

**Strawson doubts that the question whether determinism is true is a significant one for morality. What are his reasons, and is he right?
by Simon Borrington**

As our understanding of what it is to be human has become increasingly located within the confines of the physical world, it seems much harder to feel confident in claiming some degree of ontological ‘otherness’ for consciousness and its relationship to the realm of human action.

The metaphysics of ‘substance dualism’ has become increasingly untenable as neuroscience has convincingly demonstrated that consciousness seems to be more than logically dependent upon the physical structure of the brain, and, as a consequence of the scientific acceptance of this physical basis for mental activity, the idea that human action takes place within the rubric of the ‘laws of causality’ has gained wider recognition.

If consciousness is grounded in the material, then the laws that govern the relationship between cause and effect in the physical world must also pertain to human action. If we can understand a physical event as being determined by its cause in such a way that it could not have been otherwise, then it must be no different when we are discussing human events (i.e. actions) and their causes. Therefore, to say an action was determined by its cause is to say that it could not have been otherwise. This, it is felt, seems to have major implications for moral responsibility and our notions of approval and disapproval, reward and punishment.

Strawson refers to those who feel that moral beliefs are compromised by this possibility as ‘pessimists’. This is a class that contains both extremes of the ‘free-will v. determinism’ debate; the ‘libertarians’ and the ‘determinists’ who both hold that if determinism is true, then it must follow that there is no justification in holding people responsible for their actions and, therefore, there can be no grounds for the attribution of moral responsibility to individuals.

For his part, Strawson claims that he has no real desire to enter into this debate as he does not feel that he has a sufficient understanding of what is meant by ‘determinism’. One feels that he is perhaps being a touch disingenuous on this point, but if he is then one also comes to understand that it is for an honest rhetorical purpose, as I hope I will be able to demonstrate.

Whilst the ‘pessimists’ are two extremes of the debate, conjoined by a shared ultimatum, Strawson places in opposition to them the ‘party’ of the middle ground, which he refers to as the ‘optimists’. This is his term for those who hold the compatibilist position which postulates that even if determinism is true, it does not necessarily rule out moral responsibility, even if only as a means of social regulation.

It is important not to get ‘side-tracked’ by the many issues that Strawson’s essay touches on. It is a densely woven piece of work that can be used as the starting point for a number of philosophical conversations. Strawson’s professed aim is help the ‘optimists’ and the ‘pessimists’ find enough common ground for a reconciliation, which he suggests will require a “...formal withdrawal on one side in return for a substantial concession on the other.” (Guttenplan et al. p.194; ll 3-4) But, again, one suspects that this is not an entirely honest claim. His real objective is to ‘disappear’ the metaphysical impasse; moral attitudes and the attribution of responsibility are the reality, and there are important conversations to be had about these aspects of social life, but they are hindered by the endless bickering over seemingly unprovable speculation.

In the post-Wittgensteinian world this dissolution of a ‘pseudo-problem’ can be dealt with by investigating how what it is that we say about our moral beliefs conveys the reality of our understanding. Strawson suggests that this is best achieved by considering our emotional response to how we perceive the intentions of others towards us, and that if we consider these responses in the context of our day-to-day personal interactions on an individual level, rather than trying to deal with abstract moral principles, we will perhaps be in a better position to get a firmer grasp of what is really going on when we are discussing concepts such as ‘moral responsibility’ and all that this might entail

The point that Strawson is making is that the abstract ethical debate that takes place at the 'macro-level', attempting to establish detached universal principles, is analogous to what actually happens in our interpersonal everyday relationships at the 'micro-level'. Reward and punishment, moral approbation and disapprobation, are personal gratitude and resentment (and the multiple gradations therein) 'writ large'. Where these responses occur at the micro-level, Strawson classes them as 'participant reactive attitudes'.

There is another class of responses which make 'special consideration' of the role of the agent to whom one is responding, whereby the response of gratitude or resentment should be mitigated if it appears that constraints of some sort may have played a part in how the agent had acted. Some of these fall into a category that Strawson refers to as 'objective attitudes', and these occur when we have to respond to behaviour that in some way seems to be other than what we would normally expect in ordinary inter-personal relationships.

The reason that the 'objective attitudes' are important is because they are different from our 'reactive attitudes' in such a way as to emphasise that they are not 'natural' attitudes. They are important attitudes for civilized societies to hold, but they are not representative of our normal attitudes to others. Could it, then, be the case that the adoption of a particular theoretical position, a metaphysical theory, for example, such as that of determinism, would encourage us to drop our natural responses to others in our ordinary inter-personal relationships? Strawson thinks that the answer would have to be no, simply on the grounds that these reactive attitudes, which, for him, are the foundation upon which our moral attitudes are constructed, would not allow it. These attitudes - these feelings such as gratitude and resentment that we feel towards other human beings - are simply a fact about us as a species. They occur without reference to metaphysics.

I think that Strawson demonstrates admirably that sometimes to find the best account of the way things are it is important to look at the simple facts of the matter, rather than extrapolating beyond these to complex and amorphous theoretical positions. Not that such a view will necessarily persuade those who find security in the process of extrapolation.

Bibliography:

Guttenplan, Hornsby & Janaway: "Reading Philosophy" (Blackwell 2003) – Chapter 7 pp.193-216.