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Introduction

This free course asks what it is to be a person. You will see that there are several philosophical questions around the nature of personhood. Here we explore what it is that defines the concept. As you work through the course, you will notice that this area of enquiry has developed its own semi-technical vocabulary. The plural of ‘person’ is, in this area of enquiry, ‘persons’ rather than ‘people’. It is easy to see the reason for this. The question ‘What are people?’ is potentially confusing. It could mean ‘What is it to be a people (as opposed to simply a collection of individuals)?’ This, like the question of what it is to be a state or a nation, falls within the province of political philosophy. This is not the question we want. Instead, we want ‘What is it to be a person (or one of the kind of thing that are persons)?’

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Postgraduate Level study in Arts and Humanities.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- discuss what it means to be a person
- read and understand arguments discussing this question.

1 Introducing the concept of the 'person' and 'persons'

This course explores what it is to be a person. There are several philosophical questions around the nature of personhood. In this course we will be exploring what it is that defines the concept. As you read on, you will notice that this area of enquiry has evolved its own semi-technical vocabulary. The plural of ‘person’ is, in this area of enquiry, standardly ‘persons’ rather than ‘people’. It is not difficult to see the reason for this. The question ‘What are people?’ is potentially confusing. It could mean ‘What is it to be a people (as opposed to simply a collection of individuals)?’ This, like the question of what it is to be a state or a nation, falls within the province of political philosophy. This is not the question we want. Instead, we want ‘What is it to be a person (or one of the kind of thing that are persons)?’ There is a lesson to be learned here. As we have seen, in writing philosophy the overriding aim is clarity. Clarity is generally best achieved by writing in plain English. Technical or semi-technical terms should only be used when – as in this case – plain English provides no easy way around a potential confusion.

Why is the question as to the nature of persons a question for philosophers not biologists? In ordinary language, ‘person’ is often used synonymously with ‘human being’. For example, we find out how many persons are in a crowd by counting the number of human bodies. If we accept this, we would sort out the nature of persons by sorting out the nature of human beings, and the latter task certainly is best conducted by a biologist. However, in ordinary language we sometimes do distinguish between ‘person’ and ‘human being’. Consider, for example, someone who has suffered some catastrophe that has put them in a permanent coma, a ‘persistent vegetative state’. Their biological classification has not altered; they are still a human being. They have lost something, however. In a sense, they have ceased to exist. It is tempting to say that they are no longer a person. Another sphere or argument in which this use occurs isin the debate over abortion. This sometimes comes down to the question of whether or not a foetus is a person. These are philosophical rather than biological questions.

A being in a persistent vegetative state is a case of something human that might not be a person. Could there be examples of entities that might be persons that are not human? There is evidence that some of the great apes – gorillas, for example – have quite sophisticated psychologies, sophisticated enough, perhaps, for them to count as persons. Another example of non-human persons would be intelligent life on other planets. If there are such beings they might very well be persons although it is very unlikely that they would be human beings.

This course is concerned with the use of ‘person’ that is not equivalent to ‘human being’. Arguably, there are human beings that are not persons (those in a persistent vegetative state). There might also be persons that are not human beings (the great apes and intelligent beings on other planets). We are going to try to find the necessary and sufficient conditions for personhood. In other words, we are going to try to complete the sentence: ‘x is a person if...’.

There is a tradition in philosophy, which includes Rousseau and Kant, which holds that there is a normative aspect to personhood. This would mean that specifying the nature of personhood would not simply be describing how we are in fact, but rather describing how

we ought to be. According to this tradition, a person ought to be an ‘autonomous being’. What constitutes an autonomous being is the subject of much debate. According to one recent commentator, ‘at a minimum, the agents must be able to act for reasons, reflecting on facts and interests across time’ (Hill 2000, 241). We can think of an autonomous being as one who is able to determine the ‘shape’ of their life through reasoned free choices.

The notion of autonomy can be clarified if we think about some concrete cases. Does a cat have autonomy when it notices, and then races after, a mouse? Presumably not, as the cat does not act for reasons. It does not consider whether it wants to be the kind of animal that chases mice; rather, it just does it. Are we exercising autonomy when, in Britain at least, we drive on the left rather than the right? This appears not to be an action we perform through our own free choice; rather, we are ‘forced’ to do it. This question of whether obeying the law violates our autonomy is a big question in political philosophy – too big for us to consider here. An example of a different sort are prisoners. Prisoners have freedom of thought, but not freedom of action. Hence, they are autonomous in some ways, but not in others. Another difficult problem emerges in cases in which someone is ‘forced’ to act from the strength of their desires, rather than from reasons. Does an alcoholic, for example, have autonomy when they spend their taxi fare home on a last drink? Presumably, if they are acting solely on their desires, and against their reason, they are like the cat; they are not shaping their lives through their own free choice. To that extent, they are not exercising their autonomy.

Autonomy depends on being able to make choices that are free from certain forms of interference. In particular, if our goals set by the coercion of others or by the strength of our unreasoned desires, then we are not autonomous. Respecting autonomy – respecting a person’s capacity to act for reasons – is part of what it is to treat someone as a person. We should not act in such a way that someone else is not able to exercise this capacity. This means that we should not mislead them so that they are incapable of acting on reasons and we should not override the choices they make as a result of their exercise of reason. On the other hand, if another human being is not acting autonomously, it might be appropriate not to treat them as a person. For example, it might be appropriate to override the choice of an alcoholic for another drink if we are convinced it will kill them. Prison warders override the choices of those in their charge for other reasons. These are some specific conditions in which we should shape others’ lives for them. Could there be a general condition that undermined our reason for treating each other as beings capable of reasoned free choice? Everyone agrees there are reasons for not treating some individuals as autonomous, but some people think there is a general reason for not treating anyone as autonomous. They claim that our freedom of choice (and hence our autonomy and thus our personhood) is always and everywhere an illusion. The claim that this is the consequence of determinism is the subject of Peter Strawson’s ‘Freedom and Resentment’. To understand this, you will need to be familiar with some of the background of the particular debate.

2 Determinism and free choice: a brief résumé

Imagine the following scenario. You and a group of your friends find five pounds on the street. It is too little money to hand in to the police, and too difficult to divide up equally. A happy solution is to donate it to charity and, as your walk home takes you past a charity shop, the task is entrusted to you. On the way home you stand outside the charity shop. Next to it is the off-licence. You are in an agony of indecision as to whether to do as you said you would, or spend the money on a bottle of wine. It seems that you have a free choice; it is up to you which shop you walk into. Whatever you do will be your action, and something for which you can be held responsible. If you buy the wine, and someone finds out, you will rightly be the subject of blame. (This example is adapted from Strawson, 1986)

The problem arises because the appearance of free choice (and the responsibility that follows) might not be sustainable if our world is determined. It is not clear how exactly to characterize determinism. One popular definition is that every event has a cause. Nothing happens unless there is something to make it happen. Think of any event in the world. There was some set of circumstances that existed prior to the event such that those circumstances caused that event to happen and so, in that sense, made that event inevitable.

You might think that there is one exception to determinism: namely, our own decisions. I can choose whether to go into the charity shop or the off-licence. Nothing determines that choice. Let us make an assumption: what goes on in our minds is determined by what goes on in our brains. If we call the total state of our brains a ‘brain state’, then the history of our brains is a continuous set of causes and effects moving from one brain state to another. But as our brain states determine what goes on in our minds, then what goes on in our minds is a continuous set of causes and effects. The succession of our ‘mind states’ is as causally inevitable as the succession of brain states. The appearance of a free choice is an illusion; things follow in our minds as inevitably as night follows day.

What we have, then, are two plausible lines of thought with incompatible conclusions. Faced with the choice between donating the money to charity or buying a bottle of wine it seems as if we are free to choose, and so are responsible for our choice. Faced with the argument from determinism, it seems as if we are not free to choose. Whatever we decide will simply be the effect of prior brain states, those being the effect of brain states and so on back to the beginning of time.

There are a number of issues that might already have occurred to you. First, you may have heard that scientists now believe that the universe does not simply follow a pattern of deterministic cause and effect. Quantum mechanics is a theory that is needed to deal with extremely small particles. Some people interpret this theory as indeterministic; events do not happen with causal inevitability. Thus, the ‘new physics’ shows there are indeterministic (chance) elements in the universe. This undermines the premise in our argument that all events are determined. There are at least three replies we can make to this. First, the interpretation of quantum mechanics as indeterministic is disputed (indeed, some informed opinion holds that quantum mechanics is deterministic, while it is the supposedly deterministic Newtonian mechanics that may be indeterministic (cf. Butterfield 1998). Second, the problem of free will can be posed without reference to determinism, so whether the universe is determined or not is irrelevant (Strawson 1986).

To explain these replies, and possible objections to them, would take us away from the main thrust of our current concerns. Fortunately, the third reply is sufficient to demonstrate the irrelevance of indeterminism. The argument has been that quantum mechanics shows there are chance happenings in the universe. Even if this were true, and it could be shown that my choices were the result of chance, it would not follow that they were freely chosen, because I cannot freely choose chance events. Hence, indeterminism, if anything, seems to move us further away from autonomy (Ayer 1954).

The second issue concerns predictability. If the universe is deterministic then the future is uniquely determined. This seems to imply that, if we knew the current state of the universe (the position and state of every particle) and we knew the laws of nature then we could, in principle, predict what the universe would be like at any future time. This is a consequence of determinism. However, it is worthwhile distinguishing the metaphysical from the epistemological issue. The truth of determinism would make it possible in principle to predict the future course of the universe. Given this, there is still the question of whether we could know the future, given our finite minds. The answer is, of course, that the calculations would be way beyond any human mind.

The debate over the truth of determinism has raged for centuries. This has overlapped with a second debate, between people who agree – at least, for the sake of argument – that determinism is true, but disagree over whether determinism is compatible with choosing freely. Pinning some labels on, we have the following.

Those who believe that even if determinism were true, we would still be capable of free choice, are called *compatibilists*: they hold determinism and free choice to be compatible. Assume (for the sake of argument) that determinism is true, and so that all our actions are caused. These choices will still divide into two sorts. The first are choices that we are forced to make by such circumstances as addiction and coercion. The second are all our choices that are not like that. The second sorts of choices are, according to the compatibilist, free. In short, compatibilists argue that free choices are contrasted with constrained choices. Whether or not determinism is true, there will still be unconstrained (and hence free) choices. Choices that we are not constrained to make, even if they are caused, are our own free choices. Hence, compatibilists hold that the truth of determinism would not undermine our status as beings capable of freedom of choice, that is, as persons.

Those who believe that if determinism is true we cannot make free choices are called *incompatibilists*: they hold determinism and free choice to be incompatible. Determinism wrecks all freedom of choice, whether or not the choice is otherwise constrained. If the choice between the charity shop and the off-licence is the result of a determined causal chain involving the inner workings of the brain, then this is not a choice for which the person is truly responsible. There is a clear and simple sense in which they could not have done otherwise than what they did (van Inwagen 1975). Incompatibilists who believe determinism is true, and thus that we cannot make free choices, and thus that we are not persons, we can call *incompatibilist determinists*. Incompatibilists who believe that we can make free choices, and thus that determinism must be false, are referred to as libertarians. For a libertarian, our actions are not the result of ‘a determined and unstoppable causal chain’. People (or ‘agents’ as they sometimes called) can step outside the causal chain and initiate actions themselves. There is a freedom that is outside the causal order; a ‘contra-causal freedom’ (Chisholm 1964). You do not need fully to assimilate all this to understand Strawson’s paper. Rather, it is to put the concerns of that paper in context. You can simply refer to the various positions outlined above as and when you need to.

3 Peter Strawson: ‘Freedom and resentment’

Reading Strawson

Peter Strawson's paper, ‘Freedom and resentment’ did much to change the direction of the debate surrounding determinism. Strawson, as you will see, divides his paper into numbered sections. This is because he has a reasonably small number of relatively discrete points to make, and the sections help the reader to see where the discussion begins and ends. This is not the only way of doing this; you might prefer to use explicit signposting within the text; for example, using phrases such as: ‘Having established that whatever, let us move on to discuss whatever else’. For the purposes of this course, the paragraphs within the sections have been numbered. So when I refer to, for example, III:2, I mean the second paragraph of section III. I am going to give a detailed reading of Strawson's paper, solving problems where we can and noting down those that deserve further consideration. I would like to establish a sense of the shape of the paper, to track the way in which Strawson develops his argument.

3.1 Strawson: Sections I and II

Activity 1

Click to open Peter Strawson's article 'Freedom and Resentment'.

Read I and II and answer the following questions.

1. How do Strawson's labels of ‘optimist’ and ‘pessimist’ correspond to the labels introduced in the final two paragraphs of the last section?
2. What is the impasse into which, Strawson implies, the optimist and pessimist have argued themselves?
3. What can you deduce about where Strawson's sympathies lie?

1. From the definitions in I:1, it is clear that the pessimists hold that the truth of determinism would make a range of concepts that rest on responsibility (moral obligation, punishing and blaming among them) unjustified. Hence, they are incompatibilists. In his initial definition at least, Strawson only attributes the conditional to pessimists: ‘If the thesis is true…’ Hence, we cannot identify the pessimists with either incompatibilist determinists or libertarians at this stage. Optimists ‘hold that these concepts and practices in no way lose their raison d'etre if the thesis of determinism is true’. Hence, they are compatibilists.
2. In summary, in I, and in greater detail in II, Strawson sketches the debate between the optimist and the pessimist. The optimist argues that ‘the facts as we know them’ supply an adequate basis for concepts and practices such as blame and punishment. The relevant fact is that there is a sense of ‘freedom’, compatible with determinism, that justifies these concepts and practices – a

sense that Strawson gives in II:1. The pessimist argues that the only reason the optimist has given for using such a thin notion of freedom to justify blame, etc. is that it allows us to continue in practices that ‘regulate behaviour in socially desirable ways’. However – and this is the decisive point that Strawson gives to the pessimist – ‘this is not a sufficient basis, it is not even the right *sort* of basis, for these practices as we understand them’ (II:3). The optimist, faced with this point, has nothing left to say. The pessimist, to get the basis for blame, etc. that they want, must demand the falsity of determinism. Neither position seems satisfactory.

3. Strawson takes up the position of the agnostic; he is not even sure whether he knows what determinism is (I:1). However, he is clear that what he wants to do is to provide a way out of the impasse by giving the optimist something more to say that will include a concession to the pessimist (II:4 and I:2). This tells us what to expect from the rest of the paper: a new approach that will in some way reconcile the two traditional opposing schools in the debate

In III he begins this, by telling us he is going to put aside the usual concepts and practices that are discussed (‘punishing and moral condemnation and approval’ (III:1)) and talk instead about ‘reactive attitudes’ (III:5). The examples he gives are ‘gratitude, resentment, forgiveness, love and hurt feelings’ (III:1). This is, to those who are used to the usual compatibilist versus incompatibilist debate, surprising, for these attitudes do not seem to be clearly connected to the matter that is usually in dispute: namely, the connection between determinism and responsibility.

3.2 Strawson: Sections III and IV

Activity 2

Click to open Peter Strawson's article 'Freedom and Resentment'.

Read III, noting the detailed discussion Strawson gives of the place of reactive attitudes in a human life. Then read IV, and do the following exercises:

1. List the distinctions and sub-distinctions Strawson makes in paragraphs 2 and 3.
2. Reconstruct the argument that leads to the conclusion at the end of 4.
3. Put, in your own words, Strawson's two-part reason for denying that accepting the truth of determinism would lead to the decay of the reactive attitudes.

1. The first group of attitudes are those in which we excuse an action of an agent (that is, a person) without our seeing the agent as one in respect of whom these attitudes are in any way inappropriate. The second group is divided into two sub-groups. The first are those in which we excuse the agent because, although generally fully responsible, they were at the time they acted in such a way that we temporarily do not view them as fully responsible. The second are those in which we excuse the agent because they are not fully responsible because of who or how they are (for example, a child or an addict).
2. Strawson is considering the second sub-group of the second range of cases. He argues as follows. It is appropriate to have ‘the objective attitude’ to those he is

considering. The objective attitude cannot include the full range of reactive feelings and attitudes. The absence of some of these reactive attitudes makes some interactions impossible. In particular, ‘you may fight with him, you cannot quarrel with him, and though you may talk to him, even negotiate with him, you cannot reason with him.’

3. The question at issue (which is Strawson's novel way of reconsidering the compatibilism versus incompatibilism debate) is as follows: if we assume that determinism is true, then should this affect our relationship with other people? His reply is summed up in the final eight lines or so of IV:11. The argument for the first part comes in the middle of IV: 10. The argument for the second comes around about the middle of IV: 11.

In the final paragraph, Strawson canvasses a possible objection to his view. He imagines someone arguing that he has been considering ‘what we actually do’, perhaps what it is psychologically possible for us to do. According to the objector, as a philosopher he should be considering what it would be *rational* for us to do; that is, what we *ought* to do. Strawson gives two reasons for rejecting this charge. The first is that our commitment (to reactive attitudes) ‘is part of the general framework of human life’. This ‘is not something that can come up for review’ in a way that ‘particular cases’ can come up within the framework. This is reminiscent of a remark by Ludwig Wittgenstein: ‘some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn’ (Wittgenstein 1974, 341). In the same way that without immovable hinges, a door will not turn, discussion and argument rely upon certain things: principally, the conditions that allow us to relate to each other as persons. These cannot be questioned, because it is the fact that they are in place that allows us to raise questions at all. The second reason he gives is that even if it were possible to question the framework (which it is not), we would be choosing between different kinds of life we wanted to lead – do we want to relate to each other as persons, or do we want to take the objective stance? The answer to this would not be given by our theoretical commitment to determinism; rather, it would be a matter of the assessment of the gains and losses to our lives.

As we saw, section III ended with Strawson having set up a problem and pointed to where the solution might lie. Section IV contains much of his positive proposal. It is, not surprisingly, longer than the previous sections (longer indeed than I to III combined). Having reached the positive proposal, it would be worth stopping reading and thinking about how plausible it is. What would be its ramifications if it were true? Can we really believe it? How strong are the arguments?

The conclusion Strawson comes to is, initially at least, puzzling. The view appears to imply that the beliefs that govern the way we live our lives are, in some respects, ‘fact proof’. Even if we discover that the way we carry on does not correspond to the way things are, we cannot change (because we cannot change ‘the framework’). Given that the conclusion is so puzzling, it would be worth turning back a few pages and checking the argument. Having done that, it would be worth reading on to see if any of the puzzlement is mitigated in the succeeding pages.

3.3 Strawson: Section V

Activity 3

Click to open Peter Strawson's article 'Freedom and Resentment'.

Read section V:1–4 and answer the following questions:

1. What are the three kinds of reactive attitudes Strawson has described by the end of V:4?
2. What does he claim is the relation between them?
3. Why has Strawson developed his argument in this direction?

1. (i) Personal reactive attitudes. These are the ones discussed in the previous section: attitudes (such as resentment) that we take up as a result of actions of other people. (ii) ‘sympathetic or vicarious or impersonal or disinterested or generalized analogues’ of the personal reactive attitudes. These are attitudes we take up as a result of actions of other people towards not only ourselves, but ‘all those on whose behalf moral indignation may be felt.’ (iii) Personal reactive attitudes that cover one's own actions towards others (such as ‘feeling bound or obliged… compunction… guilty or remorseful’).
2. These are connected ‘not merely logically’, but ‘humanly’. Strawson considers the ‘moral solipsist’, someone who had only (i) above, but not (ii) or (iii). Solipsism is the belief that only oneself and one's experiences exist. Strawson's analogy is of someone who only takes up attitudes in situations in which they are directly involved. They would feel resentment if they were unfairly slighted, but would have no feelings of indignation on behalf of others who found themselves in exactly the same position, nor would they feel bound not to slight others. Such a case, Strawson says, may not even be a ‘conceptual possibility’. As people share a ‘human nature’, and inhabit ‘human communities’, all three attitudes come together.
3. This is always a good question to ask of developments in an argument. Consider, for a moment, Strawson's overall strategy. He wanted to take us away from the usual ground of argument between compatibilist and incompatibilist towards considering reactive attitudes. He started by talking about those reactive attitudes that it would easiest for the reader to grasp (that is, (i) above). However, those form only a small part of the reactive attitudes we have, and he wants to consider the possible effect of belief in the truth of determinism in a whole human life. Hence, having told us what they are (by considering (i)), he is broadening his scope and considering their generalized versions.

Activity 4

Click to open Peter Strawson's article 'Freedom and Resentment'.

Now read the rest of V and answer the following questions:

1. What parallel is Strawson drawing between the personal reactive attitudes and their impersonal (generalized) versions in V:5–6? What is the difference?

2. What kind of case do you think Strawson has in mind in the closing sentences of V:7?
3. What is the parallel between the personal reactive attitudes and their impersonal versions in V:8?
4. In V:8 and in V:9, Strawson says a certain question would be ‘useless’ and talks of a concept's ‘irrelevance’. On both occasions the word is italicized. Why do you think Strawson uses these terms, instead of such terms as ‘wrong’ and ‘incoherent’?

1. Strawson is considering the special considerations that mitigate the impersonal reactive attitudes, which he considered with respect to the personal reactive attitudes in IV:2–3. He thinks the cases are parallel. In the first group, we excuse the action but not the agent. In the second group, we temporarily excuse the agent in the first subgroup, and take up ‘the objective attitude’ in the case of the second sub-group. The difference is that the conclusion is no longer directly personal. Someone to whom it is appropriate is ‘not… seen as a morally responsible agent’.
2. Strawson has given reasons why taking up the objective attitude, without the usual reasons, is easier in the generalized case than it is in the personal case. He mentions ‘speculative or political gains’. Perhaps he has in mind cases such as a politician who needs to ration scarce resources. They might decide, for example, to target medical treatment on certain age groups, and simply ignore the needs of others. This may be the best decision to make in the circumstances, but it does require the suspension of ‘ordinary interpersonal attitudes’ towards some people.
3. There are three parts to this. First, is it is never determinism that leads to the suspension of the impersonal reactive attitudes. Second, the theoretical conviction of the truth of determinism would never lead to the decay of these attitudes. Third, Strawson rejects the claim that his considerations are irrelevant because they only concern what we would do, not what it would be rational to do.
4. The terms ‘useless’ and ‘irrelevant’ signal that Strawson thinks that the question of the *truth* of determinism just does not arise when we are considering whether or not to suspend our ordinary reactive attitudes. Whether or not to suspend these is a question that arises within the context of a lived life. The lived life requires a framework, and the question of the appropriateness of the reactive attitudes arises about, or outside that framework. As we have seen, Strawson thinks that the question of the nature of the framework is principally a question of the kinds of life we want to lead. So, within the framework, the question of the appropriateness of the reactive attitudes is not a matter of right or wrong, coherence or incoherence. It is simply beside the point.

3.4 Strawson: Section VI

There is only one more section left in the paper. Here, as we would expect, Strawson returns to the way in which he set out the problem (in II:4) and makes good his promise to ‘[give] the optimist something more to say’.

Activity 5

Click to open Peter Strawson's article 'Freedom and Resentment'.

Read section VI and answer the following questions.

1. How, according to Strawson, should the optimist alter their view?
2. How, according to Strawson, should the pessimist alter their view?
3. What factors does Strawson think inhibit the acknowledgement of the ‘network of human attitudes’ in ending the compatibilist versus incompatibilist debate?

1. What alarms the pessimist is that the optimist's belief in the truth of determinism drives him or her to take an objective view of humanity; to see people as subjects of ‘policy, treatment, control’ (VI:3) and to justify, for example, the criminal justice system in terms of ‘the efficacy of these practices in regulating behaviour in socially desirable ways’ (VI:2). This is not wrong (the consequences of our system of punishment do matter), but it is inadequate. The optimist should realize that determinism should not lead us to take the objective attitude, and that our treatment, for example, of offenders *expresses* our moral attitudes and thus is justified by the impersonal reactive attitudes we have been considering.
2. The pessimist should realize that he or she does not need to resort to panicky metaphysics, such as postulating contra-causal freedom. (Strawson alludes to the argument we met earlier in this course: that it is not even clear that responsibility can be assigned, in particular cases, for actions that were not caused.) They do not need anything of such doubtful pedigree, but rather need to remember that the kind of justification they seek for punishment is given by the network of reactive attitudes that the optimist has no reason to discard.
3. The general factor is that ‘human attitudes… have to an increasing extent become objects of study in the social and psychological sciences’. He gives three specific instances of this. First, ‘increased historical and anthropological awareness of the great variety of forms these human attitudes may take at different times and in different cultures’. If some cultures can do without blame and resentment, it would make us wonder whether such reactive attitudes are as essential as Strawson claims. Second, psychology has shown that reactive attitudes are often not to be trusted: ‘they are a prime realm of self-deception, of the ambiguous and the shady, of guilt-transference, unconscious sadism and the rest’. Third, subjects such as science (that have great prestige) take a detached view of these attitudes, while for Strawson they are important because of the non-detached role they play in human life (III:1). Strawson rejects all three as reasons not to acknowledge the importance of reactive attitudes.

You have now read through the whole essay. Before moving on, there are four further issues I would like to look at. First, – as pointed out above – Strawson divides his paper into numbered sections. He built his argument up using fairly clear blocks hence it does make sense to number these: there is a section for each major advance of his argument. Notice also the way he uses paragraphs; there is a lot to be said for the old advice to begin a new paragraph with each new point. This results, in Strawson's case, in paragraphs that greatly differ in length – his sections differ in length for the same reason. Second, notice the way Strawson uses footnotes. Of the nine there are, three are to make reference to others’ work. The small number of references is because Strawson is an established

philosopher contributing original work to a debate. At graduate level (and beyond) one would expect significantly more references, particularly in any section devoted to reviewing existing work on a problem. The remaining footnotes are asides that Strawson has not incorporated into the text.

The other two issues are about the content rather than the structure, and stem from remarks Strawson makes in the final section. First, there are his views on punishment (in VI:4–5). Recall, this is in the context of the pessimist's criticism of the optimist's objective attitude towards offenders; an attitude that, because it is devoid of reactive attitudes, treats the offender as someone outside the moral community. Strawson argues that we do not treat offenders that way. Rather, we withdraw our goodwill to the offender, in proportion to the degree of their offence. As Strawson goes on to say, our attitudes are expressed in our practices – by which I take it he means that this withdrawal of good will would be manifested in our practice of inflicting punishment. Withdrawal of goodwill is not the same as the objective attitude, however, it is rather a mitigation of the usual reactive attitudes. As Strawson says, we do not want the offender to suffer unnecessarily. The offender, caught up in the same web of reactive attitudes, should not resent their punishment (as would be appropriate if they were punished for no reason at all). Resentment is not appropriate here; indeed, we might hope, although Strawson does not say so here, that the offender viewed their punishment as in some way an expression of their remorse or their shame.

Finally, there are his views on the decline of reactive attitudes in the face of scientific investigation. Science takes a detached attitude to the world. It attempts to consider phenomena independently of any distinctively human perspective. Consider, for example, what human beings refer to as ‘marble’. A scientist would tell us that there is no single thing that is marble, that the classification is partly a matter of our ignorance and partly a matter of convenience. In fact, marble covers a number of unrelated compounds including limestone, alabaster, serpentine and granite. Scientists might even argue that because these different compounds have different properties (some, for example, are softer than others) we would be better off in the long run if we dropped the classification and used the more accurate scientific divisions. Strawson raises the possibility that something similar may be true for our reactive attitudes. On scientific investigation it might transpire that, like marble, these do not describe anything scientifically respectable, and, like marble, the advice might be that we drop them.

3.5 New light on compatibilist versus incompatibilist debate

Strawson has attempted to throw new light on the compatibilist versus incompatibilist debate by showing that there are certain ‘reactive attitudes’ that are a necessary part of the framework of anything that is recognizably the life of a person. His argument has centred on the claim that is it ‘useless’ to question these attitudes. He argues this by showing the role they have in our lives, and arguing that they are part of the ‘framework’ of life. We could put the point as follows. A hypothetical world in which we became convinced of the truth of determinism and, in consequence, developed an ‘objective attitude’ to each other would be a very different world to the one in which we live. In particular, Strawson suggests, it would not be one in which we related to each other as (in his terms) ‘human beings’. It is obvious that Strawson does not mean the biological classification (that would continue regardless); rather, he means that it would not be a

world in which we related to each other as *persons*. It would be a world in which all the network of attitudes Strawson describes so carefully would be absent. In its place, we would relate to each other, and to ourselves, as mechanical systems. Our current concept of a person would not survive.

What does this tell us of Strawson's answer to the question ‘What is it to be a person?’ There are certain properties we have (being a patriot, being socially responsible) that emerge out of social interactions. They are not properties possessed by hypothetical individuals who have always lived outside any society (for the sake of simplicity I am ignoring the fact that an isolated individual is always in a society with their past and future self). Other properties (being human, having two legs) do not emerge out of social interactions; they are properties we would have had anyway. Strawson says that life takes place within a context provided by a framework. Within one framework (that which mandates reactive attitudes) we relate to each other as persons. Within another framework (that which mandates the ‘objective attitude’ as the general way we react to each other) we would not relate to each other as persons. Within the first scenario, the concept ‘person’ has a place, within the second it does not. Hence, for Strawson, being a person is some kind of emergent social property; we are persons because we have, and are the subject of, certain reactive attitudes. We could have all the non-emergent properties we do have (the same brain structures and so on) and, within a different framework, not have been persons.

Where has Strawson's paper left us? My view is that there is more to be said about the nature of personhood. In particular, why are some entities (human beings, in particular) the object of our reactive attitudes and other entities not? For Strawson this is a consequence of our having the framework that we have. Hence, the question of whether we have general reason to treat (most) human beings as persons is not one that can sensibly be raised within the framework, as it is a question about the framework. Let us persist, however. If we can formulate exactly the question we want to ask, we can then check whether there is any argument in Strawson's paper that rules out our asking it.

Could there be some property, possessed by all and only those entities that are the subject of reactive attitudes, that justifies their being the subject of reactive attitudes? From the discussion at the start of the course, we can hesitantly assume that it is appropriate to adopt such attitudes to autonomous beings: beings with the capacity for free choice. The question of what it is for an entity to have the capacity for free choice threatens to take us back to the debate between compatibilism and incompatibilism that Strawson hoped to get beyond. That itself is no reason not to proceed. Strawson's starting point was simply that the debate had reached an impasse, rather than that it was logically flawed. Hence, it might merit another look.

You might find Peter Strawson’s article, ‘Freedom and Resentment’, a little difficult. The argument is quite elusive. If so, I hope this short note will be of some use. It is not meant to replace the course material or a thorough reading of the text. What it does, I hope, is to give you an overview of what is at issue.The course material introduces you to the problem of free will and determinism. In brief, if everything is caused (including the states of our brain, and so – given some plausible assumptions – our mental states), then the notion that we make choices seems to drop out of the picture. We simply do what we are caused to do. One way of thinking about what Strawson is trying to do is to take him to be asking what difference the truth of determinism should make to us. Strawson contrasts the approach taken by the optimists (that everything would carry on regardless) with that taken by the pessimists. The pessimists’ view is that the optimists can only maintain the claim that everything can carry on regardless by working with attenuated and inadequate notions of responsibility, blame and so on and so forth.

Instead, Strawson advocates a different approach. He says that, in particular circumstances, it is appropriate to regard a person in a way similar to that in which we might regard a machine (that is, take an ‘objective attitude’ to them). An example might be the way we regard someone who is very mentally defective. This contrasts with the way we usually regard our fellows: within a complicated network of attitudes such as praise, blame and so on. Strawson calls these reactive attitudes. What should happen if we become convinced of the truth of determinism? One option, you might think, would be for us to start taking the objective attitude to everyone. After all, if determinism is true, then, in one sense, we are determined in the same way as a machine is determined. Strawson’s claim is that this is ‘practically inconceivable’, that we have a ‘natural human commitment’ to reactive attitudes. In short, what he is saying is that if we consider what life would be like if we dropped all our reactive attitudes and took the objective attitude to everyone, we could see it would be no kind of life at all. Hence, even if we become convinced by the truth of determinism, that should not make a difference to how we treat each other.

It is not quite clear what the moral of all this is. However, something like this seems to follow. Some of the properties we have follow from certain non-relational facts about what we are. It is a fact about me that I possess one X and one Y chromosome, which makes it the case that I am male. Strawson is saying that it is not facts of this sort that make it the case that I am a person. Rather, being a person is a bit like being a respected person in the community. Respected people in the community do not have a different biology from us; they pretty much share the relevant non-relational facts. Being a respected person in the community is a form of social role. If one wants to say what being a respected person in the community is, one has to consider such matters as how that person is seen through the eyes of others.

So take the question: What is it to be a person? One way to go about answering this would be to find certain non-relational properties and claim that any entity that had those properties is a person . The other way – Strawson’s way – is to say that what it is to be a person is to have a certain role in human interaction. What it is to be a person is to fit into the rich tapestry human beings weave in interacting with each other.

Conclusion

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