Author's response

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An invitation to share evaluations

Let me first of all say something unsurprising and perhaps even something obligatory that I nevertheless would have wanted to say if there were no rules of decency to regulate these intellectual invitations to share evaluations: I am grateful for the opportunity provided by the editors of this journal to reply to my commentators who I want to thank in turn for their interest in my target article.

We all have our concerns that make us tick, and think. These concerns make us respond to our fellows when we fear they may go astray because they seem to misunderstand some crucial features of the world we share. My concern is basically about how to distinguish and understand the coordinate roles of science and philosophy in the attempt to make sense of human nature. My commentators have different though affiliated concerns. They appear to be pretty much in tune with my project; that of showing human nature to be a matter of normative facts about and partly constituted by our own responsible agency. Yet, each one of them is worried that I might take my argument too far. Baker is concerned that I fail to acknowledge the metaphysical presuppositions of my view of responsible agency, presuppositions she thinks answer rather than dissolve the problem of man's uniqueness. Bertelsen is concerned that I fail to acknowledge the reality of our physiology and bodily morphology that provides us with rich phenomenological resources to resonate with one another and with the world in a unique human way. Morton is concerned that I might have to accept that we cannot settle questions of exclusion with respect to individuals incapable of "entering into the ballet of mutual trust and consideration". And Racine & Carpendale are concerned that I disregard the contribution of *the* science that aims to explain normativity's emergence in human nature: developmental psychology.

These are serious and highly interesting concerns that I should like to address in this reply. I shall do so under five headings.

A science of human nature

I argue in my target article that there cannot be a science of human nature. Of course, as Racine & Carpendale rightly observe, such a claim depends on what is meant by science. It also depends on what is meant by human nature. I have said more in the article about human nature than about science, but I've probably said not enough about either. The conception of science presupposed by my argument derives from the early philosophical anthropologists. For them science is basically an experimental science, an enterprise designed to acquire empirical data. I have assumed that such a science embraces the observer's point of view. That is a rather vague notion to be sure, and I have said not much more about it in the paper than that it is a viewpoint from which facts about responsible agency cannot be acquired. The idea derives from Nagel's *The View from Nowhere* (Nagel, 1986), in which science is described as an attempt to approach an absolutely detached and completely objective conception of reality. There is no place in this conception for response-dependent properties – that is, not for properties that depend on the response of the subject who has this absolute conception of reality. The reasoning is, roughly, as follows.

Suppose an Italian, an Inuit and a German talk about ice. They will soon notice that each one of them ascribes properties to ice the others fail to acknowledge. So they may agree to call these properties subjective, not to be detected in ice, but merely projected to it. They may try to systematically study ice in an attempt to identify the objective properties of ice, properties that hopefully would enable them to explain why ice appeared the way it did to each one of them. That is, their hope might be to find in the objective properties of ice sufficient reason for the subjective properties projected to ice by each one of them. Their systematic study reveals two ways of scientific progress: one is to describe reality as merely displaying objective properties, the

other is to explain the *appearance* of subjective properties on the basis of reality's objective properties.

The first way requires the Italian, the Inuit and the German to eliminate the subjective features in order to arrive at a shared conception of reality. For this they need to detach themselves from their particular subjectivity. Each one of them should concentrate merely on the properties ice would have for each one of them. Of course, taking up a general *human* perspective on ice is merely to make a stop halfway. There may be peculiar "human properties" projected to ice by any human that will turn out to be subjective from a still more detached "anti-humanistic" perspective. Science may be a typically human enterprise, but its aim is to reach out beyond the merely human to absolute objectivity. Following this track a science of human nature will most likely concentrate on biochemical and neurophysiological processes that happen on the sub-personal level in our bodies. None of my commentators seem to favour such a science of human nature.

But there is a second way of making scientific progress. This is to try to objectify our own modes of response. An objective description of reality should after all also be able to describe *our subjective responses* as a proper part of reality. Science should therefore aim to explain, merely in terms of objective properties, why the world appears to us the way it does. If I understand him correctly, Bertelsen refers to just this when he writes in his fifth comment about "our phenomenological resonance to the world". And Racine & Carpendale seem to have this in mind too when they introduce the central problem of developmental psychology as "how we get from neurons to norms". So what do I think of this way of engaging in a science of human nature?

I should first like to repeat that my argument is not meant to undermine the ambitions of the anthropological sciences to describe and explain our existence as a proper part of reality. I might have given the wrong impression, but contrary to Racine & Carpendale I did not intend to assume that studies such as anthropology are not possible. As I have said in the article there is no reason at all to stop any of the fascinating research that is going on in these quarters. But what I have tried to argue for is that *describing* and *explaining* our responses to one another and to the world are not the best ways of *making sense* of these responses. Getting along with the normative import of the ways in which our fellows give and ask for reasons is not something that can be done by describing and explaining these responses in merely objective terms. That is, I argue that one *should* not respond from the observer's point of view in case one is addressed as a responsible agent.

This is a normative claim that makes perfect sense in the everyday business of getting along with one another. If your teenage daughter asks you in anger why she cannot go to the dance party, you may let yourself be informed by the best developmental psychology around, but you had better conceal this from her and address her as a responsible agent, i.e., from the participant's point of view. Likewise you cannot excuse yourself in court by pointing out that you're just an organism composed of complicated biochemical and neurophysiological processes. So, sometimes you have good reasons to stick to the participant's point of view even though you are – apparently – capable of switching to the observer's point of view.

The issue between me and my commentators now is whether I have good reasons to stick to the participant's point of view when I am among scientists interested in the reasons not to adopt the participant's point of view to creatures such as young children, pets and primates? Bertelsen and Racine & Carpendale seem to think my reasons for this are not good enough across the board. There is some reasonableness in their critique. After all, it always seem to make sense to listen to what science has to say. My claim, however, is that in the end taking up the observer's point of view will precisely deprive us of our reasons. Let me elaborate a bit on my conception of reasonable agency to strengthen my case.

Reasonable agency

Baker succinctly sums up the conditions of responsible agency implied by my account, and rightly stresses that they are partly normative and partly empirical. She provides in a nutshell some of the key features of her elaborate metaphysics of personhood, notably the idea of a robust first-person perspective. At the end of her comment she offers her view as an alternative philosophical anthropology. When we are looking for the reasons to address merely one another as responsible participants, and not the apes, our pets or domestic robots, Baker advises us to switch to the observer's point of view. From that viewpoint we will be able to appreciate that we are the only ones around with a robust first-person perspective. Having such a perspective is according to Baker, if I understand her correctly, necessary and sufficient for responsible agency, that is – on my account – for participating in the deontic game of giving and asking for reasons.

Baker distinguishes between rudimentary and robust first-person perspectives and claims that a "human animal that develops the ability to support a rudimentary

first-person perspective typically goes on to develop a robust first-person perspective". This gives us, according to her, sufficient reason to include young children in the class of persons and to exclude nonhuman animals.

Racine & Carpendale may join in here to give this reason empirical substance. If I understand them correctly they might wish to resist the essentialism and the formalism that is part of Baker's metaphysics, but they will insist that we can learn much from the observer's point of view about why and especially *when* to include children in our normative practices. As it turns out, however, Racine & Carpendale actually say little about how *science* is going to help us here, let alone about how science is going to be decisive.

I might have been too incautious in radically dismissing the relevance of the observer's point of view, and if so I wish to step back a little and assert that I have not intended to remove all facts from our reasons to address someone as an appropriate addressee. There are certainly facts involved when, for instance, I notice a change in my reactive attitudes as soon as I learn that my three-year old child made the mess in my office. Such facts may be scientific, discovered for instance by developmental psychology, such as the facts reported by Bertelsen about the age at which children normally should be capable of mentalizing. But whatever the amount of facts and whatever the scientific objectivity that they adhere, they are not going to be decisive – at least, that is what I claim.

And they are not going to be decisive, precisely because of their objectivity. My claim here can be read in two ways. Suppose the scientist tries to be as objective as possible and consequently tries to reduce all response-dependent facts to merely objective facts. My claim then is that he will lack the resources to acknowledge the import of normativity *as normativity* to the question of detecting responsible agency. He will probably study biochemical and neurophysiological processes and just be in the dark when it comes to such higher level phenomena as agency and normativity. Alternatively, the scientist might try to be as objective as possible about the *normativity* of the facts involved. The more objective he is, on this account, the more cautious and modest he will be. He will emphasize that the decision to be taken cannot be enforced on the participants by overriding facts that can speak for themselves. Whatever the decision the participants will reach, it should follow in the wake of their agreement about who is to count as an appropriately equipped subject and which are to count as the favourable circumstances for responsible agency to flourish. And that means, in Morton's words that I am happy to embrace: their success in reaching agreement is "partly constitutive of their own correctness," and is not a matter of *discovering* empirical facts.

Determination by attunement

My commentators express worries about the arbitrariness that they fear might be entailed by the circularity of my claim that responsible agency is determined by the practice itself of getting along by holding one another responsible. The claim is Strawsonian: the existence of our participant's game of giving and asking for reasons is its own justification. Or in the words I used in both Dennett's and Velleman's footsteps: responsible agency "pulls itself out of the hat".

Bertelsen is afraid that on my account the particularly human becomes a purely arbitrary construction. Similar concerns are raised by the other commentators too. I am not so afraid, or, at least, I'm optimistic enough about our human resources to respond sensibly to threats of arbitrariness. We might read the history of humanity as an enduring attempt to resist and overcome arbitrariness, and although there is no decisive victory yet to be celebrated there is no sign of defeat either. We have our resources – one of them science, to be sure. But science is precisely the one I wanted to put in its proper, more restricted place among other resources, and I am grateful for Morton's acumen to name them: "logic, responsible rhetoric, and imagination."

So what can we do with these resources? Here is a phrase that I love for its ambiguity[1]: we, participants in the deontic game of giving and asking for reasons, *determine* ourselves as responsible agents. The basic ambiguity in the verb "to determine" concerns the distinction between 'making' and 'finding'. When a scientist determines what is the case we are standardly inclined to think he *discovers* what is the case. This standardly involves that he *creates* an intelligible pattern that allows him to explain the facts he comes up with. Assuming that the 'finding' is always a matter of how we relate to reality and the 'making' a matter of how we relate to intelligibility is, however, not simply plausible. In matters of invention the order tends to be the other way around: An engineer *creates* a new type of plastic, for instance, by *discovering* the intelligibility of its formula. My claim about determination's ambiguity is that in cases where a thing's reality is intrinsically connected to its intelligibility the ambiguity is irreducible. Such is the case, I believe, with responsible agency. We

[1] On a number of occasions I have discussed this ambiguity. See Bransen, 1991, 2002, 2008.

discover it by making it up, just as much as we make it up by discovering it.

This does not mean, however, that determining ourselves as responsible agents is an arbitrary affair. It requires logic, responsible rhetoric, imagination and, as Morton rightly observes, a reflective equilibrium that displays our success in mutual attunement. Responsible agents are real enough, on this account. They are not arbitrary constructions. They are part of the furniture of the world, just as much as rocks, trees, animals, and plastics are. Their reality may require, though, some special metaphysical consideration. In this respect I agree with Baker that responsible agents, like persons, are not identical with the human animals that constitute them. But I keep myself open to a possibility Baker seems to deny: that one day intelligent bats from Alpha Centauri or sentient domestic robots might join us in constituting responsible agents too.

Second nature

These comments about responsible agents being part of the furniture of the world raise a worry about a currently much discussed topic: the relation between normativity and naturalism. Racine & Carpendale have a serious interest in unravelling the trajectory that leads from mere causal influence to interactions that display substantial modes of rule-following. They see impediments and opportunities in my article. If I understand them correctly they fear that my emphasis on the distinction between the observer's and the participant's point of view and my related dismissal of the observer's point of view as completely irrelevant to understanding responsible agency, creates an unwelcome obstacle to the project of finding a home in the natural world for normativity. If it does, I will regret this too, but I hope that it does not and that this fear is merely fuelled by some of my unfortunate formulations.

Racine & Carpendale see an opportunity too in what they consider to be a helpful metaphor: my notion of education as an invitation to be human. I am happy that they take this up. I have emphasised in my article that our practices of holding one another responsible and of treating one another as appropriate addressees is grounded in the "naturalism" of our reactive attitudes. Our emotional responses just seem commonsensically right, and they naturally are, most of the time. They occur to us straightforwardly, in virtue of our nature which is edified too during all those years we depended for our survival upon the protection, care and support of our parents. Recent varieties of virtue ethics speak of second nature in this respect, and this seems to me a useful term.[2] Our second nature is natural enough to be considered simply given, yet edified enough to be considered *prima facie* justified and reasonable. "Natural" on this account has evaluative overtones, just like "normal".

The idea of a second nature allows for a grounding of our responses in dispositions that need not display the kind of bias that Bertelsen sees exemplified by my emphasis on the exchange of reasons: "a kind of elitist academia-centristic attitude" preoccupied with "the verbal articulation of rational reasons". The idea of second nature supports a view of our body language, our acquired reflexes, habits, emotions, intuitions, as *prima facie* reasons.

Hospitality

There is a final issue at the heart of my account of responsible agency as determined from the inside by participants who have shown themselves to be responsible agents precisely by addressing the question of how to determine who is to count as an appropriate addressee. The issue is raised in the final unnerving sentence of Morton's comment. How to determine the responsible agency of individuals who are incapable of entering into our deontic game of giving and asking for reasons, or, as nicely re-stated by Morton: "into the ballet of mutual trust and consideration"?

It is not so clear about which individuals Morton is thinking. If he accepts my concluding suggestion about educatability, Morton's remark seems to me to refer to individuals incapable of responding to an *invitation to share evaluations*. There are a couple of conceivable scenarios here. One is the interdependent beast-labelling scenario by antagonistic groups. I take it that we (that is me and everyone who recognizes himself in my words) will always be one of these groups. And on my account of responsible agency we will only turn to beast-labelling if our repeated invitations to the other group to share evaluations are not returned by a response we can understand as an attempt to share evaluations. Lots of things can go wrong here.

We may fail to *invite* the other group, perhaps just because we overlook their presence as co-existing responsible agents, or because we fail to voice our invitation in a way that is intelligible to them. These failures might still happen to Kanzi and his kin, the bonobos mentioned by Racine & Carpendale, or to creatures as

[2] See e.g. McDowell, 1998, Bransen, 2006.

alien as the Gorfs who figure in Salman Rushdie's first novel *Grimus*, and who look like huge stone frogs that cannot move but that can re-order the world by mere mental force.

We may of course also fail to understand our antagonists' responses as attempts to share evaluations. Baker's observation that responsible agents should be language-users makes sense here. Perhaps it enforces a sensible anthropomorphism in the discussion as an inescapable presupposition. After all, dissolving the problem of man's uniqueness should not obscure the fact that *our* interest in the limits of responsible agency starts off from our recognition that we are constituted as responsible agents by human animals.

There may also be failures in the antagonist group. They may fail to acknowledge the logic of invitations, or the logic of sharing. They may enforce their evaluations upon us in manipulative, oppressive, demeaning, or horrifying ways. Think of *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, in which real persons are replaced by simulations that grow from plantlike pods and that are perfect physical duplicates who kill and dispose of their human victims.

I have no definite answer to silence Morton's concern. If an antagonistic beast-labelling group is out there to ruin the prospects of responsible agency by eradicating our invitations to share their evaluations, then there is no decent defense. If so responsible agency will be up for grabs. But if our invitations will succeed to address an audience, we will be able to satisfy a shared educatability. A growth of responsible agency will then spread the world.

References

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