

Free Will III

So far we have looked at various ways of arguing for compatibilism, i.e. the thesis that free will and determinism are compatible. But suppose we thought that none of them worked? What would follow? One response would be to give up on determinism. The difficulty here is that we haven't got a good conception of what a non-determinist position—libertarianism as it is sometime called—would really be like. Giving up determinism is only part of the solution; we need to know what to put in its place. An alternative response is to give up on freedom, and to give up on the notions of praise and blame that go with them. Various behaviourist psychologists have suggested that we do just that. They hold that talk of praise and blame is just outdated superstition. Instead of talk of *punishing* people for anti-social behaviour, we should just think in terms of exposing them to stimuli that will make them less likely to do that thing again. In short: we subject them to treatment. But such an attitude strikes many as profoundly horrible; it gives up on the respect and dignity that we owe to people.

Another response is to question the connection between freedom and our practice of holding people responsible. Perhaps, despite what we said in earlier lectures, believing someone to be free is not really a prerequisite to holding them responsible (at least where holding someone to be free is understood as a *descriptive* statement; more on this anon). There are two famous articles in this area. The first, again by Harry Frankfurt, is fairly straightforward. The second, by Peter Strawson, is harder to get a grip on.

FRANKFURT

Frankfurt's basic contention is simple: contrary to what we have suggested, it's not true that you're not responsible if you couldn't have done otherwise. Suppose that there is someone who very much wants you to do a certain thing; and moreover they have a way of ensuring that their desire is carried out. But they will only use their power over you if they think you are not going to do what they want you to do; otherwise they'll leave you alone. Thus, perhaps they want you to drive down a certain street; and provided that you do drive down it they will not interfere; but if you were to fail to turn at the relevant corner, they would activate a secret device in your car that would automatically turn it. Suppose that they do not in fact need to interfere; you drive your car down the street. Then surely you have acted freely, even though you could not have done otherwise.

Does this help us show that considerations of the truth of determinism have no bearing on whether people are responsible for their actions? Perhaps, but it seems unlikely that it does. For the crucial point seems to be that someone is not responsible in so far as it is their action being determined that brings them to act as they do. (This isn't the case in the car example.) But doesn't determinism claim that exactly that is true: we act as we do because we are determined to do so.

STRAWSON: FREEDOM AND RESENTMENT

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.

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. Here 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.

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.

Almost everyone can agree about the existence of the reactive attitudes. What is really controversial about Strawson's claim is the relation that they bear to determinism. For 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; a contention sometimes known as *Hume's Law*.)

How then should we understand Strawson's response to the argument about the viability of compatibilism? We can accept that the question of whether or not determinism is true is a theoretical one; whereas the issue of whether or not we should take the reactive stance, including the question of whether or not we should hold people responsible, is a practical one. But what about the claim that people are free? There are two ways to go here. One is to accept that this is a theoretical claim, and so one which is detached from the practical question of how we should treat people. So even if incompatibilism is true, this won't have the terrible consequences for our practice that was suggested in the first lecture.

But 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 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.

READINGS

Harry Frankfurt, 'Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility', in Feinberg.

Peter Strawson, 'Freedom and Resentment'. Originally in *Proceedings of the British Academy* 1962; reprinted in his *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*, and in Watson ed., *Free Will*.