

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

By Michael Schwabe

In his famous article “Freedom and Resentment” (1962) Peter Strawson claims that, by the way we display reactions like resentment and gratitude, we treat each other as morally responsible. As Strawson locates this responsibility solely in our attitudes, he believes it would never be under threat in a world where determinism was true. This relinquishment, however, of a potential metaphysical theory that governs our moral claims, raises concern.

Strawson sets out by identifying two main positions held by philosophers: on one side is the compatibilist (the “optimist”), who believes that, even if determinism is true, we are still morally responsible for our actions and that blame and punishment are appropriate and efficient tools to regulate social behaviour. On the other side stands the incompatibilist (the “pessimist”), who thinks that, if our actions are all truly the result of prior causes, no one can be made responsible for their behaviour. Strawson makes clear that he intends to find common ground for both camps by demonstrating that the question whether determinism exists or not, is of no importance.

He does so by taking a close look at how we generally react to each other’s behaviour in everyday life. Our personal feelings and reactions largely depend on the attitude, namely on the good or ill will, that other people display towards us. Whenever we show feelings like anger or gratitude (Strawson calls these reactive attitudes), we also imply that the agent was responsible for their action.

In some cases, however, we learn that an action was due to circumstances, over which the agent had little or no control. We sometimes excuse an action when, for example, we realise that someone who pushed us had in fact been pushed himself and that no harm was intended. Furthermore, we suspend our resentment towards the agent altogether when we learn that the person who hurt us was only a young child or was mentally incapacitated. Cases like these, according to Strawson, “invite us to view the agent himself in a different light... When we see someone in such a light as this, all our reactive attitudes tend to be profoundly modified.” (Guttenplan p.199). When we become aware that the agent cannot be held responsible or accountable, we step back and adopt what Strawson calls an objective attitude, which means that we see the agent as someone who is “to be managed or handled or cured or trained.” (ibid., p.200). To see someone as such makes an ordinary interpersonal relationship impossible.

Importantly, Strawson further points out that we also possess the resource to look at normal and mature behaviour with an objective eye, for example in a strained relationship or simply out of curiosity, but, he says, it would be difficult to sustain this attitude for long. When we do decide to adopt a permanent objective attitude, it also means that we are giving up any potential for a normal relationship.

After demonstrating the reasons why we sometimes modify or suspend our reactive attitudes, Strawson is finally asking his key questions: “What effect would, or should, the acceptance of the truth of a general thesis of determinism have upon these reactive attitudes? ... Would, or should, it mean the end of gratitude, resentment and forgiveness...?” (ibid., p.202). In other words, in a world in which everyone’s behaviour was determined, could we not make use of our resource and look at everyone, even those we call normal people,

with an objective eye, as if they required management or treatment? Strawson finds this conceivable in theory, but looking at everyone as being abnormal would not only spell the end of all reactive attitudes, but also, as we saw, of personal relationships as we know them. A theoretical concept could never change the way we react to each other and show our feelings. Anger, gratitude and forgiveness towards each other is what defines our relationships; suspending them permanently on theoretical grounds would lead us into isolation. When we do suspend them, we do so for specific reasons previously mentioned, but never because we are convinced of the concept of determinism.

Similarly, to the personal reactive attitudes, we also suspend moral attitudes like disapprobation (when we disapprove of an agent on behalf of a third person). Again, Strawson stresses that, just like the reactive attitudes, a suspension of our moral attitudes would never be the consequence of a belief in determinism. These two stand or fall together.

For Strawson the case is clear: it simply does not matter if the theory of determinism is true or false. Even if it were true and it was the rational thing to do, we would never be able to give up our current practice of holding others responsible. We do not require an intellectual concept to justify our moral responsibility; it is already expressed in our daily reactions like indignation, blame and admiration. As Strawson writes at the end of his article: “It is useless to ask whether it would not be rational for us to do what it is not in our nature to (be able) to do.” (ibid., p.209)

Has Strawson managed to reconcile the pessimist and the optimist by asking them to acknowledge the role that reactive attitudes play in everyday life? Only if both sides are willing to make concessions. The optimist has to concede that we are not just objects of social policy who require management and treatment, who can have their “evaluator readjusted” (Blackburn, p.93) by being blamed or punished. The pessimist, on the other hand, is asked to accept that, even if determinism is true, we don’t require a metaphysical concept to hold each other responsible, that our deeply ingrained reactive attitudes are already taking care of that. This, of course, is a big sacrifice to make for the pessimist.

It is also a point that leaves Strawson’s whole argumentation vulnerable. As much as one can agree with his description of reactive and objective attitudes in general, they can hardly replace a metaphysical concept of moral responsibility. Our expressions of feelings and reactions are often vague and unpredictable and may vary from day to day and person to person. What is seen as blameworthy or abhorrent behaviour to one society, may seem normal to its neighbours. It would imply that a society’s practices of blaming and punishing are beyond criticism. Moreover, we never learn from Strawson in which situations we either ought to or must sustain or modify our reactive attitudes; we are to adopt an objective attitude when we look at an agent “as incapacitated...for ordinary interpersonal relationships” (Guttenplan, op. cit., p.203), but this can be very difficult in practice. How incapacitated, for example, is a teenager or a dementia patient? How is an ordinary relationship defined anyway? According to the author Pamela Hieronymi, Strawson, if we interpret “ordinary” as “statistically ordinary”, owes an explanation (Pamela Hieronymi, 2020). In Strawson’s argument the mere fact suffices that our reactive attitudes are an essential part of who we are; thus, no other intellectual justification is required. However, it should be the aim of philosophy to formulate a guiding theory of morality, of which our practices are the consequences.

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Strawson is right when he describes a deterministic world, in which everyone permanently suspends expressions of anger, appreciation and praise as a vastly impoverished one. Alienation and isolation would seem to be the inescapable consequences. But is it unthinkable? We can certainly imagine the possibility that one day scientists will prove the theory that everything in the universe is determined and thus everybody's behaviour is outside their control, unlikely as it may currently seem. And it does seem conceivable that humankind would then be able to at least adjust to this realisation and slowly incorporate it in some of its laws and practices. Strawson says we couldn't do so, but the question is, shouldn't we? Impossible as it may seem to repress feelings like anger and resentment when we are, say, the victim of a crime, one might, on the other hand, argue that we are already half way there. In many courts judges and juries are asked to consider the childhood of an offender or the mental state the perpetrator was in when committing the crime; and praiseworthy behaviour is occasionally credited to a genetic advantage and a privileged upbringing.

To sum up, Peter Strawson believes that, according to the pessimist, a world, in which determinism was found true, would require us to abandon our network of personal reactive attitudes across the board and instead adopt an impersonal objective attitude. This, however, he finds inconceivable. Our reactive attitudes are part of what makes us human; suspending them permanently would mean the end of personal relationships as we know them. And, importantly, by making moral responsibility part of our human nature, Strawson seems to argue that we do not require a rational justification for our morality. But basing our moral claims solely on our reactions cannot be a satisfying scenario for any society.

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