

BOOK REVIEW

Jennifer Hornsby, *Simple Mindedness: In Defense of Naive Naturalism in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997). ISBN 0-674-80818-5

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The subtitle of this collection of essays, published or written by Jennifer Hornsby since the appearance of her first book, is “In Defense of Naive Naturalism in the Philosophy of Mind.”¹ What is naive naturalism?

According to Hornsby, Descartes bequeathed us two main legacies. First, he developed a particular conception of the natural world, of what he called *res extensa*, as a realm governed entirely by mechanistic principles, and excluding purposeful agents such as human beings along with their actions and mental states. His second legacy was to posit the existence of another kind of substance than *res extensa*, a type of substance he called *res cogitans*, and to make some gestures at explaining how such substances could exist within the realm of *res extensa*. From these parents was born the modern mind-body

¹ The first book was *Actions* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980).

problem. It is an irony of history, on Hornsby's reading, that of these two legacies, Descartes has been more closely identified with his introduction of mind, or thinking substance. For she finds that it is the former, the picture of the natural world excluding *res cogitans*, that has been both the most potent and the most damaging in the attempt to understand our place in nature.

This understanding of Descartes is borne out by the fact that Descartes has distressingly little to say about the metaphysics of *res cogitans*. The most well-known problem here concerns the causal interaction between thinking and extended substances. Another is the issue of locatedness, and with it, the nature of the union between mind and body in an individual person. Among the qualities of material objects that are alleged to stem from their extension is included position. Yet unextended minds, too, must surely have position. This is confirmed by Descartes' claim that the mind is not located in the body as a pilot in a ship, but rather is spread out through it. This spreading out is accomplished in such a way that removal of part of a body does not diminish the mind. But the metaphysics of all this are not treated with any depth or systematicity by Descartes. That they can be given precise and formal treatment is evidenced by some of those, such as W.D. Hart in *Engines of the Soul*, who represent themselves as being modern followers of Descartes.²

It is not such substance dualists as Hart, who make up a beleaguered and defensive minority in the modern mind-body debate, that Hornsby sees as the effective heirs of Descartes. It is rather those who have been inspired by his view of the natu-

² See W.D. Hart, *Engines of the Soul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

ral world as a world exclusive of agency, purpose or mind, governed by laws that operate from an objective, impersonal standpoint. These are the aggressive and dominant materialists. Materialists argue that if mind is to have any place in nature, it must live up to Cartesian naturalistic credentials. Those who think that mind can make the grade hold various forms of the identity theory of mind. Those who think it cannot are eliminativists, holding that mind, agency, even persons, will ultimately have no place in a thorough account of what used to be called the sublunary world.

Naive naturalism is Hornsby's attempt to avoid the horns of this trilemma – substance dualism, identity theory or eliminativism. Since the common ground for all three is acceptance of a conception of the natural world as a place exclusive of agency and personhood, she argues that the way to avoid all of the above undesirable views about the place of mind is to overturn this conception of nature. In place of this scientifically motivated, ideologically held view of what the natural world is like, she advocates the naive view that the natural world includes people, their actions and their mental lives. In short, Hornsby seeks “a conception of ‘nature’ to which humanity is not inimical” (8).

Although Hornsby is, as the dust-jacket of her book says, opposing “the whole drift of the last thirty or forty years of philosophy of mind in the English-speaking world,” she is not entirely a lone voice. Her work has many affinities with that of John McDowell. And both of these authors have been heavily influenced by Wittgenstein, Strawson and Davidson. Outside the English-speaking world, and a bit further back than thirty or forty years, we can find a strong similarity, at least in some respects, to Heidegger's project in *Being and Time*. The compa-

rability is especially evident in the latter's analysis of Descartes. When Heidegger writes:

The idea of Being as permanent presence-at-hand not only gives Descartes a motive for identifying entities within-the-world with the world in general ... it also keeps him from bringing Dasein's way of behaving into view in a manner which is ontologically appropriate ... On the contrary, he takes the Being of 'Dasein' ... in the very same way as he takes the Being of *res extensa* – namely, as substance.³

this could, with a few changes in terminology, stand for Hornsby's own diagnosis of the problems with Descartes, and with the modern mind-body debate that operates on the basis of the Cartesian conception of nature.

Naive naturalism is undoubtedly an attractive way out of a difficult place. Indeed, its naiveté makes of it a kind of return home from philosophical exile.⁴ Nonetheless, I feel, with respect to it, as if on the edge of a leap of faith. I yearn, with every fibre of my being, to say "yes" to naive naturalism. Its attractions are evident and tempting, and they are, in a sense, close enough to reach out and grab. Yet at the same time, I hesitate to jump, afraid that if I leave the familiar, if turbid, swampland of the contemporary consensus, I will find even less solid ground under my feet when I land. What exactly are my doubts?

My principle doubt concerns the issue of causation, an issue that Hornsby rightly gives center stage in her book, but still, I am afraid, fails to say enough about. Most philosophers

³ M. Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), pp. 130-1 (H. 98).

⁴ I should point out, however, that Hornsby is at pains to stress that naive naturalism is not especially a *pre-modern* view, and she quotes Marx in support of her conception of nature.

of mind today accept that mental talk is often causal talk. Hornsby belongs to the large sub-group of such philosophers who also believe that rational explanations – “she put on the kettle because she wanted some tea,” “she missed the train because she thought it left at 9 p.m.” – are causal explanations. However, the admission of causation, and especially causal explanation, into the mental in this way has often served as a bridgehead in the subsumption of the personal by a Cartesian conception of nature. Philosophers have held that causation has its home in an impersonal world populated by physical events that fall under physical laws. To the extent that the mental is also affected by causation, they argue that it must also be a realm of physical events falling under physical laws.

Here is where Hornsby parts company. She refuses to go from the claim that “she put on the kettle because she wanted some tea” is a causal explanation, to the conclusion that it is made true by events that are susceptible to subsumption under physical laws, or even that it is made true by events that are, as she sometimes puts it, accessible from an impersonal standpoint. This means that one moderately well-understood way in which causation operates – as a relation between events that can be described so as to fall under laws – is ruled out from shedding light on mental causation. How, then, does causation operate in relation to rational explanations and persons?

Hornsby’s favored way of talking is that such sentences as “she put on the kettle because she wanted some tea” show relations of dependence between facts. They are causal in the sense that when we understand that she put on the kettle because she wanted some tea, we understand that if she had not wanted some tea, she would not, other things being equal, have put on the kettle. Her putting on the kettle depended on her wanting some tea. This suggests the causal locution: “The fact that she

wanted some tea caused her to put on the kettle.” In Hornsby’s words:

When we know why she did something, the fact that she did it may be seen as depending crucially on the fact that she wanted some particular thing and thought some particular thing. And the dependency is of a causal sort, of course. (135)

It is well-known, however, that causal locutions involving facts run into trouble. If, in the sentence after “the fact that,” we allow replacement of co-extensive singular terms, as we surely must, then an argument developed by Frege and made much use of by Davidson in this context, will show the context to be truth-functional, thus leading to the unacceptable consequence that from “the fact that she wanted some tea caused her to put on the kettle” we can infer “the fact that Australia is a continent caused her to put on the kettle.”⁵ The so-called Frege Argument may not be good. Indeed, I would love to see Hornsby show that it is not. But, sadly, she nowhere so much as addresses the argument.

It might be thought that we could get rid of facts and replace them with states or events, seen as concrete particulars. Instead of having “the fact that she wanted some tea ...” we could use “her wanting some tea.” This seems to pick out a state, about which we could say that it is the cause of the action. (Or if causes must be events, we could use one of Davidson’s expedients for getting events out of states and refer to the onslaught of her wanting some tea.)

Although this maneuver would get round the worry about facts that gives rise to the Frege Argument, Hornsby es-

⁵ See the appendix in my *Donald Davidson* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991) for an explanation of the Frege Argument.

chews it. This leads her to one of the most bold and intriguing positions in her book. She denies that behind every sentence of the form “ x ... that p ,” where the dots are replaced by some propositional attitude verb such as “believes,” “thinks,” “notices,” etc., there is some particular, token state of x ’s ...ing that p .⁶ This denial of concrete token mental states, and hence of the events of the onslaughts of such states, is an ontological view of far-reaching consequences for the philosophy of mind. Philosophers of almost all persuasions assume the existence of such things as Jones’ belief that grass is green. Such entities have roles in many different areas in philosophy. Unfortunately, though this rejection of much traditionally assumed mental ontology is a very attractive position, it receives far too little discussion and defense.

Part of Hornsby’s reasons for taking this stance, I conjecture, lies in the defense of naive naturalism. If we do posit the existence of such token mental states or events, it might seem as if the following dilemma is forced upon us. If these items are also accessible from the impersonal standpoint, we have an identity theory of mind. Hornsby gives excellent reasons for being wary of such theories in a number of the papers included in this collection (see especially “Physicalism, Events and Part-Whole Relations” and “Which Physical Events are Mental Events?”). If, however, they are not accessible from the impersonal standpoint, then perhaps Hornsby is worried that we have taken too big a step in the direction of a non-naturalistic, dualistic ontology. I am not sure about this, though, and ultimately, I am not sure what leads Hornsby to draw the ontological lines exactly where she does. To see this, let us turn from

⁶ In fact, in denials of mental ontology go beyond the alleged propositional states.

the explanans of reason explanations (“she wanted some tea”) to the explanandum (“she put on the kettle”).

In this case, Hornsby declines to use the same strategy that she uses for the putative causes of actions, such as mental events. She does not deny that for every true action sentence, such as “she put on the kettle,” there is a particular event that is her putting on of the kettle. Do we find here, then, some entity, some concrete particular, which the materialist could use to force the personal into the impersonal world of Cartesian naturalism? Can we latch on to those events that are actions and force the dilemma of the previous paragraph?

Hornsby certainly refuses to be impaled on the materialistic horn. She insists that actions are events that are not accessible from the impersonal standpoint at all. What this means is that if we start from micro-events that are accessible from the impersonal standpoint, no mereological operations with those events will ever produce the events that are actions. To put it slightly differently, if we try and view actions from the impersonal standpoint, there will be a host of unanswerable questions about exactly where, in the neurophysiological processes inside a person, the action begins, and where, in the physically measurable effects of the action in the world, it ends.

Evidently, however, Hornsby does not think that by insisting that there are events that are simply inaccessible from the impersonal standpoint, she is giving way to any ghostly ontology. Why, then, could she not take the same tack with possible token mental events or states? Clearly there must be some other reason driving her rejection of these latter putative entities, but I don’t think this ever clearly emerges.

As we have just seen, Hornsby claims that some sentences that imply agency, such as “she wanted some tea,” do not entail the existence of token states or events. Other sentences that re-

veal agency, however, such as “she put on the kettle,” do. Most philosophers treat these cases on a par by taking the first kind to entail the existence of token mental states or events. I have asked why Hornsby cannot allow the existence of token mental states or events. But given that she does not, we can equally ask, why does she insist on the existence of action-events? Why not treat sentences like “she put on the kettle” in the way in which she treats sentences like “she wanted some tea”?

One argument that Hornsby gives for the existence of action-events is that actions have effects in the world. Indeed, this is the point of most actions, to achieve a desired effect: she put on the kettle because she wanted some tea, and putting on the kettle is a causal requirement for tea’s being made. The argument finishes: if actions have effects, they must be causes, and if they are causes, they must be events.

Hornsby considers an objection that someone could make to this argument. “Someone might allow that there is causality here, but say that only a philosopher bent upon forcing causality into the event-event model would introduce ‘an action’” (131). The objector could go on to say that the tea’s being made is causally dependent on the agent, and not on any alleged action-event of the agent. Hornsby counters that this ignores the fact that the agent has to do something if the tea is to be made, and this doing something is an action-event. Although we say that the agent made happen the event of the tea’s being made, this does not impute mysterious causal powers to the agent. It simply means that some action of the agent caused the tea to be made. That action, as Davidson argued and Hornsby accepts, can be variously described in terms of its effects. Thus “putting on the kettle,” “turning on the gas,”

“making the tea,” can all be descriptions of the same action. In Davidson’s words, “an agent causes what his actions cause.”⁷

The objection which Hornsby considers and answers here, an objection to positing action-events, is in fact exactly parallel to Hornsby’s own objection to the claim that the causal antecedents of an action must be mental events inside the agent. As we noted, she allows that there is causality present in such claims as “she put on the kettle because she wanted some tea,” but argues, in effect, that it is only a “philosopher bent upon forcing causality into the event-event model” that would introduce a mental item, such as a token state or event, to be the cause of the action. But if, to avoid mysterious forms of agent causality, we say that when an agent brings about something in the world, that thing is caused by an action of the agent, what are we to say about the relation between the agent and her action? If there is no event that causes the action, as it were inside the agent, then one of the following three possibilities must surely be true. (1) The agent causes the action but not by bringing about any other event. In other words, we have a form of agent causation. (2) The action-event has no cause at all, although it is causally explained by giving the agent’s reasons. (3) The action-event that is not accessible from the impersonal standpoint has an event cause that is accessible from that standpoint.

None of these options is attractive. As far as agent causation goes, talk that is reminiscent of such a notion is certainly part of everyday talk about actions, and it also shows up in what Hornsby is willing to say about them, as when she writes: “a person’s actions are the events at the start of those series [of

⁷ Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 53.

events] she initiates" (132). Since "initiates" is clearly a causal verb, this implies that we have a causal sequence going from the agent, to the action, to the actions various effects. Yet Hornsby does not acknowledge, let alone defend, any doctrine of agent causation. And it faces many well-known objections.

As for (2), it is implausible that events, at least everyday, common or garden events, should have no cause at all, especially if there are causal explanations for them. That leaves (3), which may be Hornsby's position. But if actions can have causes that do not themselves belong to the world of agency, then it is unclear why the alleged effects of actions could not have such causes. And if that were the case, we no longer would have an argument for treating the ontology behind "she put on the kettle" differently from the ontology behind "she wanted some tea."

For these reasons, along with many others, I am wary of naive naturalism at the same time as I greatly admire it. Hornsby has succeeded in challenging, in a creative and interesting way, various deeply held and often unexamined presuppositions in the discussion of the place of rational beings in nature. But there are many new questions raised and a lot of work still to be done.

