

AN INTERVIEW WITH HELEN STEWARD

# ON AGENCY AND THE RELEVANCE OF PHILOSOPHY



Illustration: Marianne Røthe Arnesen

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In early April, Helen Steward, Senior Lecturer at the University of Leeds and author of several books on philosophy of action and mind was in town to participate at the CSMN workshop on her latest book, *A Metaphysics for Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). *Filosofisk supplement* had the pleasure of talking with her about her newest project.

*In the preface to your book, A Metaphysics for Freedom, you write that you “have always thought the free will problem is the most interesting problem in philosophy.” Considering the vast amount of literature on the topic it seems a lot of philosophers tend to agree with you. Could you give a brief characterization of the problem and explain what makes it so special?*

Roughly speaking, I take the problem to be the issue of how beings like us really are in charge of things as far as our own lives are concerned, at least to a certain extent. How can it be that things really are up to us, when from another point of view, it looks as though we’re made of flesh and blood and the things that happen to our bodies are produced by electrical impulses, things that happen in our neurons and so on? We’re all physical creatures, and given certain, I think, very tempting pictures of what it is to be part of the physical universe, it can come to seem really mysterious that anything can be up to us. So, that is the problem that I took

myself to be writing about. But I think there is more than one reason why the free will problem is so fascinating. It is obviously tremendously important because it seems to follow from the need for us to be morally responsible for things. We have to find some way in which it seems to be true that we are in charge of things and that some things are up to us and so on. It is very important for the way we conduct ourselves in society. We punish people for doing wrong things and so on, and that seems really unjust if nobody is in charge of what they do. But the other thing which I think makes it really fascinating is that, for someone to whom philosophy seems really appealing in the first place, it is really hard and really exiting. There is a bit of philosophy of language, there is metaphysics, moral philosophy, there is stuff about epistemology – it has got everything. So, all sorts of bits of philosophy come together in the free will problem, and I think that is another reason why, for someone who likes philosophy, it is a real magnet.

*You agree that moral responsibility and free will are connected in important ways. However, unlike many philosophers you do not want to take moral responsibility as your starting point. What are your reasons for choosing an alternative point of departure?*

I think it is partly because I felt that those approac-

hes that start from the moral responsibility side of things, which basically treat the problem as a problem in ethics, tend to miss something I think is really important about the metaphysics of agency. So lots of people dealing with the problem are basically ethicists and they're very cavalier about the accounts of agency that underwrite their view, they do not really bother about it much. Whereas I think it is really important to have an account of agency to start with, in which it is at least intelligible that we might be beings that things could be up to. Lots of people, it seems to me, do not think about that before beginning. They just plunge straight in at a quite high level on the ethical problem, and they do not get their accounts of agency sorted out. I think that leads people up all sorts of wrong alleys and blind pathways, because – I think – there is more than one problem in the area of free will and they get mixed together and mixed up, unless you begin at the metaphysical level. So I try to begin at the metaphysical basics.

*So you are looking for a concept of “basic agency” or “basic agent” that has to be there in order for us to even get started talking of a “higher-level” type of agency involving moral responsibility?*

That is right. They are very simple ideas, really. Things that are morally responsible for things have at the very least got to be what I call agents. So you

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know a chair can't be morally responsible for anything, a banana can't be morally responsible for anything. And the main reason why not is that they are not agents. So what's an *agent*? That is where I start. What is it to be this sort of thing that potentially might be morally responsible for something? I think it is only a necessary condition, though, it is definitely not a sufficient condition for moral responsibility. There are agents, of course, who are not morally responsible, such as animals. But at the very least you have got to be an agent in order to be morally responsible.

In the free will debate, the classical divide has been between compatibilists on the one side and incompatibilists on the other [i.e. between philosophers who hold that free will is compatible with the possibility of universal determinism being true and those who do not]. Your account falls

on the incompatibilist side; you call your position “Agency Incompatibilism”. Nevertheless, you are in agreement with the compatibilists in rejecting the principle of Alternative Possibilities [the principle that a person is morally responsible for what she has done only if she could have done otherwise] so often advocated by the incompatibilists. Could you say something about why you still want to call yourself an incompatibilist?

When I first thought of my position, I thought of it as a position that was neither clearly compatibilist nor incompatibilist. I took the best bits from both, I thought. I agreed, as it were, with incompatibilism in that we have to be settlers. That is one major way in which we differ from, say, chairs, and it is very, very important – I believe – that we are able to settle matters in the universe. But at the same time I wanted to say that the compatibilists have got something right when they say that the possibility of doing B instead of A, when you've got no reason to do B, is pointless. Who wants that? How can freedom consist in something so pointless as the ability to do things you have no reason to do and would never want to do in a million years? That is stupid, and I have always found this compatibilist argument very compelling. What I wanted to do, then, was to formulate a version of incompatibilism that did not fall to that compatibilist objection. Still, I believe, lots and lots of stuff is up to me, such as *when* I choose, or – if the thing is actually a proper action involving physical movements and so on – *how* I move, how exactly I perform the action, *whether* I do it in this way or that way. Lots and lots of stuff remain for me to settle.

*That brings us to the concepts of “settling” and “up-to-usness” which are very important for your account of agency. Could you give a brief introduction for those who haven't read your book? Why do we need those concepts to make sense of freedom and agency?*

I suppose the thought was to try to locate something which I think is intuitively part of the distinction between the inanimate world and the animate. By inanimate I actually mean plants as well. I do not think they have the capacity to settle. The predictability of the world is enormously decreased as a result of the fact that animals are on the scene. Because animals do, I think, have the capacity to settle, as I put it, whether the world is going to go that way or this way, to the right or to the left, to put it very simply. Even a very simple animal could choose. But that capacity to take the

world in one direction rather than another seems to me primitively part of our conception of what agents can do, and that is definitely not part of our conception of what things like bananas can do, or even more complicated things, like washing machines. They can move, but there is no flexibility: they do what their program says. And I know a lot of people will say, “Well, it is the same for animals, they will do what their program says”. And of course, to a certain extent, that is true. We do have instincts; all animals have instincts, including us, which do constrain what can be thought of as an appropriate choice for the animal. No spider is free not to bother spinning some webs, because it is part of the spider’s nature to have a web-spinning type of life. But all the same, the spider can build the web here, or it could build the web there. It has got some flexibility. It has got some freedom to settle where the web will be, for example, or when it is going to spin the web or whether it is going to go between this blade of grass and that blade of grass. Those sorts of things are *settled* by the spider at the point of action, I want to say, rather than, as determinism says, at the beginning of time. I just find that idea mind boggling; it can’t be like that.

*But where does the concept of up-to-usness come into the picture? As you say, there are many ways in which things can be settled that do not involve agents. Is there a difference between up-to-usness and settling or is something being up to someone a variety of settling?*

I think, and this has only become clear to me in the last few days [during the workshop at CSMN], that the ability to settle is a necessary condition of the ability for something being up to you, but it is not a sufficient condition. Because you can have

settling in the universe as it were, where indeterministic events occur, but nothing is up to anything because the thing is not of the right kind to be the sort of thing that something can be up to. And I think I have only really realized that over the last few days. I have not been careful enough about what the relation between settling and up-to-usness was. They are certainly not the same thing. But there can be varieties of settling, the kind that animals and us go in for, such that it is up-to-us what we settle. But the settling bit is just necessary for up-to-usness. One thing that I think maybe I did not bring out enough in the book, and that maybe I need to bring out more, is that agents have other features. They are not just settlers; they are loci of subjectivity and so on. We think of human agents as persons, but obviously the concept “person” is too specific to apply comfortably to animals, which is a point I make in the book. There is a point of view on the world that that creature has, and it is doing stuff – it is not like a chair or a banana. There is a really, really deep distinction between things in the world that are like that, animated and enlivened by something, and those that are not. I do not know what to call it really – “personhood” is too rich a concept. There is no normal word that picks out the right class of things. Even “animals” won’t do. And so I’m looking for a concept that we do not have an ordinary name for, and “agent” is what I have landed on. But even that is not brilliant. Ordinary language is lacking. There is definitely an important place where that concept is needed and no word is available. We need a term.

*The phenomenon of top-down causation is important for your account of agency. [Top-down causation refers to the effects on parts of organized systems that cannot be fully analyzed*





*in terms of part-level behaviour but instead requires reference to the higher-level system itself.] In A Metaphysics for Freedom, you write that there has to be top-down causation for anything to be up to the agent.*

Yes. I suppose I thought that if stuff was up to a complicated organism like an animal – like a human animal – it has to be the case that we have to be able to bring things about in our own parts. That seemed to me to be a condition, because if everything I do is brought about by things that go on in my parts, it seems to me that really does detract enormously from the sense that things are up to me – me the animal, the whole thing. We just become like washing machines, very, very complicated washing machines, but such that what goes

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on in our parts determines what we do. It seems to me that that conception had to be toppled in order to make way for the view I wanted to hold. So I wanted to explore whether it was possible for there to be top-down causation. I think causation has to be top-down rather than antecedent, which is the traditional libertarian way to think about it – that there is input into the material world from the agent prior to the physical events that bring about, say, your arm going up, you kind of inject agential power right from the start of the causal chain. That

just seemed hopeless to me. This picture looks like it has got to be dualist and naturalistically hopeless. So it seems to me that what you needed instead was top-down causation. I tried to think about ways in which it might make sense to think of there being top-down causation in the world in general. I think we have become very, very inclined to think that everything a big thing does is composed of what little things do, but, actually, that is a prejudice. It is a very understandable prejudice because in lots of cases it is very important for understanding the behaviour of the whole to understand the behaviour of its parts. But particularly where biology is concerned, it also seems true that the behaviour of the whole affects the behaviour of the parts. To understand that the fact that this cell is part of this tissue, and this tissue is part of this organ, and this organ is part of this creature could actually matter to how the cell behaves.

*Moving on to another topic, there is an ongoing debate about the relevance of the humanities both in Europe and the US. How we answer questions like “What is the product of the humanities?” and “Do they contribute to the economy?” not only influences the public image of the humanities, but can have profound effects on budgeting decisions as well. What, in your mind, is the value of the humanities and of philosophy in general?*

Wow! (*sighs*) I suppose there are lots and lots of things to mention. First of all, I think science can’t manage without the humanities, it can’t manage without subjects like philosophy to take the supposed results of science, and try to figure out their relevance and importance for things like conceptions of the human person, for instance. Science needs the input of philosophy. The idea “Let’s just do science and forget about the humanities” is totally wrong. I think science progresses in part by taking notice of what subjects like philosophy have to offer it. Lots of the greatest advances in science have been prompted by thought of a type that is clearly philosophical.

*Do you think this is still the case for science today?*

No, I think that is not so much the case anymore now. But I think that that is a shame. It is much more difficult now that science has become so specialized. Scientists themselves deal with much smaller bits of their subjects than used to be the case. It used to be the case that, if you were a phy-

sicist, you would know about all sorts of bits of physics. Now, people are doing one tiny little problem on one particular tiny little bit of physics, or biology, or whatever it may be, and they do not know very much about the rest of it – or at least they forget what they once knew, or they do not bring it to bear.

*It seems that to some extent that is the case for philosophy as well.*

Absolutely, and I deplore this tendency. I think the richest accounts in the development of thought have always taken account of a very wide spectrum of knowledge. Of course there are advantages to the specialized way of doing philosophy, too. You get little knotty problems sorted out, and little knotty problems need sorting out. But real progress and the revolutions that I think we need from time to time in thinking do not come about from sorting out little knotty problems – at least not from that alone. They need people who think across disciplines, certainly across their own disciplines, and preferably in an interdisciplinary way.

*Pertaining to the question of relevance, do you think philosophers have any special responsibility when it comes to participating in public debates?*

I think all academics have such a responsibility insofar as we are all paid by the state to think about stuff. I do think that brings certain responsibilities with it: We all ought to make contributions. I do not necessarily mean us all stepping up and going on TV – some of us would be rubbish at that – but at least talking to the people we meet about why we think our subjects are important, and why they should be funded if we think they should, as presumably we do.

*That sounds great – for someone who works in moral or political philosophy. But how do you explain the importance of work on, say, the foundations of mathematics or stuff involving thought experiments featuring zombies to a layperson?*

I guess you have to get the level right. You cannot hope to fully explain to a layperson who has not got the concepts yet, why you are looking at zombies, or whatever it is you are looking at. And I do not think one should hope to be able to do that. You need an education to understand the problems, and how the problems fit into bigger

problems, and those into even bigger problems, and so on. In a five-minute conversation with someone on a train, you cannot hope to get that sort of stuff across. I think what you have to have is a sort of general account of why it might be important in general to have a bunch of people – maybe not very many, but some people – thinking about certain types of things and communicating their reflections to other people working on related kinds of things and of how that is important to the health of a society. One very obvious bit of the value of academia is that most of us who are academics teach and thereby communicate the value of reflective thinking to our students – at least that is what you hope to do – and then they go off into their different walks of life as critical, reflective people who understand why thinking about things is important. That, I think, is a very easily justifiable account of the philosopher's existence: One wants and needs people who do not just uncritically accept what other people tell them to do, and who are going to be alive to different ways of doing things.

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*Is there a piece of advice you give your students about what to do or do not do that you want to share with other young philosophers?*

What is most important is to be intellectually independent: not to be too led by fashion or by your particular teacher or mentor. To really keep alive the sense of your own position and to go where your nose leads you philosophically. I think, again, that mainly because of institutional pressures, people are too inclined to think “I will write about this or that because it is fashionable, and I will probably get something published about that,” or “I will work with so and so because he is a big figure”. Of course, you can see why people do those things, but I do not think it is good for the subject and I do not think it is good for the person, either, because you end up with a compromised intellectual view, which is not really yours. So that is what I would say.

*To be a free agent in every aspect?*

Yes, be a free agent!