

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

In “Freedom and Resentment”, Strawson contends that our moral attitudes, such as praise or blame, are so deeply ingrained in the way we as human beings live and interact with one another that a theoretical conviction of the truth of determinism would not lead us to abandon them. He reaches this conclusion on the basis of the following steps and reasons:

1. Strawson starts off by examining our personal feelings and attitudes, such as resentment, gratitude, anger, forgiveness etc which, he argues, are our reactions to the attitudes and intentions shown towards us by others when we participate in interpersonal relationships. Strawson calls these “participant reactive attitudes” and describes them as “essentially natural human reactions to the good or ill will or indifference of others towards us”.

2. Strawson then analyses various sets of circumstances which would ordinarily lead us to suspend our ordinary participant reactive attitudes. He focuses primarily on those situations where either (a) the agent acted under abnormal stresses – for example, situations where we use words like ‘he wasn’t himself’ or (b) the agent is psychologically abnormal (e.g. incapacitated) or morally undeveloped (e.g. a child). In these abnormal cases, we suspend our ordinary reactive attitudes and adopt what Strawson calls an “objective attitude” - we see the agent as a person requiring treatment or as an object of social policy.

3. Strawson argues that our acceptance of the truth of determinism would not lead us to abandon our participant reactive attitudes in favour of a sustained objective attitude because “human commitment to participation in ordinary interpersonal relationships” is so “thoroughgoing and deeply rooted”. When we do adopt an objective attitude in the abnormal cases mentioned above, we do not do so because of some belief in the truth of determinism but because we consider the agent as incapable of interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, even when occasionally in normal cases we suspend our reactive attitudes and take an objective stance, we also do not do so because of some belief in determinism.

4. He then argues that moral attitudes are reactions towards the behaviour of persons in general which are analogous to our reactions in interpersonal relationships. Thus, moral condemnation (blame) is the “vicarious analogue” of resentment. Our personal reactive attitudes and our moral attitudes are connected because (a) they both “rest on, and reflect” our expectations and demands that human beings should show some good will or at least should not show ill will or indifference to one other; and (b) together with self reactive attitudes (the attitude of the agent - feeling obliged or guilty or shameful), they “have common roots in our human nature and our membership of human communities”. Because of their deep roots in our human nature, moral attitudes, like our personal reactive attitudes, would not change and become ‘objective’ if we are convinced of the truth of determinism.

The end result of Strawson’s thesis is that it defuses the incompatibilist vs. compatibilist controversy. According to Strawson, our practices of holding persons responsible and our expressions of moral approval and condemnation do not depend on a “kind of freedom” that demands the falsity of, or compatibility with, determinism. Our moral attitudes such as praise or blame are not reactions which require some justification either on the basis that the agent ‘deserves’ such moral reactions or on the basis that such reactions regulate social behaviour - they arise from the fact that we as human beings living and interacting with each other in communities expect and demand some degree of good will from others.

I agree with Strawson’s description of our personal and moral attitudes and his classification of these attitudes into ordinary reactive attitudes and an objective attitude which we adopt in certain particular circumstances. However, I disagree with Strawson’s overall conclusion that the truth or otherwise of determinism would not be significant for morality for the reasons set out below.

Although Strawson does not define determinism, he says that “if there is a coherent thesis of determinism, then there must be a sense of ‘determined’ such that, if determinism is true, then all behaviour whatever is determined in that sense”. Now, if we are convinced that all behaviour whatever is determined would this change our reactions to the good will or ill will or indifference of others?

If our personal and moral attitudes, though deeply rooted, have their roots in nurture rather than nature, it is likely that a paradigm shift in our view of human behaviour (such as a general conviction in the truth of determinism) could change our moral attitudes. One could make a strong argument that our moral attitudes are rooted in cultural or social concepts and cannot be put on the same level as basic human emotions like love. Strawson does not provide much by way of evidence and argument to show that our moral attitudes are not social or cultural concepts. In this context, I disagree with Strawson’s claim that it is more likely for someone to adopt an objective attitude in case of a personal issue rather than a moral issue. On the contrary, in passing moral judgement a person has no personal involvement and it is more likely for one to adopt an objective attitude. As Nagel points out:

“When we first consider the possibility that all human actions may be determined by heredity and environment, it threatens to defuse our reactive attitudes as effectively as does the information that a particular action was caused by the effects of a drug—despite all the differences between the two suppositions” (Nagel in Hondereich)

Strawson also argues that even if we did have a choice, it would not be rational for us to abandon our reactive attitudes since we would have nothing to gain by doing so. But, on the other hand, would it be rational to maintain our reactive attitudes if we feel that they are ‘false’ because we are convinced that behaviour is determined? If we did have a choice, it would be more rational for us to live ‘authentically’ and to change our attitudes to reflect what we truly believe about human nature.

If, on the other hand for the sake of argument, one concedes that our personal and moral attitudes are reactions which are an essential part of human nature and that we have no choice but to maintain our ordinary reactive attitudes even though we know that all behaviour is determined, a general conviction that the thesis of determinism is true could still have a significant effect if not on our reactive attitudes then on morality in general. We admire and are inspired by people who have a good or strong moral character - people like Gandhi who, with courage, opposed violence and injustice. People of good moral character are role models who influence morality in society as a whole. A belief that all behaviour is determined would undermine the influence these role models have on our moral character and could have a deleterious impact on moral behaviour in general. If all behaviour is determined why consider Gandhi a hero and Hitler a villain?

Strawson’s attempt to divorce the notion of moral responsibility from the determinism / free will debate encounters the fundamental difficulty that underlies the debate – the strong bond that exists between moral responsibility and our feeling that we have ‘free will’. Strawson contends that our ordinary reactive attitudes are essentially “natural human reactions to the good or ill will or indifference of others towards us”. But the notions of good will, ill will and indifference presuppose that the agent had a choice – that of either manifesting good will or ill will or indifference. So our personal and moral attitudes are natural human reactions which depend on whether the agent had a choice or a “kind of freedom” which makes him responsible for his behaviour. In other words, our reactive attitudes are inextricably intertwined with a deep rooted “clear and certain feeling of responsibility for what we do, of accountability for our actions ...” since this feeling “rests on an unshakable certainty that we ourselves are the doers of our deeds” (Schopenhauer in Guttenplan et p.192).

## **Bibliography**

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