Second Prize

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

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Strawson believes morality is so grounded in human nature that the question of whether determinism is true becomes insignificant. I will argue in this essay that the roots of one-on-one personal morality can be found not only in human nature but in other primates too. However, humans also practise community-concern morality, which involves abstract rule-making and is grounded in rationality (De Waal, 2013, p.172–177). As such, the question of whether determinism is true, and whether agents are truly responsible, becomes a significant one.

The question of whether determinism is true is seen by many philosophers to be a significant one for morality, in particular moral responsibility (Talbert, 2022), which depends on the notion of a person being truly responsible for how they are (Strawson G, 1993, p.6). If determinism is true and all our future actions are determined by our past actions, then how can agents be truly responsible for how they are?

Strawson recognises that this question has caused a divide between pessimists (incompatibilists), who think determinism is incompatible with free will, and optimists (compatibilists), who believe determinism is compatible with a form of freedom that is understood as making the choices we want to make (even if we couldn't have done otherwise) (Talbert, 2022). Both of these camps believe the theory of determinism and the implications for free will and moral responsibility could lead to dehumanising consequences for morality.

The main thrust of Strawson's thesis is designed to bring pessimists and optimists together through understanding that our morality is grounded in 'reactive attitudes', not a metaphysical theory concerning whether determinism is true or not (Guttenplan, Hornsby and Janaway, 2002, pp.193–209). The three main conclusions Strawson reaches are as follows:

1. The reasons for suspending moral reactive attitudes towards some agents never include the truth of determinism.

2. He cannot imagine a world in which we kept our personal reactive attitudes and gave up our moral attitudes to one another.

3. Determinism is irrelevant to the rationality of suspending these moral attitudes (Guttenplan, Hornsby and Janaway, 2002, p. 214).

I will address each of these points in turn before deciding whether Strawson is right to reduce the significance of the problem of determinism for moral responsibility.

1. **The suspension of moral reactive attitudes never includes the truth of determinism**

Strawson begins his thesis by explaining that we use personal reactive attitudes toward each other as part of human nature. These are the attitudes we take toward someone because of the attitude they display towards us (eg, resentment and gratitude). He describes moral reactive attitudes as 'impersonal' analogues of personal reactive attitudes that are used to hold each other responsible for our behaviours (eg, moral indignation) (Guttenplan, Hornsby and Janaway, 2002, p.205).

Strawson then considers whether there are some people towards whom we suspend our 'ordinary reactive attitudes' and do not treat as moral agents. He identifies the following categories of agent: 'warped or deranged, neurotic or just a child'. All of these categories of agents are 'morally undeveloped' and so our expectations of moral responsibility are different. We adopt an 'objective attitude' when engaging with agents of this kind, which cannot include 'resentment, gratitude, forgiveness, anger, or the sort of love that two adults can sometimes be said to feel reciprocally, for each other' (Guttenplan, Hornsby and Janaway, 2002, p.200).

Strawson recognises that we can use an 'objective eye' in other scenarios too: 'as a refuge, say, from the strains of involvement; or as an aid to policy; or simply out of intellectual curiosity' (Guttenplan, Hornsby and Janaway, 2002, p.201). He concludes that we don't need to know whether determinism is true or not to think about suspending moral attitudes, we do it anyway (Guttenplan, Hornsby and Janaway, 2002, p.201).

The theory of determinism is not widely known, so we can understand that it is not consciously considered most, if not all, of the time when we suspend moral attitudes. However, if we look again at Strawson's argument, we notice something intriguing about his descriptions of the underlying causes for why we might use objective attitudes. He describes seeing someone as 'peculiarly unfortunate in his formative circumstances' or 'compulsive in behaviour' (Guttenplan, Hornsby and Janaway, 2002, p.200). Consider how similar these descriptions are to the concepts of determinism (ie, the past determining the present, not being able to do otherwise). A question then arises: do we subconsciously use the concepts of determinism when assigning an agent as morally not responsible?

Regardless of whether this is true or not, it can still be argued that just because the thesis of determinism (in a conscious sense) isn't *necessary* for suspending reactive behaviours, it could still give a *sufficient* cause. If the theoretical implications of determinism on free will and moral responsibility were understood fully, it could potentially contribute towards significant changes in our moral attitudes and frameworks, the details of which rely on our intellectual arguments (De Waal, 2013, p.235). One example of a universal moral concern that has a rational basis is international human rights.

2. We cannot completely give up our moral attitudes toward each other

Strawson's second conclusion is that he cannot imagine a world in which we gave up our moral attitudes toward one another.

> The human commitment to participation in ordinary interpersonal relationships is, I think, too thoroughgoing and deeply rooted for us to take seriously the thought that a general theoretical conviction might so change our world that, in it, there were no longer any such things as interpersonal relationships (Guttenplan, Hornsby and Janaway, 2002, p.202).

I have two objections to this argument. Firstly, Strawson believes moral attitudes can't be given up because they are grounded in our personal reactive attitudes. They stand or fall together. However, our community-level morality is closely tied to the way we organise ourselves, and therefore is not immutable (De Waal, 2013, p.180). Even if morals are grounded in human nature, the specifics are decided by people (De Waal, 2013, p.185).

Secondly, we only need to consider our closest relatives, the bonobo and the chimpanzee, to see how an absence of moral responsibility does not actually affect social values and behaviours. They too use a more objective attitude towards infants and mentally compromised individuals (De Waal, 2013, p.94, p.166) and have interpersonal relationships that include gratitude and moralistic aggression (De Waal, 2013, pp.127–128).

But you may argue, the bonobo has no awareness of the truth of determinism either, they are in fact living as Strawson suggests, in ignorance of this theory and suspending reactive attitudes appropriately. Humans, on the other hand, could rationalise sustaining objective attitudes by arguing it is morally right to do so in the context of no moral responsibility. This is a possibility, of course, but only adds credence to the idea that humans need to rationalise their moral attitudes and frameworks. You could equally argue that an increased understanding of what determines who we are (in a humanising empathetic way) could lead us to build deeper connections with one another. Rather than leading to moral decay, it could lead to moral enrichment (Blackburn, 1999, pp.109–110).

3. Determinism is irrelevant to the rationality of suspending moral attitudes

Strawson's final conclusion is that the theory of determinism is irrelevant to the rationality of suspending moral attitudes. However, the question to consider here is: if the theory of determinism makes moral responsibility impossible (Strawson G, 1993), *ought* we consider *changing* our moral attitudes and practices on rational grounds? Many of our community-level moral practices require a rational basis (such as social justice and punishment, human rights etc.). It is on this type of morality that the theory of determinism could exert the most influence.

Conclusion

To conclude, Strawson wants to reach a compromise between pessimists and optimists who are worried about the dehumanising consequences of the theory of determinism for morality. This is the background against which Strawson tries to find a new approach, a bottom-up argument for morality that does not require metaphysical justification.

In many respects, Strawson's argument is very successful. He demonstrates persuasively that our moral one-on-one reactive attitudes are grounded in human nature and that reasons for suspending them do not overtly seem to rely on the truth of determinism. However, he does not address community-level morality and its intellectual moral framework. There is also a lack of discussion of free will and moral responsibility; the subjects with which determinism is inextricably linked.

I have argued that comparisons with other primates demonstrate that there is a community-level morality in humans that is grounded in rationality. I have also shown that an understanding of the truth of determinism is significant for notions of responsibility in our moral practices and could potentially have positive consequences for the way we relate to one another: not with the objectifying stance, but with full human understanding, enriched, rather than undermined, by knowledge of the conditions that bring about the decisions of other people (Blackburn, 1999, pp.109–110).

Reference list

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