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More Substance, Please:
A Dualist-Theistic Reply To Michael Esfeld's
Minimalist Ontology of Persons

Abstract:

Michael Esfeld has recently put forth his ontology of persons, with which he hopes to secure freedom and irreducible personhood as well as scientific realism, all by working with minimal ontological assumptions. I present his view and investigate it, finding it too minimalistic: Esfeld's featureless matter points do not warrant an emergence of persons from matter, and his claim that persons can create themselves by adopting a normative attitude seems more like a just-so story. Also, Esfeld's rejection of classical mind-body dualism seems premature. I present as an alternative a modified mind-body dualism which solves the problems of Esfeld's view and argue that embedding it in a theistic worldview is favorable for any account that seeks to establish irreducible personhood.

Keywords:

persons, naturalism, Super-Humeanism, causal closure, dualism, minimalist ontology

I. Introduction

If you want to get rid of harmful body fat, you basically have two options: either you eat less and lose weight, or you build muscles. In the latter case, you may not end up lighter, but still healthier.

Something similar goes for ontologies. In order to get a healthy ontology (i.e., one which adequately explains important phenomena of the world), one can try to make do with as few metaphysical postulates as

possible, or embrace richer ontological resources for the sake of robust explanatory power. Michael Esfeld's world-view is constructed in the spirit of the former, minimalist paradigm. His ontology of nature has been around for some time now. It seeks to establish scientific realism with no more than the assumption of matter points in motion. More recently, he has presented his metaphysics of human persons, which is likewise minimalistic but at the same time seeks to salvage human personhood and free will. These features make it an ideal target for a critique of naturalism: while other naturalist views either make ontological commitments controversial among naturalists or stay "lean" at the expense of abandoning common-sense beliefs (like those in persons or free will), Esfeld's theory refrains from both pitfalls.

In this paper, I analyze and critique Esfeld's position. Like him, I believe in both scientific realism and the irreducibility of persons. Unlike him, I do not think that such a "starving ontology"¹ is sufficient to establish a robust notion of irreducible persons. I shall first present Esfeld's view of persons, where it is inevitable to include his ontology of nature, since the former is inextricably intertwined with the latter. Then, I proceed by criticizing his position. I start by questioning his two basic assumptions of Super-Humeanism and *Completeness*, which pave the way for his minimalist ontology of persons. After that, I defuse his objections against classical (substance) dualism, showing that dualism, *contra* Esfeld, still is a serious contender. Finally, I analyze his account of the genesis of persons, finding it unstable: it either collapses into a reductionist account or stands in need of more ontological resources. In the last section, I discuss how a dualism of the sort dismissed by Esfeld is capable of accounting for persons in a robust way.

II. Michael Esfeld's Minimalist Ontology of Persons

Esfeld's overarching project is to salvage human freedom and personhood *without compromising scientific realism*. Scientific realism is roughly the view that scientific theories describe things which exist mind-independently: when scientists establish theories to explain the behavior of the physical world, they tap into the reality of what actually happens in it. However, if the physical world has such a reality of its own, then the question arises how our free will squares with it, since often free will is expressed in actions which partake in the physical world. That is what philosophers typically mean by mental causation: persons, with their minds, cause events in the physical world. The addition of "persons" is crucial. It is *persons* who are free and who mentally cause physical events, not just minds *tout court*. As regards the debate about mental causation, Esfeld thinks that it has so far been framed by the extremes of physicalism on the one hand and (Cartesian) dualism on the other hand:

We thus get to the traditional opposition between physicalism on the one hand and dualism on the other that dominates the debate from the exchange of letters between Hobbes and Descartes to this day.²

As we will see, he takes his approach to be a *tertium via* that navigates through the *Scylla* of physicalism and the *Charybdis* of Cartesian dualism, both of which he rejects. That third way is mainly driven by an invocation of the principle of parsimony, or Ockham's razor, according to which entities should not be multiplied beyond what is necessary for a theory to explain its *explananda*. In contrast to Cartesian dualism, he does not consider persons further substances in the world; in opposition to physicalism, he insists that persons are not reducible

1) See Lazarovici, "Starving Ontology."

2) Esfeld, "Super-Humeanism," 263.

to matter. To understand just how Esfeld embeds persons in the physical world, we first need to understand his ontology of nature.

II.1 Esfeld's Ontology of Nature

Michael Esfeld's philosophy of human personhood cannot be understood without his philosophy of nature, Super-Humeanism. Humeanism is the well-known view of nature that claims that there are no necessary causal connections between events, and that the laws of nature have no modal force either, but are read off the actual events. Super-Humeanism adds to that the claim that matter does not even have categorical (non-causal) qualities; in Esfeld's version, the universe consists of featureless matter-points whose movements determine all the familiar physical quantities like mass, charge, or spin. At the basis, thus, there is nothing but those matter points and their (changing) spatial relations. Everything else in the physical world derives from that.

Esfeld thinks his Super-Humeanism is a good way to ontologically anchor scientific realism. Importantly, he ties scientific realism to the principle of Completeness, by which he understands the proposition "For any physical event p , there is a complete physical cause insofar as p has a cause at all."³ In addition, Esfeld believes that scientific realism is inextricably tied to *Completeness*: "It is not clear how one can reject this principle while endorsing realism with respect to what science tells us about the natural world."⁴

One reason why he rejects both interactive dualism *and* a non-Humean view of laws and causation is that in his view their combination would lead to a "clash" between the modal powers of nature and mental causation: "It is not clear how the mental powers could cause behaviour without clashing with the physical powers as they are conceptualized by the laws of physics."⁵

Hence, he seeks a position where mental causation makes a difference, albeit without causing tension with the laws of nature. Super-Humeanism fits the bill because it implies no modality in nature, and hence no "clash of powers." But his more basic worry is that if one admitted mental powers into the picture, then there would be a "need to amend (if not distort) physical theories in such a way that they include mental variables in their dynamical laws in order to cover the dynamics of physical events."⁶ His assumption is thus that mental powers, if they exist, would have to be incorporated into physical theories and dynamical equations. But altering our physical theories in this way is out of the question for him because those "physical theories as they stand tell the truth about the physical realm (or theories in the same vein as our current ones do so)."⁷ But how can minds make any difference in the world given that their causal influence changes the trajectories of some physical systems? Is it not inevitable that that would make "the laws of physics lie,"⁸ since they would predict different patterns of motion than those that actually happen?

Here is where Super-Humeanism can play out its strengths. It has it that the laws of nature are read off the actual events; the events are in no way determined by the laws. Thus, it is possible to derive the laws from a mosaic of events *that already contains physical events caused by minds*. At this point, two options are open to the Super-Humeanist. He can either accept that mental causation changes the *laws* (as done by Jenann Ismael)⁹

3) Ibid., 262.

4) Ibid., 263.

5) Ibid.

6) Ibid., 264.

7) Ibid.

8) To use a phrase coined by Nancy Cartwright in *Physics Lie*.

9) Ismael, *Physics Makes Us Free*.

or follow Esfeld in relegating the influence of mental causation to the *initial conditions* of the universe. What sounds like bizarre retroactive causation is perfectly consistent with the metaphysics of Super-Humeanism: since there are no intrinsic qualities whatsoever, and all physical quantities derive from motion, the initial conditions (understood in terms of derived quantities) can be fixed differently in function of what the laws are. Esfeld prefers to keep the laws untouched and let mental causation fix the initial conditions.

Most dualists subscribe to a modal (or necessitarian) view of causation and the laws of nature, and Esfeld proffers his non-modal/non-dualistic theory. Thus, in the logical space of positions, the combination “Super-Humeanism/dualism” is still vacant. But a combination of Super-Humeanism and dualism, Esfeld holds, would be unfortunate:

Assuming dualism, it seems that there can be an exact physical duplicate of the actual world, but in this duplicate, there are no mental events that cause some of the physical events. This would be a zombie world so to speak. ... If there is the metaphysical possibility of an exact physical duplicate of the actual world in which there are no mental causes of some of the physical events, then mental causation is abandoned also in the actual world and the position runs into epiphenomenalism (...). To exclude this metaphysical possibility, however, it seems that one has to drop dualism.¹⁰

On (Super-)Humeanism, there is no modality in nature that fixes the course of events. Thus, the actual world w with a certain pattern of physical events some of which are caused by minds and a world w^* without minds but the same pattern are physically identical, and, what is more, identical with respect to the laws of nature, because according to Humeanism those supervene on the actual physical events. But then the question arises how one can ascertain the causal contribution of mental events in w . The answer is that this is impossible; there is no counterfactually robust answer from the viewpoint of w^* that the course of events would have been different had there been mental events. And so dualism runs the risk of becoming epiphenomenal, which is what Esfeld seeks to avoid, and so must offer a different solution.

II.2 Esfeld’s Ontology of Persons

That solution is to make persons arise from sufficient physical conditions:

If the metaphysical possibility of a physical duplicate of the actual world without mental events causing some physical events is to be excluded, this implies that the fact that there are mental events – more precisely, the fact that there are persons or minds that act – is fixed by and thus supervenes on the configuration of the physical events and its evolution. ... There are purely physical sufficient conditions (that is, *metaphysically* sufficient conditions) for physical systems to be organisms including human beings with minds and free will. This is the limitation that we have to impose on the dualism that is admissible in this context.¹¹

Thus, Esfeld hopes to ensure that minds definitely make a difference in a physical duplicate of our world. I wish to highlight three points from above quotation. First, persons *supervene* on physical configurations. Second, persons arise whenever there are *sufficient physical conditions*. Third, Esfeld admits *some* form of dualism.

10) Esfeld, “Super-Humeanism,” 266.

11) *Ibid.*, original emphasis.

Taken together, those expressions make clear that Esfeld does not have a physicalist picture of persons in mind, otherwise he would be content with supervenience; “sufficient conditions” is causal language, where the effect is distinct from the cause. What kind of dualism does Esfeld have in mind here? It is rather only a “dualism light” (personal conversation), a dualism not of substances, but of matter and persons. What matters most to Esfeld is that persons are ontological primitives, irreducible to matter in motion. What distinguishes persons from matter is normativity:

There is a *principled* argument why the ontology of science is not complete when it comes to persons. To integrate normativity into this ontology is not an issue of further progress in science, but in principle excluded, whatever progress (neuro)science may make.¹²

At this point, we learn a further reason why Esfeld rejects classical (Cartesian) interactive dualism, namely that the point of contact between mind and matter is unclear:

The problem for Descartes is that on the one hand, he has to conceive a point of contact of both these substances. However, on the other hand, any conceivable point of contact where the non-physical mind is supposed to get in touch with the material domain is widely implausible (such as a point of contact located somewhere in the brain, as in the pineal gland for Descartes).¹³

Shortly after, he identifies the more basic problem of classical dualism as being “conceived as a dualism of two types of entities of the same category, such as a dualism of a physical and a mental substance as in Descartes, a dualism of physical and mental properties from Spinoza and Leibniz on to contemporary non-reductionist positions, a dualism of physical and mental states of affairs, facts, aspects, etc.”¹⁴ The missing point of contact is only indicative of this deeper metaphysical issue, thinks Esfeld.

What we face here is a typical instance of the interaction problem that already bewildered Elisabeth of Bohemia¹⁵. Esfeld makes explicit that he identifies the problem as a lack of a point of contact between mind and body, where by “point of contact” he literally means some place in the body, like the pineal gland proposed by Descartes. Arguably, however, the pineal gland does not quite fit the bill, and no other convincing alternative has been presented so far. He concludes that, since no plausible point of contact can be found, the interaction between a mental and a physical substance cannot happen, and thus the relation between the mental and the physical must be conceptualized differently than as one between two sorts of substances.

So, Esfeld’s persons are no Cartesian souls, but he insists that although they arise once sufficient physical conditions are in place, they are not determined physically as regards their intentions, beliefs, and so forth.¹⁶ This of course puts into even sharper focus the question *what* persons are: determined by matter as regards their existence, but not their normative dimension; – ontologically primitive, but not mental substances. What kind of entity could satisfy that description?

A key summary can be found in *Science and Human Freedom*: “Being a person is not a fact, a property or a substance in addition to the material ones. It is an attitude that one adopts to oneself and others. In

12) Esfeld, *Science and Human Freedom*, 140.

13) Ibid.

14) Ibid., 141

15) Shapiro, Correspondence between Elisabeth and Descartes.

16) Esfeld, “Super-Humeanism,” 268

adopting this attitude, one brings oneself into existence as a being that creates meaning and thereby rules for thought and action.”¹⁷

Two things stand out here: first, a person is not a fact, property, or substance, but rather an *attitude*; second, a person creates herself by adopting the requisite attitude. That attitude is a normative one, as he specifies later on in the book, where he also declares that “norms are not facts in the world.”¹⁸ Persons “come into existence by deliberating about what they should believe and do, thereby creating a normative web of rights and obligations, of commitments, entitlements and precluded entitlements in which they situate themselves”;¹⁹ and: “They are an ontological primitive over and above the physical ones, since their normative attitudes cannot be reduced to matter in motion.”²⁰

More precisely, Esfeld conceives of persons in structural parallelism to matter. While matter consists of featureless points which are individuated by the spatial relations in which they stand to one another, persons are “mind points,” individuated by normative relations.²¹ Importantly, mention of “mind points” should not be understood as the introduction of a new type of points alongside matter points; that would be a contradiction to his previous claim that persons are not further facts, properties, or substances in addition to matter. The universe consists solely of matter points, some of which stand in normative relations to one another and thus constitute persons:

The categorical difference between matter points and person or mind points lies in the difference in these relations: distances that exist as a matter of fact versus norms that come into being through certain configurations of matter in motion adopting to themselves and others the attitude of taking themselves and the others to be situated in a web of rights and obligations.²²

Thus, it is *relations* (normative vs. spatial) rather than intrinsic qualities or natures that distinguishes persons from matter.

One could object at this point that it is unjustified to speak of persons as ontological primitives if their hallmark is something as ephemeral as their type of relation (normative), where norms are not even accorded the status of facts. Although he only accepts physical facts (facts about matter points) as facts, Esfeld is adamant about norms (and therefore persons) existing in the same way as matter does: “They exist, as the matter in motion exists.”²³ “Existence and truth are unequivocal. Either something exists or it does not exist.”²⁴

In summary, persons are but configurations of matter points that create themselves as persons by taking a normative stance. They thereby do not become further facts in the world, because norms are not facts. It is no coincidence that this sounds quite existentialist: Esfeld explicitly likens his view to Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialism, where persons create themselves and their values²⁵.

17) Esfeld, *Science and Human Freedom*, ix.

18) *Ibid.*, 141.

19) *Ibid.*

20) *Ibid.*

21) *Ibid.*, 142.

22) *Ibid.*, 143.

23) *Ibid.*

24) *Ibid.*, 144.

25) *Ibid.*, 154.

III. Criticism of ME's Position

III.1 Regarding Super-Humeanism

This is not the place to discuss Super-Humeanism as a theory of the laws of nature. What I wish to do, though, is to dwell a bit on the untoward consequence that Esfeld himself notes (see section II.1). Esfeld offers a solution to that problem within the confines of Super-Humeanism (see section II.1). But what if one starts with a non-Humean account? Super-Humeanism is not needed to ensure the causal efficacy of minds. The *desideratum* is a position according to which a physical twin of the actual world but without minds is no longer metaphysically possible. On any modal account of the laws of nature (and of causality), the course of events in the actual world w is the result of both natural modality and mental causation; thus, if mental causation is absent in a possible world w' , the consequence is that the course of event changes, and thus w' cannot be a physical twin of w . Necessitarian accounts of causality and the laws of nature are thus *prima facie* equally good candidates for ensuring the causal efficacy of minds as Humeanism. However, as we have seen, regarding this picture Esfeld fears a “clash” of mental and physical powers, or alternatively the breakdown of scientific realism. I shall argue in the next section that both worries are unfounded.

III.2 Regarding Completeness

As indicated, Esfeld enshrines his commitment to scientific realism in the principle of Completeness:

For any physical event p , there is a complete physical cause insofar as p has a cause at all.²⁶

Of the “inconsistency tetrad” of mental causation, non-identity of mental and physical states, Completeness, and causal overdetermination, Esfeld keeps mental causation and rejects physicalism (the identity of mental and physical states)²⁷; this is key to his overall project. Of the two remaining propositions he prefers to drop overdetermination and keep Completeness, because he thinks dismissing completeness undermines scientific realism. Note that Esfeld's formulation of Completeness is equivalent to the physicalist causal closure principle (CCP), for example as rendered in Kim.²⁸ Thus, Esfeld rejects one tenet of physicalism (identity of mental and physical states), while embracing the other (CCP).

Why not reject Completeness? After all, it is the only proposition in the tetrad that is not widely supported by common sense and/or good arguments.²⁹ Esfeld believes that dropping it would be tantamount to sacrificing scientific realism. However, how exactly is this true? Although Esfeld does not say, here is a reasoning reconstructed from above formulation of Completeness. If scientific realism depends on Completeness, then Completeness requires all physical effects to have complete physical causes; conversely, if at least one physical event had a non-physical cause, scientific realism would break down. The idea that seems to lurk in the back-

26) Esfeld, “Super-Humeanism,” 263.

27) Of course, there is a variety of views among physicalists, for instance, identity theory (type identity of mental and physical states), multiple realizability (token identity), or functionalism (mental states are functions implemented in physical states). Nonetheless, all hold that mental states are ultimately no more than physical states.

28) Kim, *Mind in World*.

29) Mental causation is obviously a commonsense belief. Causal overdetermination is so insofar as a systematic overdetermination of physical events by both mental and brain events would raise the question which difference the mental events make. As for non-identity, even if it were not a widely shared intuition (which I think it is), there would still be good arguments in its favor.

ground here is that the contribution of a non-physical cause would falsify the pertinent law of nature, expressed as a dynamical equation.³⁰ And since scientific realism assigns more than just instrumental value to law-like formulas, this is interpreted as a serious threat to scientific realism.

This fear that mental causation could invalidate the laws of nature rests on two debatable assumptions: (1) that laws of nature represent (to use Daniel von Wachter's term)³¹ "regularities of successions" (ROSs); and (2) that the causal efficacy of minds must be reflected in the dynamical equations that describe the movements of physical systems. As to (1), the ROS conception of the laws of nature has it that the laws specify, for any given physical system s which state it will be in next, taking of course into account the initial conditions C . In other words, on this view the laws are if-then statements. Then, or so the objection goes, if a mind interacts with s , the consequent of the conditional statement will not become true, and the law of nature will be invalidated. The ROS view basically identifies laws of nature with dynamical equations, which indeed specify outcomes from given initial conditions. But it is exactly this identification that shows a flaw in the objection: dynamical equations depend on initial conditions, and so if mental causation simply changes the initial conditions, then the dynamical equation remains unscathed. This reply is employed by Von Wachter³² and Jeffrey Koperski.³³

But there is yet another, even more powerful reply open to those who reject CCP. It is that laws should not be identified with dynamical equations to begin with, because dynamical equations derive from the laws,³⁴ and the laws themselves do not specify any ROSs. The laws of nature could then be conceptualized in several ways that remove them from the danger of being invalidated by mental causation. For example, they could be taken to be constraints on the possible physical histories of a physical system,³⁵ or one could view them as supervening on the dispositions of physical systems,³⁶ or one could conceive of them as *directednesses* toward a future state.³⁷ In none of these cases does mental intervention need to break a law of nature, as I have argued elsewhere³⁸.

As for (2), it is ill-founded for two reasons. First, mental influences should be considered *local*, not *global*. A local influence is one that obtains in a specific place, at a specific time, while a global influence is one that occurs equally in all places and at all times. For example, the gravitational equations are thought to hold globally; it does not matter which time or place in the universe we pick, a physical system will always behave according to them. Changing the gravitational equations would thus apply to all places and times in spacetime. By contrast, a mental influence, being local, does not alter the fundamental makeup of spacetime, but only the state of one, particular physical system. If mental causation were global, then physics and the other sciences would have to be reconstructed from the bottom up. But it is precisely physics that supports

30) See Esfeld, "Determinism in Physics."

31) See Von Wachter, "Miracles Are Not Violations."

32) Ibid.

33) Koperski, "Breaking Nature," and Koperski, *Divine Action*.

34) Take the example of the well-known Newtonian law $F = ma$. It does not specify the temporal evolution of a physical system, only the relation between force and mass times acceleration. What does specify the temporal evolution is the correspondent Euler-Lagrange equation () which derives from the Newtonian equation.

35) See Koperski, "Breaking Nature," and Koperski, *Divine Action*, for a theistic version; and Chen and Goldstein, "Without a Fundamental Direction of Time," for a non-theistic one.

36) Harré and Madden, "Causal Powers," and Bird, *Nature's Metaphysics*.

37) Von Wachter, *Die Kausale Struktur*, and Von Wachter, "Miracles are not Violations."

38) Cucu, "Interacting Minds," pt. IV.

the idea of *local* conservation laws³⁹ which are formulated in a conditional way: roughly put, if and only if no non-physical influences are at work, then energy and/or momentum are conserved⁴⁰.

Second, making mental influences part of dynamical equations destroys the very freedom that Esfeld defends: freedom is characterized precisely by *not* being subject to laws of nature (or their derivatives), but to reasons, where reasons again do not obey laws of nature in any strict sense. By contrast, a law of nature is characterized precisely by not being responsive to reasons, but to specify mathematically the relationship between two or more physical quantities.

The upshot is that there are ways to maintain scientific realism without commitment to Completeness. Thus, the way is cleared for admitting interactive dualism (more precisely, a combination of necessitarianism about laws of nature and interactive dualism) back into the picture.

III.3 Why no Classical Dualism?

Before moving on to examine the internal coherence of his position, I wish to show that Esfeld's grounds for rejecting classical (interactive) dualism are unpersuasive.

Esfeld's worry about classical dualism (his main target being Cartesian substance dualism), is that there is no plausible point of contact between the physical and the mental that would make mental causation possible. As an example of a failed point of contact he cites Descartes' pineal gland. Now that notion of "point of contact" is worth investigating a bit more. The idea behind the pineal gland as point of contact is that it functions like a central "switchpoint": whatever the mind causes in the brain, it must first affect the pineal gland. However, the idea of a central switchpoint does not seem to be crucial for mental causation. It could be that the point of contact changes in function of the specific effect to be brought about; or it could be that the mind affects the brain as a whole. In some trivial sense *any* brain structure affected by the mind *ipso facto* becomes a point of contact.

The much more interesting question, therefore, is whether there is an in-principle argument against the interaction of something mental with something physical. As Robb and Heil point out, that question stems from a reflection on the "radical difference" between mind and body,⁴¹ a difference that in the Cartesian tradition has been conceived of as follows: the mind is pure thought (*res cogitans*) which is extensionless and lacks spatial location, while the body is a spatially extended thing (*res extensa*). Let us take this extreme view and ask whether it really gives rise to an interaction problem, and if it does, whether there is perhaps a different dualistic conception of the mind that avoids that problem.

As to the first question: it seems that there indeed is a problem, which however, does not stem from the conception of the mind as *extensionless*, but from its conception as *lacking spatial location*. Apart from the problem how minds lacking spatial location can have the impression of being spatially located, it stands to reason that something lacking spatial location cannot interact with physical matter, because it does not partake in spacetime.⁴² But does not being without extension entail being without spatial location? No, it does not. The concepts of extension and spatial location are clearly orthogonal. Mathematical points are extensionless but have

39) Pitts, "Conservation Laws and Mind" and Cucu and Pitts, "Objection from Energy Conservation."

40) The basis for this is the first Noether theorem, according to which a quantity is conserved if and only if its pertinent continuous symmetry is preserved. If spatial symmetry is preserved: momentum is conserved; if temporal symmetry: energy.

41) Robb and Heil, "Mental Causation."

42) Even this might not be graven into stone. If abstract objects such as numbers turn out to have a causal relationship with physical things, then the lack of spatial location may turn out not to be a problem. Or take God's interaction: God does not have a distinct spatial location – rather, He is omnipresent – and still, according to classical theistic doctrine, He can interact with the physical world.

spatial location. Thus, we could conceive of minds as point-like, having location but no extension. (This happens to be precisely how Esfeld conceives of persons.) However, point-like minds are not the only solution.

Traditionally, many dualists have held that the mind/soul is present throughout the body (see the discussion of Augustine's view in⁴³ or ⁴⁴), which entails that its extension is equal to that of the body. Even non-dualist William Lycan considers this way out of the Cartesian dilemma.⁴⁵ Thus, it seems that Descartes' pursuit of differentiating mind from matter may have overshot a little. Neither lack of extension nor lack of spatial location seem to be necessary for clearly distinguishing mind (and persons) from matter. What is, then?

I agree with Esfeld that it is freedom and reasons-responsiveness that distinguishes persons from matter. Both can be had with minds which have both spatial location and extension. Thus, one can maintain a radical difference between mind and matter, albeit one that does not create problems for interaction.

It might still be that even spatial location is not enough to ensure the causal efficacy of minds. One worry, which arguably lay at the bottom of Elisabeth's famous objection to Descartes, is that minds need to be able to transfer motion to physical bodies in order to move them; and that, in turn, presupposes that they themselves possess motion. More abstractly, this reflects what Hoffman and Rosenkrantz call the principle of transference:

Necessarily, if a brings it about that b is F , then a does so in virtue of the transference of F -ness from a to b .⁴⁶

That principle in turn presupposes the necessity of the synonymy principle:

If a brings it about that b is Φ , then a is Φ .⁴⁷

Hoffman and Rosenkrantz argue that the synonymy principle is false. For example, one can cut a square object from, say clay, with an object that is not square, for example a rolling pin. Hence, they argue, the production of motion by a mind in a physical object need not be understood in terms of transference of motion but should rather be understood in terms of universally quantified general laws.⁴⁸ As a precedence, they cite universal gravitation which is a universally quantified law but no transference of motion takes place between two gravitationally attracted bodies.

Although Hoffman and Rosenkrantz's reply is certainly a possibility, I think there are better options available. For one, the rejection of transference as a principle of causation need not lead to a quasi-Humean position (for that is what the universally quantified law view is, without any qualification to the effect that the laws have modal power). One could assign the laws necessitarian status, for example along the lines of minimal primitivism,⁴⁹ divine decretalism,⁵⁰ or perhaps nomic fundamentalism.⁵¹ Alternatively, one could work with some sort of dispositionalism for both physical and mental causation; the most convincing account in this

43) Goetz and Taliaferro, *History of the Soul*, 43.

44) Moreland, "Thomistic-like Dualism."

45) Lycan, "Redressing Substance Dualism."

46) Hoffman and Rosenkrantz, "Unintelligible Souls," 198.

47) Barnes, *The Presocratics*, 119.

48) Hoffman and Rosenkrantz, "Unintelligible Souls," 198.

49) Chen and Goldstein, "Without a Fundamental Direction of Time."

50) Koperski, "Breaking Nature," and Koperski, *Divine Action*.

51) Maudlin, *The Metaphysics Within Physics*.

respect is in my view Richard Swinburne's substance powers liabilities (SPL) account⁵² which allows for individual (non-law-governed) mental powers of persons.

However, even if one sticks to the transference principle, there might be a way for construing dualistic mental causation. It is true that physical motion is arguably not a property of the mind. But what if physical motion were but a special case of a more encompassing concept of motion? Call this concept MOTION. Although I cannot argue for this in detail,⁵³ here is the rough idea. Let F be the feature of motion, x the mind and y the brain (or body). Then, according to a proposal by Timo Kajamies,⁵⁴ one can distinguish between x containing F formally or eminently. Formal containment means that F exists in x in the way in which x is represented in our ideas (e.g., triangularity in triangles, motion in bodies, and so on). By contrast, eminent containment means that F is in x in a way different from the way x is represented in our ideas. For example, for theists motion must exist eminently in God, because God can move physical objects, albeit not in the way physical objects move each other. Thus, if motion exists eminently in the mind, and if the mind has a greater degree of relative independence than the brain (by which Kajamies means that it is "higher up the ontological hierarchy"), then the mind can transfer MOTION to the brain and thus cause physical events in it.

The upshot is that there are multiple ways open to interactive dualists to metaphysically explain mental causation. I therefore conclude that classical (substance) dualism remains a viable alternative. The advantage Esfeld's view still has its ontological parsimony. But Ockham's razor can adjudicate between two theories only if they have the same explanatory power. We will see in the next section whether that is true of Esfeld's account.

III.4 How Persons Come About

Recall that Esfeld holds both that persons create themselves by adopting a normative attitude, and that they arise when sufficient physical conditions are present. The first observation I wish to make is that these two claims seem to be redundant as explanations of the genesis of persons; one makes the other superfluous. Take "sufficient physical conditions." If a condition C is sufficient to bring about effect e , then by the very concept of sufficiency, nothing more than C needs to be in place for e to come about. Conversely, if persons can "create themselves," it is unclear why sufficient physical conditions are required, because self-creation then becomes the "sufficient condition." But maybe it suffices that one of those two pathways is successful. Let us therefore take them in turn and see if at least one of the two stories delivers a robust explanation.

First Horn: Sufficient Physical Conditions.

The mere presence of physical configuration C is supposed to give rise to an ontologically novel person p . How is this to be understood metaphysically? The relation between C and p cannot be one of mere constitution, so that the parts present in C constitute p *ipso facto*; in that case, persons would be reducible to matter in motion. The supervenience relation, as Esfeld points out (although he uses the term once to describe the relation between matter and persons), is not helpful either because it just describes the relation between two types of things given that both exist, but it does not explain how those things come about in the first place.⁵⁵

52) Swinburne, *Mind, Brain, and Free Will*, 131ff.

53) For a more thorough treatment see my argument in Cucu, "Interacting Minds in the Physical World," chpt. 3.3.

54) Kajamies, "De Novo Creat."

55) Cf. the difference between property dualism and physicalism: both use the notion of supervenience, but confer a fundamentally different ontological status to mental properties.

What suggests itself, though, is the relation of emergence. Esfeld is skeptical of emergence,⁵⁶ and with good reason, for emergence can very well be another “just-so” story: there is a phenomenon p inexplicable by reference to properties of matter, but one wishes to stick to the naturalist framework of explaining everything by reference to matter, so one stipulates that p emerges from matter. Since this is unsatisfactory, let us see whether we can put a little more metaphysical “flesh on the bones” and get a viable account of emergence.

One does not get far without distinguishing different levels of emergence. A property E of system S consisting of parts $p_1 \dots p_n$ is an emergent property iff E is not explainable as the mere sum of the parts of S . Thus, mass is not an emergent property of any physical system, nor does an image emerge from the pixels on the screen.

William Hasker⁵⁷ offers a helpful discussion of different varieties of emergence, in ascending order of their novelty: emergence_{1a}, emergence_{1b} and emergence₂. Emergence_{1a} is emergence of causal powers that are wholly explainable in terms of the *causal interactions* of the underlying parts. An example would be water: its liquidity at room temperature can be explained in terms of the interactions of H₂O molecules. Emergence_{1b} occurs when the emergent phenomenon has *new causal powers* not explainable in terms of the causal interactions of the parts – Hasker cites biological life as a (possible) example. Emergence₂, finally, is the strongest form of emergence, as the emergent phenomenon not only has novel causal powers, but also those powers cannot be captured by any law-like description. The prime example here would be libertarian freedom. Persons in Esfeld’s and my sense are emergent₂, not least because they possess libertarian freedom.

However, as Brandon Rickabaugh points out,⁵⁸ emergence captured thus still gives us no satisfactory explanation as to how the emergent phenomenon can come about. After all, the examples given for emergence₂, and even emergence_{1b} are controversial. If there is no clear precedence for emergence₂, how can we construe even its possibility? Rickabaugh proposes, with respect to Hasker’s emergent dualism, the principle that the emergent phenomenon be wholly grounded in facts about the emergence base. This principle at least gives strong emergence some metaphysical credentials. The idea is that matter possesses *proto* features: proto-mental, proto-normative⁵⁹ or even proto-personal. The prefix *proto* indicates that the features are not fully fledged but can grow into the full-orbed property or entity whenever suitable physical conditions apply. Thus, as Rickabaugh also notes, one obtains a kind of proto-panpsychism (or “proto-panpersonalism,” respectively).

However, this road is closed to Esfeld because his ontology rests exclusively on featureless matter points. An aggregation of featureless matter points is still (intrinsically) featureless.

One might reply that their featurelessness is no obstacle to Esfeld’s matter points being the basis for derived physical quantities as well as laws of nature, and, if featureless matter points suffice to explain those things (which appear to us to be of a different kind), could they not suffice to explain persons as well? The crucial difference between the cases is that in Esfeld’s Super-Humean worldview, derived quantities and laws are, strictly speaking, products of the human mind. It is human minds that conceptually “carve the world” such that the laws are the way they are⁶⁰; it is human minds that create the conceptual and linguistic “shortcut” of “mass,” “charge,” and so forth, to describe the behavior of particle configurations. Persons are different; they

56) Esfeld, *Science and Human Freedom*, 74.

57) Hasker, *The Emergent Self*, chpt. 7.

58) Rickabaugh, “Against Emergent Dualism.”

59) What is meant is not that matter itself has (proto-)normative features, but that it has the (proto-)ability to engage in normative reasoning and acting.

60) To be sure, they do it in accordance with the criteria of simplicity and informativity on the Best System Analysis, but those are still criteria that exist in human minds and not in the world.

are obviously not products of the conceptual segmentation of nature by human minds, but are the very beings that do the segmentation. Therefore, as Esfeld correctly insists, persons must be irreducible to matter. Only, his ontology does not provide the resources to explain how persons emerge from matter. Let us therefore turn to the second option, the self-creation of persons.

Second Horn: Self-Creation of Persons.

Let us look at the other option: persons creating themselves by adopting a normative stance. I take it that what Esfeld has in mind here is not ontogenesis (each individual person creating themselves) but rather phylogenesis (the whole phylum, or species of human beings having once been created by some ancestral beings adopting a normative attitude).

It is worth noting what a radical leap in existential quality “adopting a normative attitude” is. In a way, this is a phylogenetic bridging of the famous “is-ought gap.” It should not be forgotten at this point that this gap remains a gap in metaethics to this day. What *is* and what *should be* are two radically different perspectives. Further, on the plausible assumption that even the use of language and concepts is normative, one cannot use the evolution of language or the having of concepts to get from the non-normative to the normative.

I submit that Esfeld’s claim of self-creation does nothing to illuminate how it can be bridged either. Here is why: in order to take a normative stance, a being must first possess the ability to think normatively. Take the animals paleoanthropology claims are our closest relatives: chimpanzees. We may sometimes get the impression that they act according to norms, but that is only a superficial impression. Chimpanzees may very well express emotions and intelligence (that seems undeniable), but neither emotions nor intelligence constitute normativity. For example, a chimp may display anger at another chimp because the latter stole his banana. It does not suffice for the chimp to be angry at his conspecific for stealing the banana; he must be angry *because he thinks it is wrong* to do so, or perhaps because it is wrong in the absence of overriding reasons. Now what we know from our own experience is that we adopt a normative attitude when being stolen from (an attitude that is mostly accompanied by emotions, but never identical with them); but we do that *because we are already capable of normative reasoning*. How can a being that has no normative concepts – in fact, no concepts at all (since the use of concepts is already in itself normative) – suddenly adopt a normative attitude (which can, *qua* the nature of the normative, never merely be an attitude, but must be accompanied by a concept)?⁶¹

Esfeld does not give us more by way of an answer than his invocation of existentialist thinking. It is worth dwelling on the paradigm of existentialism a bit, for it gives us insights into the grander vision that arguably motivates Esfeld. The main tenet of all existentialists is that the world, that life has no intrinsic meaning. The universe is a cold, sterile place devoid of God; life is often absurd and cruel. Some people are better off, some worse; but there is no master narrative with universal validity that could confer meaning on either suffering or happiness. Still, the project of all existentialist philosophers from Camus to Heidegger to Sartre is to defy the world’s meaninglessness by creating one’s own individual meaning of life. Similarly, in Esfeld’s view, persons “defy” their purely material nature and create themselves as normative beings. In both cases, a massive qualitative leap is just being postulated, virtually *per impossibile*. The main difference is that the existentialist quest for meaning is still ongoing, such that we may ask how successful existentialists really have been in conveying meaning to their lives. As far as I know, the track record is not impressive.

61) I am aware that moral non-cognitivists will deny this. However, I think there is more than enough reason to reject this view (see Jackson, *Defence of Conceptual Analysis* and Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism*).

But apart from that we may ask, is the universe really such as the existentialists and Esfeld claim? Is it really devoid of meaning, or devoid of intrinsic qualities and souls? Or to put it differently, why must we accept Sartre's slogan that "existence precedes essence" rather than stick to the inverse paradigm which the vast majority of philosophers through most of the history of philosophy has held?

In the last section, I will present a view from that "old school" of thought that, I hope, tells a more convincing story about persons.

IV. A Theistic-Dualistic Alternative that Preserves Persons and their Freedom

We have seen in section III. that Esfeld's naturalistic ontology runs into serious problems. His Super-Humeanism unnecessarily creates the problem of the indiscernibility of worlds with and without mental causation; unnecessarily because there is no good reason why a necessitarian account of laws and causation should not be compatible with scientific realism. The commitment to Completeness seems equally unjustified for the project of maintaining scientific realism. Thus, the following discussion should be understood against the backdrop of a non-Humean world that is at the same time open to free will interactions: I assume some necessitarian account of the laws of nature and causation to be true, and *Completeness* to be false.

However, that is only half the battle. As we have seen, Esfeld's ontology of persons is too thin. Its flaws reveal a deeper truth about naturalistic accounts of persons: they either need additional ontological resources beyond the merely physical, or else must bite the bullet and deny the reality of personhood and free will. Thus, in order to properly anchor persons in the world, a richer ontology is called for. What I will offer are reflections on how a return to more traditional metaphysical resources can do job, but also how those additional resources fit more easily within a theistic worldview than a naturalist one.

IV.1 Persons as Immaterial Substances

Persons, as Esfeld rightly notes, are distinguished from matter by freedom and normativity, two features not possessed by mere matter. Further, and in order to safeguard those two features, persons must be irreducible to matter. Esfeld's account, however, does not provide the necessary ontological resources for this picture of persons. Thus, given that Esfeld's minimalist ontology fails, persons must either have an extra ontological ingredient that grounds personhood (and with it normativity and freedom), or be something immaterial altogether.

There is a great variety of accounts of the first form, reaching from Aristotelian substance ontology to contemporary property dualism. I shall not attempt to characterize or critique those theories here. Rather, I will explore the route that Esfeld all too quickly dismisses: Cartesian-style mind-body dualism. By "Cartesian-style" I mean a dualism of the second of the two forms above, one that considers persons to be wholly immaterial and, in some sense, "inhabiting" bodies. I am speaking of "Cartesian-style" because it need not be a classical Cartesian⁶² dualism, or substance dualism, that considers both body and person to be substances. Such a dualism is the most clear-cut way to account for the freedom and normativity of persons, because it allows those features which are not shared by matter to be straightforwardly "located," namely in the immaterial substance that is the person.

62) Though views relevantly resembling Cartesian dualism can be found way earlier, for example in Plato or Augustine, it is undoubtedly Descartes who first argued for it in a rigorous, systematic way.

More specifically, the dualism I have in mind I call soul-body dualism⁶³ (SBD). According to SBD, human persons *are* essentially immaterial substances⁶⁴ (souls) that in some to be specified way have bodies. I call this view soul-body dualism and not substance dualism because I do not believe that the body is a substance (see also below). Second, I deliberately choose the term “immaterial” because it precisely expresses the relevant point, namely that persons are fundamentally different from matter in that they are not governed by the laws of nature. The oft-used term “mental substance” can be misleading, because being mental is just one aspect of persons (being capable of normativity is another). A soul is a simple (indivisible, not consisting of proper parts), immaterial substance. By substance I roughly understand a concrete particular that has an inner unity and can exist on its own (barring divine upholding).

Finally, why “soul” and not “mind”? Does that term not carry unnecessary religious baggage? Even if it does, I do not consider the religious connotations a liability; to the contrary (see final section). Further, the notion of soul allows to integrate more functions than the purely mental (see below).

SBD accounts for personhood in multiple ways. Let us start with the two features noted by Esfeld, freedom and normativity. SBD accounts for both effortlessly. It does so by making both capabilities features of the immaterial soul. It is the soul that is free in the sense that it is not subject to the laws of nature. This freedom enables it to choose⁶⁵ its thoughts and actions in the light of reasons (normativity). As regards free actions, it is the soul that initiates them without being made to by any cause lying outside it.⁶⁶ Of course, in order to have any effect on the body, the soul must be able to interact with it. I argued in section III.3 that Esfeld’s worries with respect to such interactive dualism are unfounded.

There are further perks to SBD. Via its simplicity the soul metaphysically grounds the indivisibility of persons. By the same token, it accounts for diachronic personal identity: it is the simple immaterial substance that persists and underlies the identity of persons. I am now, at t_2 , the same person I was at t_1 (say, ten years ago) because I am the same soul now that I was at t_1 . Accounts that tie personal identity to bodily features notoriously suffer from sorites problems: how many and which parts can a body lose before it ceases to be the same person? There is no non-arbitrary answer to this question.⁶⁷ Then, SBD also explains synchronic personal identity or the unity of consciousness. Consciousness is unified (not split up) because it is a feature of a simple substance.⁶⁸ By contrast, accounts that tie consciousness in some way to the brain (even property dualism) have the problem of explaining how something consisting of myriads of parts can give rise to something perfectly unified.⁶⁹

Unfortunately, SBD is often rejected for inadequate reasons even apart from the so-called “interaction problem” I addressed in section III.3. One is the objection that SBD entails a problematic relationship between a person and their body. The worry is that on such a strong dualism we cannot adequately capture our physical interactions with each other as interactions between persons. For example, can we legitimately say we are embracing another person when we, strictly speaking, ever only embrace their body, and not their immaterial

63) The term “souls” is typically frowned upon, even by dualists, for its religious connotations. However, since I deem a theistic link helpful (see final section), I do not share those qualms. Moreover, the oft-used term “mind” strikes me as falling short of persons, for persons arguably have minds (rather than are minds).

64) I avoid the term “substance dualism” because there is no need for a commitment to physical substances.

65) This does by no means preclude physiological influences on decision-making. Of course, we are constantly nudged by our bodies. The point is that the ultimate choice of what we do with the possibilities presented to us lies with us.

66) See also Hasker, *The Emergent Self*, chpt. 4, and Moreland and Rae, *Body & Soul in Ethics*, chpt. 4).

67) See Swinburne, *Mind, Brain, and Free Will*, chpt. 6

68) See Moreland, “Unity of Consciousness.”

69) See *ibid.*, and Rickabaugh, “Against Emergent Dualism.”

soul? A solution could be some kind of Thomism which ties the soul much more closely to the body, considering it as a special kind of Aristotelian *form* of the body (namely one that can, in contrast to classical Aristotelian forms, survive the demise of the body). While this is a viable possibility, I prefer a position that combines the best aspects of substance dualism and Thomism: J.P. Moreland's Thomistic-like Dualism (TLD).⁷⁰ On TLD, the soul remains a full-fledged substance which can exist apart from the body, but it also assumes the roles of an Aristotelian/Thomistic form.⁷¹ More precisely, it is the formal, final, and even efficient cause of the body, in other words the "blueprint," purpose, and even "manufacturer" of the body. The body, in turn, is a mode or inseparable part of the soul, by which is meant a part that loses its nature when separate from the thing it used to be a part of.⁷² This way, by interacting with someone's body one is literally interacting with that person, albeit without the person being identical to their body.

Another important worry concerns the genesis of souls. Where do they come from, barring Plato's tenet that they exist eternally? The traditional Christian response used to be that they are created by God, either directly or indirectly. Naturalists could resume Esfeld's thread and hold that souls arise whenever sufficient physical conditions are present. We already discussed this possibility in section III.4 under the heading of emergence. What I want to offer in the next and last section are some reflections on how theism can be advantageous as a framework in which to embed one's account of irreducible personhood.

IV.2 "All Roads Lead to God"

I discussed emergence in section III.4 and found that it does not even come into question for Esfeld due to his minimalist ontology. A richer naturalist ontology, like panpsychism, could of course accommodate it. I will not discuss such an approach now, but rather wish to note that even if viable, emergence makes more sense on theism than on naturalism. On naturalism, the fundamentality of the proto-personal would just be a brute fact about the cosmos. By contrast, theists can hold that God has good reasons to create matter in such a way that it eventually gives rise to persons endowed with consciousness. And if the emergentist/panpsychist story does not work after all, then divine creation becomes interesting a fortiori.

I am well aware that divine creation may be considered even more unpalatable than emergence. Still, I invite the reader to consider its advantages.

First, the admission of God into the picture helps mitigate even more the biggest difficulty Esfeld sees for adopting substance dualism, namely the interaction issue. If interventionist theism⁷³ (the traditional Christian position), is true, then we have a precedence for something wholly non-material interacting with matter. But even non-interventionist theist positions such as deism do not deny that God can interact, they just deny that He has sufficient reasons to do so. Thus, with respect to the metaphysical question of interactive dualism, theism provides a positive precedence either way. Second, questions of meaning and value find satisfying answers in a theistic worldview. On Esfeld's existentialism, persons must create themselves and thus a fortiori create their meaning⁷⁴. On Christian theism, human beings are created in the image of God. They thus not only have intrinsic

70) Moreland and Rae, *Body & Soul in Ethics* and Moreland, "Thomistic-like Dualism."

71) In fact, by making the soul also the efficient cause of the body Moreland goes beyond standard Aristotelian/Thomist accounts which restrict the roles of the soul to formal or at best formal and final causation.

72) Moreland, "Thomistic-like Dualism," 102.

73) On interventionist theism, God has intervened in history and still can do so (e.g., by performing miracles).

74) Esfeld does, along Kantian lines, affirm the intrinsic value of persons: they are to be considered "ends in themselves," not "means to an end" (personal conversation).

value but also the meaning, as the Westminster confession of 1647 puts it, “to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever.” By the same token, the body, often seen as a mere appendix on strong dualist accounts, also receives its proper meaning. First, one can give the generic answer that if God saw fit to create human beings as embodied, then the body must have its value, otherwise an infinitely good God would not have made that choice. However, it is possible to put more flesh on the bones, by invoking the scholastic concept of the Hierarchy of Being (for more details see⁷⁵). The basic idea is that there is a hierarchy of beings which leaves no conceptual space unfilled. The background motivation is that God in His infinite goodness would not miss creating kinds of beings that are conceivable, and would not leave conceptual gaps between two kinds of beings vacant. Now according to the Hierarchy of Being, there is a conceptual space between angels (purely immaterial beings with intellect), and animals (embodied beings without reason); namely, rational, embodied beings – human beings. But that place in the hierarchy entails that it is part of the divine conception of human beings that they have a body.

Thus, whether one opts for an emergentist account of persons or not, the framework of theism provides a stabilizing setting for personhood.

V. Conclusion

Michael Esfeld seeks to establish irreducible persons with a minimalist ontology, consisting only of matter points and normative relations. I have argued that his basic assumptions of Super-Humeanism and Completeness are not without alternative, that his dismissal of substance dualism is premature and that his theory as to how persons come about yields no satisfactory answer. It waivers between physically sufficient conditions and an existentialist-style self-creation account, while not offering enough metaphysical resources for the first option nor clearing away the air of mystery of the second. Esfeld’s view seems just too lean to support a healthy ontology. I have offered instead an ontologically richer dualist account of persons that secures the irreducibility of persons in the physical world and argued that a theistic framework serves to stabilize it no matter which precise metaphysical route for the genesis of persons one chooses.

75) Oderberg, “Restoring the Hierarchy of Being.”

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