to truth considerations in the way that these other things are, in their normal operation, and that, perhaps, is the main reason why its specific content-productions can seem to be a matter of action, even under theoretical scrutiny, in some way that has no parallel in the case of these other things.

VII

—What about choices and decisions? These are clearly mental actions.

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\(^{34}\) There are, evidently, different catalytic techniques, different gifts, different deficits.

\(^{35}\) There is also what one might call cognitive imagination, imagination at the service of theoretical rather than practical enquiry.
Some are, but the case is far from clear. And we need to consider the mental goings on that precede choices and decisions. Are these a matter of action, at least in part?

Well, it depends on the case. Very often there is no action at all: none of the activation of relevant considerations is something one does intentionally. It simply happens, driven by the practical need to make a decision. The play of pros and cons is automatic—and sometimes unstoppable. At other times there is a deliberate setting of the mind at the problem of what to do, a process of focusing on the problem, a concertion of thought, and this can be a matter of action. But what follows is, again, just a waiting for content to occur. As in the case of theoretical thought there may well be a process of refocusing and re-refocusing—that curious ballistic launching and relaunching of the mind after it has stalled or stumbled or been distracted, a recasting of it (in the fishing sense) after it has started to settle in one direction, so that it will be receptive to hitherto unengaged relevant considerations. But here again action is the underlabourer, preparatory, catalytic. There is no direct action in the actual issuing of new content, any more than there is in the growth of trees one has planted.

In many situations of practical uncertainty, pressing or not, one believes, often rightly, that there is a straightforwardly right or best answer to the question what to do. And in all cases of this sort reaching a decision need not—I am inclined to say should not—involve any agency in decision, nor any sense of agency in decision. What happens is that one considers and reconsider the pros and cons, perhaps involuntarily, perhaps calmly, perhaps frenetically, and what one wants is that it should become clear which is the right choice. One simply wants to come to see what is best (morally or otherwise), and there is nothing in the experience of wanting this, or of actually coming to see what is best, that necessarily or even properly involves any sense of intentional agency or free decision. Some, no doubt, have such a sense, but the case seems similar to the case of imagination. Mere openness to, simple lack of resistance to, harmony with, one’s own natural, internal, automatic, non-agentive operations

36. Compare trying to decide which of a number of melons is ripest, or trying to read the words on a distant sign (Strawson, 1986: 115).
of content-processing is experienced by some as action, as something intentionally done, when really these operations are (cata-
lytics aside) nothing of the sort. The movement of the natural causality of reason (practical reason in this case) to its conclusion in choice or decision is lived (by some) as action when it is really just reflex; distinctively rational reflex, to be sure, but not in any case a matter of action.37 All in all, it seems to me that most deciding what to do is best seen as something that just happens, even if there is also, and crucially, some sort of genuine action of positive commitment to the decision, either at the time it is reached, or at the moment of the ‘passage à l’acte’.38

One could press the passivist line harder, and raise free-will issues, but I will move on.

VIII

I have argued that there is relatively little action in mental life, especially in the case that most concerns me: cognition in the widest sense. No coming to entertain a content, and no comprehending entertaining of a content, in reasoning, thinking, judging, or anything else, is itself an action. People may differ in the degree to which they are agents in their mental lives, as remarked. We can train ourselves to exercise more agency in our mentation. Some people engage in a great deal of concerted thought, others in almost none. But any action in cognition is of the catalytic sort. And, once again, the really intriguing difference between people is not the difference between those who are regularly agents (catalytic agents) in their cognition and those who are not, but between those who feel strongly that they are agents in their cognition, agents in what they think, and who set great store by this idea, and those who do not.

37. This is not any sort of reductive remark so far as the rationality of the processes (or of the people in whom they take place) is concerned. On this I agree fully with Brewer, 1995.
38. Perhaps it was awareness of this point that drove the existentialists into the strenuous artifice of the ‘acte gratuit’. It might be argued that choices and decisions are fully fledged actions only in the limiting case in which it is rational to choose either A or B but one has no reason for favouring one over the other; the case in which there is precisely ‘nothing to choose’ between A and B, so that there has to be some sort of coin-tossing, non-rational plumping for one or the other.
In large-scale bodily action, Davidson remarks, ‘we never do more than move our bodies; the rest is up to nature’. In cognition we never do more than aim or tilt our minds; the rest is up to nature, trained or not. Much bodily movement is ballistic, relative to the initiating impulse; the same goes for thought. Benjamin Libet’s experimental work deserves a mention here, for it has been cited in support of the view that we never really make choices or decisions in the present moment of consciousness in the way we think we do. Our natural sense of things, plainly, is that many of our actions depend on and flow causally from our consciously made choices and decisions and resolutions. In these cases we experience ourselves as consciously deciding or resolving what to do, and as consciously deciding or judging that now is the time to act, and as then (subsequently) acting. Such experience is routine and often vivid, and in the normal case one has no sense that the time of these choices or resolvings, or the time of their triggering action, is other than the time at which they are consciously experienced as being made and as triggering action. Libet’s experiments, however, suggest that the experience of conscious choice to perform an action occurs about 350 milliseconds after the time at which the brain activity leading to the performance of the intended action (the readiness potential) has got under way. To that extent, they suggest that there is a key sense in which the conscious experience of choice occurs some time after the choice has been made, non-consciously, in the mind or brain. Indeed it seems that the time of the experience of conscious choice or decision is simply

39. 1971:23. There are in fact powerful reasons for drawing the line between what we do and what happens further in than Davidson does: perhaps between the intentional-bodily-movement-initiating brain impulses in the cerebral cortex and all that then follows. In the case of motor action ‘the final 50 ms. before the muscle is activated is the time [needed] for the primary motor cortex to activate the spinal motor nerve cells’, and during this time things go ballistic: ‘The act goes to completion with no possibility of stopping it by the rest of the cerebral cortex’ (Libet, 1999: 51). Clearly these neurological facts do not in themselves settle any philosophical questions about what things it is best or most natural to designate as actions.

40. Although the vast majority—from typing to driving to shifting position to taking the next step down the road—do not.
the time at which the content of the choice or decision or resolution first becomes available to consciousness.41

Roughly put, then, Libet’s claim is that the neurophysiological evidence shows that the experience of conscious choice is strictly speaking illusory. It occurs only when a choice that has already been made and has already begun to be acted on is (as it were) presented in consciousness. If this is right, it undermines an intensely natural picture of agency according to which it is, essentially, the conscious I that is the agent: we take it that in so far as we are deciders, choosers and initiators of action, true exercisers of agency, it is (essentially) as conscious beings who are present in the present moment of consciousness. And yet the experimental results suggest that

it is not a person’s conscious I that really initiates an action ... The I does not want to accept this. The thinking, conscious I insists on being the true player, the active operator, the one in charge. But it cannot be.42

Is this claim true? It looks as if it may be, although it should be said that it is not really an empirical question whether the onset of the readiness potential should count as a choice.43 If it were true, would it undermine anything that matters? No. To think that it does is to make a great mistake. Even on their strongest interpretation Libet’s results do not in any way threaten the view that we really do make decisions and choices, and are indeed the authors of our actions. For our decisions and choices and actions, mental or bodily, are not in any sense not our own, or in any way less our own, because their original occurrence is not conscious (the same goes for our thoughts, reasonings, judgments). Libet’s results do not threaten any defensible sense in which we can be said to have free will or to be responsible for

41. See e.g. Libet, 1985, 1987, 1989; Gazzaniga, 1998; Wegner and Wheatley, 1999; Wegner, 2002. There is a very helpful account of Libet’s work in Norretranders, 1991: Ch. 9. See also Libet, 2000. In his experimental work Libet concentrates on cases in which the decision is not simply a decision about what to do but a decision to do it now, for these cases are more susceptible of experimental test. But if his findings are valid we may take it that they may be valid for all events of decision and choice.


43. It has been subjected to much criticism. For recent examples see e.g. Dennett, 2003: 227–42; Mele, forthcoming.
what we do. The experience one has of being the author or origin of one’s decision or choice is mistaken only in so far as it may not be oneself considered very narrowly (conscious-egoistically) as the conscious I present in the moment of the conscious experience of making the choice or decision that actually makes the choice or decision. But any such misdating is utterly unimportant. The choice or decision is, to repeat, no less one’s own for occurring outside consciousness (it is certainly no one else’s). It flows from oneself, from one’s character and outlook, from what one is, mentally. All that Libet’s experiments show (if the conclusions drawn from them are correct) is that one does not resolve on one’s actions at quite the time one thinks one does, or make one’s choices and decisions consciously in the way one thinks one does.44

—Quite so: and this point has a natural extension. Just as it does not follow, from the claim that the ‘conscious I’ never makes choices or decisions, that there is any sense in which one’s choices and decisions are not one’s own, or in any way less one’s own, so too it does not follow, from the fact that the processes that lead to the arrival of thought contents in consciousness are not themselves conscious, either (a) that they are in any sense not truly our own thoughts or (b) that they are in any sense not a matter of action.

I agree with (a) but not (b). I agree that our thoughts and judgments are not in any sense not our own, or less our own, for not being direct products of consciousness; the fear that Libet’s findings constitute a threat to any remotely defensible account of autonomy, freedom and responsibility is psychologically telling but superficial. I also agree that the occurrence of our thoughts and choices can be partly caused by genuinely intentional mental actions on our part—the catalytic business discussed earlier, the

44. See Norretranders, 1991: 257; Strawson, 1994: 172. Libet has also argued that at the time of the conscious experience of making the choice one still has a power to abort or ‘veto’ the action process that is already under way (see e.g. Libet, 2000; 1985). This, presumably, would put the ‘conscious I’ back in control in some sense; but the respect in which choices may be non-conscious remains untouched, and I do not think that Libet succeeds in answering the objection that the veto, too, is presumably under way non-consciously before it becomes conscious. (Libet also mislocates the threat to free will, as do many participants in the debate, for reasons just given.)
girding of the mind to engage the problem at hand. 45 But I see no reason to say that the operation of the mental system that is catalysed in this way, and that culminates in a thought or judgement, is itself a matter of action, rather than being automatic and standardly involuntary. We return to the fundamental point: human minds are powerfully governed by deep, natural, non-agentive principles of operation. This is the spontaneity of reason and understanding: the ‘natural causality of reason’. But it is also, more broadly, the natural causality of the profound entanglement of human cognition and emotion. More broadly still, it is the natural causality of the whole huge engine of innate mental equipment as activated and tuned by experience.

IX

We are incessantly engaged in actions of one sort or another, major and minor. Are we then bound to have some vivid sense of ourselves as agents in our mental lives (short of mental illness)? Is this a psychological necessity for us? By no means. Such a sense of agency is not a human universal. Human beings need have no significant sense of themselves as agents in their mental lives. In this respect, as in so many others, we lie along a long spectrum of temperamental difference where we have equal opportunities for flourishing and failure, however dubious we are about the claims of those unlike ourselves. One can live a good—amazing—human life without any significant experience of oneself as an agent in one’s mentation.

Certainly a sense of responsibility, and responsibility itself (understood as a general trait that a person may have or lack), do not depend on any sense of mental agency. In moral matters as much as in non-moral, certain courses of action present themselves as things one should do, or should not do; and one’s sense that this is indeed what they are, one’s living of the fact that this is what they are, certainly does not require any sort of positive, active endorsement of them, nor any sense of any such positive active endorsement. On the contrary: they are likely to seem like things one can do nothing about, like the wetness of water.

45. No doubt these catalytic mental actions, like bodily actions, are initiated and already under way before they are experienced as being initiated by the conscious I.
Responsibility as a trait of being is not a matter of action at all, although cultivating it can be. It’s a set or cast of mind that has consequences for action. Responsibility is something one finds in oneself. It’s there, like one’s hands. There is no correlation between a lack of a sense of action in mentation and irresponsibility or moral deficiency. But for some—caught up in the picture of pervasive inner agency—this may be hard to see.

The effects of spiritual discipline on human mentality should not be underestimated. Descriptions of the experiential character of states of spiritual advancement appear to be extremely robust, and Krishnamurti reports an experience that many, perhaps, have had when he claims that

you do not choose, you do not decide, when you see things very clearly: then you act which [sic] is not the action of will... Only the unintelligent mind exercises choice in life... A truly intelligent [spiritually developed] mind... simply cannot have choice.

To lose a sense of agency here may simply be to pass beyond experience of indecision and, equally, beyond any need to push or catalyse one’s thinking. It most certainly does not involve any loss or diminution of responsibility.

It is worth adding that pathological human experience is as real as any other, and important in its own right. Experience of oneself as an agent in one’s mental life can be lost in depersonalization, for example, while basic awareness of oneself as a locus of consciousness or mental presence remains undiminished.

Something like this, pathological or not, afflicted Coleridge. He got up in the morning and put on his boots. He lived from day to day. He wrote letters and walked into town. But he felt that he entirely lacked the ‘self-directing Principle’, and was, ‘as an acting man, a creature of mere Impact’. Camus’s Meursault also comes to mind.

46. In the sense that there is a high measure of agreement as to their basic character across different traditions.

47. Quoted in Lutjens, 1983: 33, 204; see Strawson, 1986: Ch 13. Compare Spinoza’s view that ‘God... cannot be said... to act from freedom of the will’ (1675: 435 (Ethics Pt. 1, Prop. XXXII, Coroll. II)).


49. Camus, 1942. See also Roquentin’s bad moments in La Nausée (Sartre, 1938), and note 5 above.
Experiences of creativity or composition also commonly have this form. You do not have to be a poet or a genius to agree with Rimbaud when he writes

It’s false to say: I think. One ought to say ‘it thinks [in] me...for I is an other ... It’s obvious to me that I am a spectator at the unfolding of my thought: I watch it, I listen to it.50

This is how it is for me when I think about what to say here. Any action lies in the catalytic prompting of mentation, in the choice of focus when several things strike me when, stuck, I re-read the previous sentence or two and wait to see what happens.51 Apart from that, the usual ambient activity, a restless scanning that goes on automatically, an apparently empty-headed, purposefully aimless ranging (it has, somehow, a spatial character to it) which is not in fact aimless because it has become tuned to a specific subject matter. Then, Nietzsche’s ‘small terse fact that a thought comes when “it” wishes and not when “I” wish’.52

I will finish with a few further remarks about spontaneity.

X

One cannot be spontaneous, in the everyday sense of the word, if one is trying or intending to be. The project is self-defeating. This is a familiar point outside philosophy, and it seems that a version of it applies equally to the idea that there is spontaneity in cognition: if the notion of spontaneity is brought into close connection with the notion of (intentional) action, or with any notion of freedom other than the Spinozan-Kantian notion according to which to be free is simply to be governed by reason,53 then there is I think nothing in reasoning, thought, judgement and belief-formation (‘cognition’ for short) that can constitute being spontaneous. Spontaneity conceived of in this way is not, should

50. 1871: 249, 250.
51. I often lose an idea and trust that it will find its way back if it is any good. Dennett, 1991, 2001, gives some striking descriptions of how contents compete for entry into consciousness.
52. 1886: Section 17. Nietzsche continues, ‘So that it is a falsification of the facts of the case to say that the subject “I” is the condition of the predicate “think”.’ I think there’s a clear sense in which this is wrong, for reasons given in the discussion of Libet, but it is right about what many people think that the “I” of consciousness is.
53. ‘I call him free who is led by reason alone’ (Spinoza, 1675: 584).
not be, and cannot be what determines one’s thoughts’ having the particular content they do as they arise in cognition.\textsuperscript{54}

The dictionary definition of ‘spontaneous’ contains interesting stresses. The first and most straightforward meaning is ‘occurring without external cause or stimulus’, and this is what Kant means by the term, but it continues as follows:

coming naturally or freely, unpremeditated; voluntary, done of one’s own accord ... acting voluntarily or without premeditation ... (of movement) instinctive, prompted by no motive ... involuntary, not due to conscious volition.\textsuperscript{55}

I have argued that it is only in so far as spontaneous means ‘involuntary’ that there is any spontaneity in reason, thought and judgement.

I don’t think that this puts me in conflict with McDowell’s basic Kantian characterization of the link between spontaneity and freedom. He, after all, is concerned with the ‘freedom, exemplified in responsible acts of judging, [that] is essentially a matter of being answerable to criticism in the light of rationally relevant considerations’, the freedom that is a matter of ‘rational necessitation’, i.e. determination by reason;\textsuperscript{56} and if freedom resides in the autonomy that consists in rational necessitation, then to the extent that spontaneity is to be identified with freedom, there seems to be a clear sense in which freedom increases in proportion as spontaneity becomes irresistible, natural, automatic, involuntary, instinctive, reflex, second nature. True freedom, on this Spinozan-Kantian-Krishnamurtian view, is—once again—necessitation by reason,\textsuperscript{57} although it affects—governs—the nature of the actions that one does perform. This is a notion of freedom that is remote from the ordinary notion of freedom of

\textsuperscript{54}. I take this to include moral cognition.
\textsuperscript{55}. \textit{SOED}, 1993: 2998. Compare Philip Roth, 2001, 141: ‘With Consuela, there’s a semiconscious spontaneity in whatever she does, a rightness, though she may not know quite what she’s doing or exactly why ... [What she does] is very close to nature, to an original drifting thought, to intuition, and there is no deliberate reasoning behind it.’
\textsuperscript{57}. It’s not up to you that, believing \(P\rightarrow Q\), you come to believe \(Q\) on coming to believe \(P\).
choice, but it is venerable, important, and perfectly clear.\(^{58}\)

McDowell writes that

judging, making up our minds what to think, is something for which we are, in principle, responsible—something we freely do as opposed to something that merely happens in our lives.\(^{59}\)

and here his view may seem directly at odds with my claim that there is a crucial sense in which judging ‘just happens’. There are, however, different ways in which things just happen, and as far as I can see the sense in which judgements and makings up of minds just happen subtracts nothing from the autonomy or freedom or responsibility that human beings have on McDowell’s

58. By my count ‘spontaneity’ and its cognates appears twenty-seven times in Kemp Smith’s translation of Critique of Pure Reason (I count occurrences in a single paragraph as a single occurrence), usually translating ‘Spontaneität’, but sometimes ‘Selbsttätigkeit’ (self-activity), or a phrase like ‘von Selbst’. The first use is non-technical, twenty of the others are concerned with the spontaneity of the understanding, six with the ‘absolute’ spontaneity supposedly required for free will. The basic meaning is the same in all cases, and is fully conveyed by the first definition given in the SOED: ‘occurring without external cause or stimulus’. If we allow ourselves to talk temporally within the Kantian frame, and say that the operation of the spontaneity of the understanding can be triggered by input from sensibility, Kant’s claim is that it is what the understanding does after that that is spontaneous: that is, the understanding is not in its own principles of operation subject to or affected by any external cause or stimulus or determinant.

The SOED definition applies equally to the spontaneity associated with freedom of action. Spontaneity is ‘a power of absolutely beginning a state’ [A445/B473], a power whereby something ‘begins of itself’ [A447/B475] without any (prior) external cause, and is therefore absolutely self-determining. ‘By freedom ... I understand the power of beginning a state spontaneously’ [von Selbst], i.e. undetermined by anything external. [A355/B361]. Kant sticks strictly to the use McDowell adopts from him, and says nothing to suggest that he thinks that the practical employment of thought or reason is a matter of freedom in the sense of freedom of choice.

The same goes for the only occurrence in the Grundlegung (1785:120, Ak. IV. 452; Kant is explaining the sense in which the spontaneity of reason is more ‘pure’ than that of the understanding), and for at least four of the seven occurrences in the Beck translation of the Critique of Practical Reason. Of the remaining three, two are used to characterize something Kant disparages in so far as it preempts or interferes with a proper sense of duty and obligation—‘spontaneous inclination’ and ‘spontaneous goodness of heart’, and the last is unclear but no basis for an objection to the present position (the question is whether it is a perfect duty to devote one’s self to ... the magnumnanimous sacrifice of life for the safety of one’s country ... spontaneously and unbidden’). In the Greene and Hudson translation of Religion Within The Bounds of Reason Alone (five occurrences), Kant continues to use the term to mean ‘occurring without external cause or stimulus’ and has no other or more exciting brief. All in all, I think, the term has no special load or importance for Kant (there are only forty occurrences of the root ‘spontan’ in the whole Kantian Corpus including the pre-Critical writings, of which twenty are in the Critique of Pure Reason).

view (or indeed from any autonomy or freedom or responsibility that human beings can be coherently supposed to have). Certainly in ‘just happening’ they can be wholly spontaneous in the Kantian sense; they do not impinge on us from outside us in any freedom-diminishing way. They are part of us, part of our natural inner working. Suddenly seeing the answer is not the same as tripping over a stone.

‘A belief’, McDowell continues,

is not always, or even typically, a result of our exercising this freedom to decide what to think. But even when a belief is not freely adopted, it is an actualization of capacities of a kind, the conceptual, whose paradigmatic mode of actualization is in the exercise of freedom that judging is. This freedom, exemplified in responsible acts of judging, is essentially a matter of being answerable to criticism in the light of rationally relevant considerations. So the realm of freedom, at least the realm of freedom of judging, can be identified with the space of reasons.60

And in another place, after asking ‘why it seems appropriate to describe the understanding, whose contribution to this co-operation is in terms of its command of concepts, in terms of spontaneity’ he responds as follows:

A schematic but suggestive answer is that the topography of the conceptual sphere is constituted by rational relations. The space of concepts is at least part of what Wilfrid Sellars calls the ‘space of reasons’. When Kant describes the understanding as a faculty of spontaneity, that reflects his view of the relation between reason and freedom: rational necessitation is not just compatible with freedom but constitutive of it.61

Both these passages seem to confirm that there is no deep conflict between McDowell’s view of spontaneity and mine, for this freedom of rational necessitation is fully available given the present account of the involuntariness of spontaneity.62

60. 1998: 434.
61. 1994: 5.
62. There is also a link to McDowell’s correct observation (McDowell, 1979) that the sound moral judgement of moral virtue is a matter of being tuned to how things are in such a way that one ‘just sees’ what needs to be done (it is in that sense a sensitivity, a kind of tuned receptivity). It is an old idea that in the highest state of virtue right action is effortless and automatic. *Dilige et quod vis fac*, love and do what you will, in St Augustine’s words.
But McDowell also writes that conceptual capacities, which are actualised in our possession of beliefs or a world-view, ... are appropriately described as belonging to a faculty of spontaneity. It is essential to them that they can be exercised in an activity of thinking responsibly undertaken by a subject who is in control of the course of the activity. 63

Isn’t his use of the notion of control in this passage plainly irreconcilable with your view?

Again I don’t think so (McDowell may correct me). For, first, much of the catalytic business is precisely a form of control, and is responsibly undertaken by a responsible person. Second, and more interestingly, control in thought may well be spontaneous in the sense of being involuntary, unpremeditated, coming naturally. It can be—and ideally is—as involuntary as the spontaneous, effortless control with which we normally maintain balance and mastery of our limbs in walking or running. Control does not require explicit awareness of control. Ask any seagull on the wind. In our own case both sorts of control, mental and physical, are acquired in accordance with a genetic predisposition to acquire them, both become second nature, all being well, and both can be worked on and refined way beyond their ordinary levels, whether in the circus or the seminar room. So once again I find no important conflict here, and no reason not to welcome the idea that the freedom—or control—constitutive of the spontaneity involved in cognition increases in proportion as the spontaneity—or control—‘comes naturally ..., [is] unpremeditated, ... instinctive’. 64

Galen Strawson
Department of Philosophy
University of Reading
Reading RG6 6AA

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