

FREE WILL X

Strawson: Freedom and Resentment

Frankfurt argued that moral responsibility doesn't require the ability to do otherwise; so we can hold people responsible without answering the hard metaphysical question of whether they could have done otherwise. Strawson provides a very different way of trying to disconnect the two issues.

Strawson argues that there are two different sorts of attitudes that we can take towards a person: reactive attitudes and objective attitudes. As an example of the first, consider resentment. Suppose someone hurts you: pushes you over for instance. Then you will be apt to feel, not just angry, but resentful towards them. And this ties into a network of attitudes that goes much further than simply holding someone responsible: you might expect them to be sorry; you might forgive them if they do; your affection for them might be lost if they do not; and so on. However, if it turns out that they pushed you by accident these feelings will be diminished; perhaps they will go altogether; it depends on the nature of the case. If they had been rushing to try and help you, and had fallen into you they probably will; indeed they might even be replaced by positive reactive attitudes like gratitude. (Unless they have a history of clumsy over-solicitous interference.) If, on the other hand, they accidentally pushed you because they were recklessly trying to get past to see someone else, your feelings of resentment might be somewhat reduced, but they are unlikely to go completely. We require certain standards of good will and concern from those around us (how much depends on how close we are to them); and we feel resentment when we think these are not met. (Note: Strawson is rather unclear on what is required: normally he speaks of goodwill, but also of regard, affection and esteem.)

The objective attitude, in contrast, requires stepping back from such involvement. We move to it when we truly think that the harm was caused accidentally; here we view the *action* objectively. In these cases we go on treating the *person* reactively. But sometimes we no longer take the reactive stance to a person in just about everything they do. Consider, for instance, someone suffering from serious mental illnesses like schizophrenia, or severe depression. Here we adopt the objective stance to the *person*. We no longer feel resentment to them; we rather treat them as people needing to be treated or managed. Why do we suspend the reactive stance when dealing with the very young or the mentally ill? Again because we do not think that their actions indicate a lack of good will towards us.

How should we understand these different sorts of attitude? Strawson's first point is that they are attitudes on the part of the person who is reacting, not different facts about the person they are reacting to. This is shown by the fact that we sometimes take both attitudes towards the same person for the same acts. Thus: suppose you are involved in a torrid love affair. Most of the time you are passionately in the grip of reactive attitudes to your beloved: affection, resentment as you think they scorn you, affection again as they ask your forgiveness, jealousy as you think they are unfaithful, and so on. Sometimes though it all gets too much. To escape from the unbearable strain you fall back into the objective stance. You remind yourself of the terrible childhood they had; you think of the earlier affairs they had that left them so wounded; you explain what they are doing as a result of the insecurities that these experiences have inflicted upon them. You can't maintain this suspension of the reactive stance for very long (or at least you can't suspend it and maintain the relationship with them; once it's over you might think of their actions, and indeed your own, almost entirely objectively); but the fact that you can suspend it at all shows that taking the stance is something that isn't just dictated by them; it's something that comes, at least partly, from you.

Strawson now asks: why should we think that acknowledging the truth of determinism will make us give up the reactive stance across the board? He thinks that it is absurd to think that it would. In the first place, we are just not able to give it up; it is too deeply ingrained. It would be to give up on our humanity. Secondly, even if we ask whether the acknowledging the truth of determinism *should rationally*

make us give it up (whether or not we actually would), the answer is: no. For the decision as to whether we should rationally take the reactive stance is a practical one; whereas the truth of determinism is a theoretical question. Practical questions are answered by considering how we would benefit from the different answers to them. And there is no question that our lives would be hugely impoverished if we were to give up on the reactive attitudes. (The difference between practical and theoretical questions is clearly related to the difference between is-statements and ought-statements. Roughly theoretical question as questions about how things are; and practical questions are questions about what we ought to do; and there are good reasons for thinking that we can never derive an ought-statement from an is-statement; the contention sometimes known as *Hume's Law*.)

All of this has addressed the compatibility of determinism and our practice of ascribing moral responsibility. But what about the compatibilism of determinism with the claim that people are free? (What we might call *freedom compatibilism*, to distinguish it from *responsibility compatibilism*.) There are two ways to go here. One is to accept that the claim that people are free is a theoretical claim, but one which is detached from the practical question of how we should treat people. So even if freedom compatibilism is false, this won't have the terrible consequences for our practice of ascribing blame that was suggested in the first lecture. (But what should we make of the phenomenology of freedom?)

There is another way to understand Strawson. This is to understand him as saying that the claim that a certain person is free is not really a descriptive theoretical claim at all. Rather it is simply something we say when we are prepared to take the reactive stance towards them. (Compare *emotivism* in ethics: emotivists say that the statement that a given thing is good isn't really a descriptive statement at all. It's just something that we say that expresses our attitude to it; it's like saying 'Hurrah') Understood this way, Strawson comes out as a kind of sophisticated freedom compatibilist: the claim that determinism is true is quite compatible with the claim that people have free will, since the latter is just a way of indicating that we are prepared to take the reactive stance towards them. It is not a descriptive statement at all. (But again, what now becomes of the phenomenology of freedom?)

Independently of this, we might wonder how successful Strawson's approach is on its own terms. And the big worry here is whether or not we can isolate the theoretical from the practical in the way he suggests. One aspect of this is the following: don't we think that there is a real question of whether we are right in thinking that we are justified in holding someone responsible? We don't just want to say: 'This is what we do'; we want to say 'This is what we are justified in doing'.

One way of thinking about this is to compare it with other practices. thus suppose someone made a parallel defense of religion. Suppose it could be shown that there was a natural human tendency to believe in a god, and that human beings flourished when they did. Would that justify belief in god? Wouldn't we want to say: whether or not it is unavoidable, or it benefits us, we want to know whether the belief is justified. We want to know whether there is a god.

Readings

Peter Strawson, 'Freedom and Resentment'. In Watson, and in Fischer and Ravizza.

Commentary on this (the first two are the most important, esp. Watson):

S. Wolf 'The Importance of Freewill' in Fischer and Ravizza, and link on the web page

G. Watson 'The Limits of Evil' in Schoeman, reprinted in Fischer and Ravizza.

J. Bennett 'Accountability' in van Straaten ed *Philosophical Subjects*

G. Strawson (his son) 'On "Freedom and Resentment"' in Fischer and Ravizza.