

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

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I think that Strawson is wrong, and that it would be possible that a widespread belief in determinism would have a significant impact on our moral attitudes.

Strawson's thesis

In his paper "Freedom and Resentment" (Strawson 1962), Strawson seeks to reconcile the views of the "optimists", who believe that moral responsibility is compatible with determinism at least in the sense that blame and punishment can be efficacious, and the "pessimists" who hold that an agent cannot justly be held responsible without freedom, and thus determinism is incompatible with moral responsibility.

Strawson first describes the ordinary interpersonal attitudes that we as human beings have towards each other – which he calls personal or participant reactive attitudes. Strawson stresses how important it is to us that others display the right quality of attitudes such as goodwill and kindness towards us, and such attitudes, or the lack of them, in turn evoke reactive attitudes in us, such as love, gratitude, forgiveness or resentment.

Strawson points out that there is an internal logic to our interpersonal attitudes, and we moderate or suspend these attitudes, such as resentment, on certain occasions, either because:

- The particular **action** or injury was unintentional or unavoidable.
- The **agent** who carried out the injury was not a fully responsible adult, for example she was insane or just a child.

With the former, we moderate our resentment towards this particular **action**, but continue to regard the agent as an appropriate subject for our reactive attitudes. With the latter, we suspend our resentment towards the **agent** and instead treat her with the "objective attitude", as someone "to be managed or handled or cured or trained" (Strawson 1962, p.200). Watson (1987, pp.122-123) describes these as "excusing" and "exempting" pleas respectively

Strawson asks whether, if a theory of determinism were generally accepted, we would give up our framework of interpersonal reactive attitudes and instead adopt the objective attitude towards everyone. His answer is no. We never adopt the objective attitude **because** determinism is true – we instead do it because of the exempting conditions. And it has never been claimed as a consequence of determinism being true that everyone who caused an injury was either insane or childlike. It is part of our human nature to have interpersonal reactive attitudes and it would be "practically inconceivable" (Strawson 1962, p.202) for us to give them up – they are what makes us human. Furthermore, even if it were hypothetically possible for us to suspend our interpersonal reactive attitudes, it would not be rational to do so as the human cost would be too high in terms of the "gains and losses to human life". (Strawson 1962, p.204)

Strawson then extends his argument to the impersonal or vicarious reactive attitudes, and in particular to the moral attitudes. These are our reactions to the quality of other people's attitudes not towards ourselves but towards other people. Thus we require other people to demonstrate a reasonable amount of goodwill towards all people. And a third category is the self-reactive attitudes – associated with demands on oneself for others, such as a sense of obligation and guilt.

Strawson states that all three types of reactive attitudes are humanly connected and stand or lapse together. Thus moral responsibility is subject to similar excuses and exemptions; we treat exempted agents, whom we do not regard as members of the moral community, with the objective attitude; we never adopt the objective attitude **because** determinism is true; and the idea that we could retain our personal reactive attitudes but abandon our moral attitudes cannot be taken seriously. Thus our moral attitudes are equally impervious to the theory of determinism.

Thus Strawson reconciles the views of the optimists and the pessimists by inverting the usual arguments about responsibility. As Watson puts it (1987, p.120), the reactive attitudes are “constitutive” of responsibility. It is not that an agent is responsible because of some theory of responsibility; it is rather that to regard her as morally responsible is just the proneness to react to her with moral disapproval. The implication is that the framework of interpersonal reactive attitudes is not appropriate for external justification or questions about the potential impact of a theory of determinism. This is merely over-intellectualising.

Thus Strawson doubts whether determinism would significantly influence our morality. This implies that as long as we regard an agent as a member of the moral community, then she can be subject to our moral judgment and if necessary blamed or punished for something she has done, even if we believe determinism to be true and that she could not have done otherwise.

My challenge

Strawson argues his case strongly with reference to the personal reactive attitudes, but then just **extends** the theory to the vicarious reactive attitudes, and claims that we could not retain the former without the latter. It would require “abnormal egocentricity” (Strawson 1962, p.208). But I think his case is weaker for the vicarious attitudes. I agree with Guttenplan, Hornsby and Janaway (2003, p.214) that there could be “a human world in which we became resentful or grateful to other agents in reaction to the attitudes they showed to us personally, but felt no moral disapproval on behalf of anyone else”. Or at least that there could be a world in which we significantly **modified** our moral disapproval in the face of the knowledge that we are none of us really to blame. We are more prone to ignorance, error and readjustment with our moral attitudes than our personal reactive attitudes - we are often too quick to morally condemn people we do not know on “facts” we have not verified, at the cost of anguish to those too quickly condemned. Also, the negative of moral disapproval appears to be far more common than the positive of moral approval. So perhaps the gains to human life may outweigh the losses from some modification to these retributive moral attitudes.

Strawson notes that we inhibit our moral attitudes today to a minority of people whom we regard as not morally responsible (and who are not like us), and adopt the objective attitude. He then concludes that if determinism were true it would be impossible for us to adopt the objective attitude towards everybody. But to suggest that the only two options in the face of the truth of determinism are the extremes of either no change at all to our reactive attitudes or wholesale repudiation of them is not a conclusion that has to follow from his premise that we treat a minority of people that way today. It is not inconceivable that we might instead treat everybody with the more objective approach of compassion and understanding if we felt that they did not have free will and were not entirely blameworthy - and if we also felt that we “may be no better” than them and that our indignation would be “self-righteous and indulgent”. (Watson 1987, p.145).

Strawson argues that we never suspend our moral attitudes and adopt the objective attitude **because** of the truth of determinism. However, he mentions someone who was “peculiarly unfortunate in his formative circumstances” (Strawson 1962, p.200) as a candidate for exemption. This sounds like determinism - an antecedent cause. This raises a similar issue discussed by Watson (1987, p.145) - if historical considerations like an agent’s childhood are relevant to our reactive attitudes, and we are often ignorant of such considerations, then this casts scepticism on our reactive attitudes and thus on our practices of holding people responsible (as in the Strawsonian model, reactive attitudes constitute responsibility).

Strawson does not consider external criticism or justification as appropriate for the framework of interpersonal reactive attitudes - they just are as they are. However, he explicitly allows room for changes, challenges and criticisms **inside** this general framework. And we have ample evidence of how our moral attitudes have changed over time - towards homosexuality in western societies for example - and of variations in moral attitudes across different cultures. Is it really inconceivable that our moral attitudes could not be changed by a general belief in determinism, even if that change might be gradual? It is for me harder to imagine that our moral attitudes would stay the same after such an overwhelming change to our current commonly held belief that we have free will.

Finally, just because it is human nature to morally disapprove and we have always done so, would it be morally **right** for us to continue to do so if determinism were proved to be true? Would it not offend against our innate human sense of what is right (which is also part of the human condition) to continue to treat someone as morally responsible and blame or punish her if we really knew that she could do no other? I think the answer is no.

Thus my challenge to Strawson is that it is at least conceivable, and perhaps even likely, that we would significantly adapt our moral attitudes if we believed determinism to be true.

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