

Explaining Values

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Excerpt

In his seminal paper “Freedom and Resentment,” P.F. Strawson proposes a fundamental shift in the way we think about moral responsibility. Philosophers have consistently argued that the truth of determinism—at a basic level, the thesis that every event is fully caused by antecedent events along with the laws of physics—poses a significant challenge to the integrity of our practices of holding people responsible for their actions. Strawson claims that this tension has led to the entrenchment of two distinct camps. The first he calls “pessimists”: they conclude that if determinism is true, all of our practices of holding others responsible—punishing and rewarding, expressing blame and praise—are fundamentally unjustified, and must be revised (1). Determined actions lack the necessary agential feature that would render them legitimate recipients of such responses. Optimists, on the other hand, hold that these practices still make good sense (and in fact may only make sense) against a deterministic background, pointing at their effectiveness in regulating behavior in productive ways (Strawson 1). The optimist account, however, lacks “something vital,” namely a deep, “moral” justification of these practices: they ignore a core condition for moral responsibility—a “genuinely free identification of the will with the act”—that is at odds with determinism (Strawson 2-3). Strawson argues that both are mistaken in considering determinism to be relevant to the issue of moral responsibility. He proceeds to give an account of our “reactive attitudes,” which represent our robust practices of responsibility holding (6). He claims that these attitudes are deeply imbedded in normal human social interaction and that reflection on their significance will lead to a reconciliation of pessimist, who will be appeased by their moral depth, and optimist.

How exactly Strawson moves from his description of our practices to the normative claim that we don’t have reason to change them is somewhat unclear. Over the course of this

paper, I try to reconstruct and assess what I take to be Strawson's arguments. "Freedom and Resentment" is at times somewhat opaque, and so analyzing and critiquing Strawson's argument involves some amount of interpretation. I will begin by rehashing in brief Strawson's account of our "reactive practices." I will then try to uncover how Strawson himself saw this (putative) fact about the nature and content of our normal interpersonal interactions as dissolving the metaphysical problem of free will. I suggest that he raises two main arguments. The first is practical: Strawson thinks that we cannot change our practices, and that at the end of the day even if we could, we shouldn't. I take issue with his suggestion that practical immutability means that the attitudes cannot come up for justificatory review. The second argument is that determinism does not actually bear on our judgments and attitudes regarding moral responsibility. I interpret this as a conceptual claim about moral responsibility, and argue that, ultimately, it does not pass muster: our concept of moral responsibility is interwoven with the thesis of determinism.

Bibliography

Strawson, P.F. "Freedom and Resentment." *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*. London: Methuen, 1974. 1-25. Print.

Fellow Commentary

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This two-paragraph excerpt from Ben Jubas’s philosophy paper about P.F. Strawson’s “Freedom and Resentment” offers a clear, straightforward, and explicit example of orienting. In the first paragraph, Ben presents the key terms and ideas he will be using in the paper: He introduces us to Strawson and Strawson’s primary claims; explains the concept of “determinism;” and defines “optimists,” “pessimists,” and “reactive attitudes.” In short, he makes us comfortable with the theoretical backdrop of his paper.

In the second paragraph, Ben outlines the core components of his own argument. He explains his motive—that Strawson’s argument is “somewhat unclear.” He then walks us through the steps the paper will take to reconstruct and assess that argument with very clear language and purpose: “I will begin,” “I will then,” and “I suggest,” he explains. By the end of the paragraph, we know what awaits us in the rest of the essay, why that is important, and what the key ideas involved entail.

The very explicit nature of this example might strike some as off-putting. Written in the first person and with clear steps, it is certainly more heavy-handed than the traditional orienting section. That is largely because Ben’s is a philosophy paper, and philosophy is a discipline so complex and, at times, technical, that it requires careful, deliberate *éxposé*. But the key take-away is that, even if its tone and form might feel unusual, the underlying tenets of this method of orienting are not. It introduces the reader first to a scholarly world and then to an argument about that scholarly world. We finish the two paragraphs ready to tackle the analysis that is to follow. Different disciplines might approach orienting differently, but the fundamental principle remains the same.