



Peter Strawson,
“Freedom and
Resentment”, 1962.

Strawson's Compatibilism

If I get mad, then you did it freely

Freedom and Responsibility

- Strawson's focus is on moral responsibility.
- Traditionally at least, a person is considered to be morally responsible for an action only if they did it of their own free will.

Responsibility and *Blame*

- The question of whether a person is morally responsible for their actions is practical, as well as theoretical.
 - Human societies have “practices of punishing and blaming, of expressing moral condemnation and approval”.
- Hence, the question of whether humans have free will can be reduced to the question of whether these *practices* make sense, or are justified.

Blame and Determinism

- In particular, the question of whether free will is compatible with determinism becomes the question of whether, in a deterministic universe, it *makes sense to blame people* for their actions.
- This leads to the question of what justifies blame in the first place. *Why* do we blame people, resent them, punish them, etc.?

- N.B. in this paper:
 - Compatibilist = “optimist about determinism”
 - Incompatibilist = “pessimist about determinism”

What is determinism?

“I must say [I belong to] the party of those who do not know what the thesis of determinism is.”

(In 1962 the notions of causation and determination were far less clear than they are today.)

Initial arguments

- *Traditional* Compatibilists:
 - The practice of blame (etc.) is **effective and useful at regulating behaviour**. That's all the justification it needs.
- Incompatibilists:
 - (“all in a rush”) Blame \Rightarrow moral responsibility \Rightarrow freedom \Rightarrow indeterminism.

The meaning of 'freedom'

- Compatibilists agree that blame requires freedom, but deny that freedom requires indeterminism.
- The meaning of 'freedom' can be found by looking at the situations where we do (and don't) blame people.

Traditional compatibilism

... what 'freedom' means here is nothing but the absence of certain conditions the presence of which would make moral condemnation or punishment inappropriate. They have in mind conditions like compulsion by another, or innate incapacity, or insanity ... To this list they are constrained to add ... some forms of ignorance, mistake, or accident. And the general reason why moral condemnation or punishment are inappropriate when these factors or conditions are present is held to be that the practices in question will be generally **efficacious means of regulating behaviour** in desirable ways only in cases where these factors are not present.

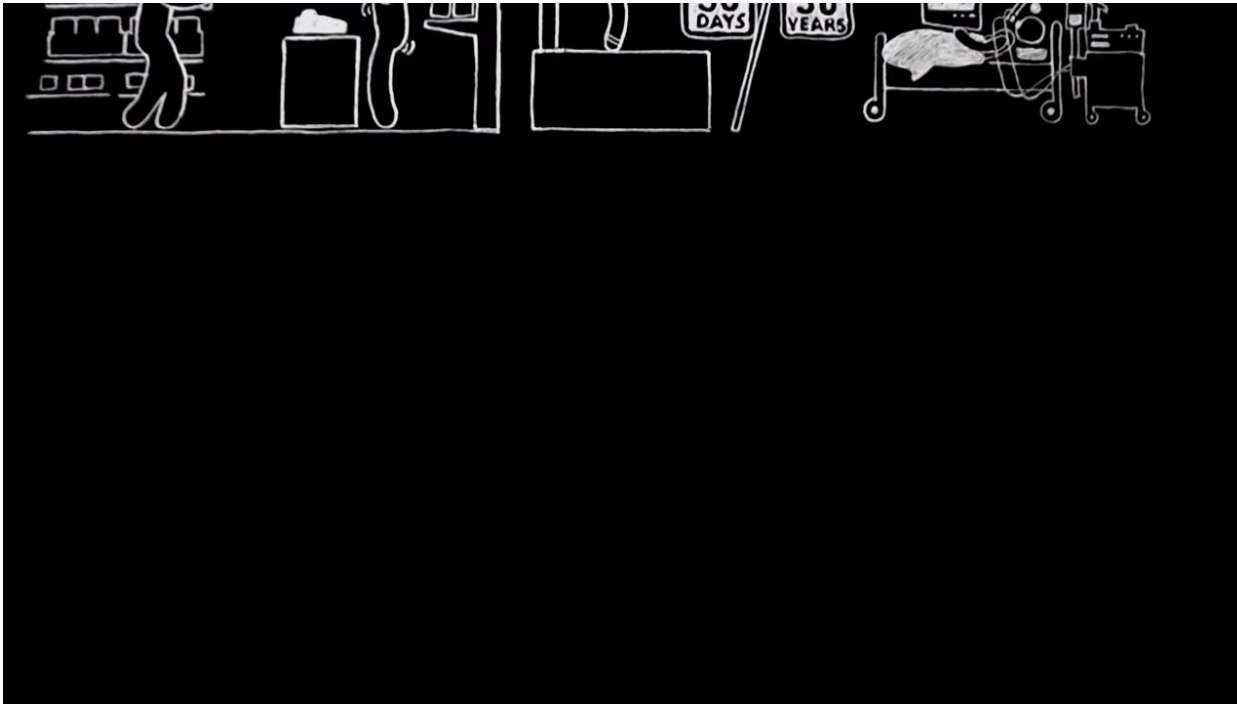
(pp. 2-3)

- The “pessimist” (incompatibilist) replies:
“But the only reason you have given for the practices of moral condemnation and punishment in cases where this freedom is present is the efficacy of these practices in regulating behaviour in socially desirable ways. But this is not a sufficient basis, it is not even the right sort of basis, for these practices as we understand them.”

We oil an engine, train and neuter animals, etc. to make them behave better. But we don't *blame* them, or feel resentment toward them, as they don't have free will. **Blame is more than behaviour modification, more than *fixing, treating* and *training*.**

Free beings *deserve* punishment

“[The incompatibilist] is apt to say, among much else, that the humanity of the offender himself is offended by this picture of his condemnation and punishment.”



C. S. Lewis, “The
Humanitarian
Theory of
Punishment, 1953.

- “The punishment for the man, the fertilizer for the plant, and the oil for the car, are all justified by the same principle and in the same way. The only difference is that different kinds of things require different kinds of causes to make them do what they should. Pain may be the appropriate remedy to apply, in certain cases, to human beings, and oil to the machine. It is, of course, of no use to inject motor oil into the boy or to beat the machine.”

Walter Stace, *Religion and the Modern Mind*, 1952

(Excerpt available at <https://iweb.langara.ca/rjohns/files/2019/08/Stace.pdf>)

Strawson's New Move

- The traditional compatibilist has nothing more to say here. So the incompatibilist remains steadfast.
- But Strawson has thought of a *new move* for compatibilism, at this point in the conversation.
- This new move focuses on the 'moral emotions', or 'reactive attitudes' ("such things as gratitude, resentment, forgiveness, love, and hurt feelings")
- Roughly speaking, a free action is not just one that is modifiable though punishment, but one that properly **arouses resentment, blame and outrage.**

- Resentment is reduced or eliminated in certain situations, e.g.
 - He didn't mean to
 - He hadn't realized
 - He couldn't help it, etc.

(In these cases, we still regard the person as a responsible agent, but not responsible for *this act*.)

- In other cases, it's the person himself who isn't a responsible agent:
 - He has been under very great strain recently
 - He was acting under post-hypnotic suggestion
 - He's only a child
 - He's a hopeless schizophrenic, etc.
- We take an 'objective attitude' to such cases of abnormality or immaturity.
 - Objective attitude = think in terms of *treatment*, or *training*.
 - E.g. we take this objective attitude toward small children, animals, lawn mowers, etc.



(Not a responsible agent)

Main argument

- ‘Participant reactive attitudes’ = gratitude, resentment, etc.
- (Vicarious) reactive attitudes: blame, praise, moral indignation, etc.
- Rather than a free action just being one that is modifiable through reward and punishment, **a free action is one that provokes reactive attitudes.**
- And the reactive attitudes are deeply engrained in human nature, and won’t be affected by accepting causal determinism.

Main argument

“... would, or should, the acceptance of the truth of [determinism] lead to the decay or the repudiation of all such attitudes?”

“... could, or should, the acceptance of the determinist thesis lead us always to look on everyone exclusively in this [objective] way?”

Main argument

“I am strongly inclined to think that it is, for us as we are, practically inconceivable.

The human commitment to participation in ordinary inter-personal 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 inter-personal relationships as we normally understand them; and being involved in inter-personal relationships as we normally understand them precisely is being exposed to the range of reactive attitudes and feelings that is in question.”

- “It might be said that all this leaves the real question unanswered ...

...For the real question is not ... even a question about what we **would in fact** do if a certain theoretical conviction gained general acceptance. It is a question about what it would be *rational* to do if determinism were true, a question about the rational justification of ordinary inter-personal attitudes in general.”

Strawson's Response: this ignores the fact that, as humans, we have these reactive attitudes *by nature*. It is not something that can be reviewed or changed. We have no choice in this matter.

“it is useless to ask whether it would not be rational for us to do what it is not in our nature to (be able to) do.”

Another argument

“For it is not a consequence of any general thesis of determinism which might be true that nobody knows what he’s doing or that everybody’s behaviour is unintelligible in terms of conscious purposes or that everybody lives in a world of delusion or that nobody has a moral sense, i.e. is susceptible of self-reactive attitudes, etc. In fact no such sense of ‘determined’ as would be required for a general thesis of determinism is ever relevant to our actual suspensions of moral reactive attitudes.”

Another argument

- (1) if determinism is true, all behaviour is determined
- (2) Incompatibilists say that, when behaviour is determined, one should adopt an objective attitude toward it
- (3) One should only take such an objective stance toward agents who are abnormal (or undeveloped).
- (4) “It cannot be a consequence of any thesis which is not itself self-contradictory that abnormality is the universal condition.”
- (5) Determinism is possibly true.

∴ Incompatibilism is self-contradictory

- Logically, a proposition that is possibly true cannot entail one that is necessarily false.
1. “No one is morally responsible” is necessarily false.
 2. Determinism is possibly true.

∴ Determinism does not entail that no one is morally responsible.

Compare to mountain formation

“According to the theory of Drift (Wegener, 1912) non-volcanic ‘fold’ mountains are formed as a result of continental plates colliding with each other. So according to the Drift theory, the existence of mountains is incompatible with the fixity of continents.”

1. “Mountains don’t exist” is necessarily false.
2. It’s possible that the continents are fixed

∴ Fixism does not entail the non-existence of mountains.

Filling the lacuna

- The incompatibilist recoils emotionally from the idea that blaming, resenting, etc. is basically for the purpose of modifying behaviour. Just training and treating.
- The incompatibilist is *correct*, here, Strawson says. Such an objective attitude toward wrongdoing is incompatible with the reactive attitudes that lie at the root of blame.
- Strawson points out that the practice of blaming depends on *not* taking such an objective attitude at all. (So standard compatibilism is wrong here.)

“the preparedness to acquiesce in that infliction of suffering on the offender which is an essential part of punishment is all of a piece with this whole range of attitudes of which I have been speaking.”

Filling the lacuna

“The vital thing can be restored by attending to that complicated web of attitudes and feelings which form an essential part of the moral life as we know it, and which are quite opposed to objectivity of attitude. Only by attending to this range of attitudes can we recover from the facts as we know them a sense of what we mean, i.e. of all we mean, when, speaking the language of morals, we speak of desert, responsibility, guilt, condemnation, and justice. But we do recover it from the facts as we know them. We do not have to go beyond them. Because the optimist neglects or misconstrues these attitudes, the pessimist rightly claims to find a lacuna in his account. We can fill the lacuna for him.”

Blame (etc.) cannot be rationally justified

“Inside the general structure or web of human attitudes and feelings of which I have been speaking, there is endless room for modification, redirection, criticism, and justification. But questions of justification are *internal* to the structure or relate to modifications internal to it. The existence of the general framework of attitudes itself is something we are given with the fact of human society. As a whole, it neither calls for, nor permits, an external ‘rational’ justification.”

- N.B. Strawson takes it for granted that determinism (whatever it means) is consistent with people being conscious, rational, etc.
- I will challenge this in the lecture of libertarianism. Determinism seems to entail a kind of ‘transparency thesis’ that is the core of physicalism.
- This ‘transparency’ part of physicalism is what drives the common claim that physicalism is incompatible with consciousness and intentionality (rationality). If this is true, a deterministic being couldn’t be conscious or rational.
- (If this is correct, then determinism isn’t a thesis “which might be true”.)