

Kant and Strawson

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1 Introduction

We first begin by providing an account of both Kant's utilitarian ethics and how this related to moral culpability, as well as P F Strawson's account of moral responsibility. Next, we examine both of these positions, and conclude that these are not compatible. We discuss the points of incompatibility, and possible modifications that can be made to each theory to agree with the other. I lean towards rejecting P F Strawson's account of moral responsibility, and therefore choose to sacrifice more of Strawson's account to reach a possible middle ground.

2 Free will and responsibility, the big picture

We might begin with our naive intuition that humans are fully free to choose their own actions, at all points in time. This position is known as **Libertarian free will**. This is an intuitively appealing position, since we all intuitively believe that we possess agency and free will.

There is another intuitively appealing proposition, that all current events all caused by past events. This is known as **determinism**. If one believes in the laws of physics, then it appears that (outside of freaky quantum phenomena), it is possible that the world is entirely deterministic, and that having full knowledge of the state of the world at any point in time will allow us to predict with perfect accuracy at all future times. Indeed, one might argue this is the fundamental goal of the basic sciences. A somewhat more unsettling rephrasing of the triumph of the scientific method is:

"Nothing other than what would occur, could occur."

The problem is striking — This view of the world implies that the current state of the world determines the next state of the world, which includes the actions we take and the decisions we make. This disagrees with our intuition of choosing our own actions.

We can sharpen our position on what choosing our own action means, by considering the **Principle of alternate possibilities**. This states that an action is truly free if the person doing the action could have done otherwise.

The principle of alternate possibilities, which is a sharpening of the idea of Libertarian free will, *does not jive* with determinism. So, we need to give up on one or the other. Libertarians argue that we should not discount our personal experiences, which very clearly make us feel that we do have free will. However, personal intuitions does not a theory make, so we move forward, to investigate how to modify our notion of free will to line with determinism. We could, of course, have tried to modify determinism to suit libertarian free will, but that seems harder, since the author feels that there is more scientific evidence for determinism than there is for Libertarian free will.

The position of **compatibilism** argues that while determinism is true, and the past does determine the future, there is something *different* about human actions. We can still call an action free when the determinism of the action comes from *within*. We know from determinism that action couldn't not happened. But when an action is *self-determined*, the action should be considered free.

This can come under attack from multiple fronts. We first consider a famous thought experiment known as a **Frankfurt case**. Let us assume a woman has a brain implant that will force her to make a particular choice if she tries to take any other choice. For example, let's say that Alice's brain has been secretly hijacked such that if she chooses to eat anything other than a pizza for lunch, the device will activate and will send an electrical impulse that will force her to utter the words "I'd like a pizza, please" to the cashier. Let's now say that Alice does choose pizza for lunch every day of the week, thereby leaving the device dormant. Now, did Alice truly make this choice out of her own free will? The Principle of alternate possibilities says she is not free, since she could not have chosen otherwise (to not eat pizza). Frankfurt on the contrary argues that since Alice chose to eat pizza, even if she could not have done otherwise, she is indeed free.

The second (graver, in my opinion) attack one can mount is by questioning the separation between internal and external factors that is required for the notion of "the action from *within*". What is the criteria to separate internal and external factors? Isn't our rich inner life shaped by our interactions with the external world? Does it really make sense to separate the two, and does such a separation even exist in the first place? Intuitively, I feel that this does not exist, and hence this particular notion of compatibilism is indefensible.

We now move on to see the positions of Strawson and Kant, and how they choose to defend the compatibilist position with more refined arguments. However, their axioms contradict each other, and thus we will have to consider which system appeals to us more, or try to resolve their contradictions.

3 Kantian ethics

Kantian ethics argues that we have to use Reason to find out what is right. **Categorical imperatives** are what he govern his system of ethics, and these are derived from pure reason. We can determine what is right and wrong. To judge if an action is moral, we must universalize the action, and see what effect

this has on the outcome of our action.

Let's consider a case of theft: Is it legal for Bob to steal something? Let's say for the sake of argument it is. If we universalize this, we get an imperative that reads "It is legal for *anyone* to steal anything". This is clearly a contradiction, for if everyone is stealing, then no one really is.

Hence, we are led to the opposite conclusion, that no one can lie! This can lead to counter-intuitive results. For example, Claire might have to lie about Alice's whereabouts to her furious husband Bob, as he just found out that Alice has cheated on him for the last year, and is prone to stabbing her in a fit of rage. However, under Kant's system, Claire cannot lie, under even this extreme circumstance.

In Kant's view, morality requires us to be free — we must have had the ability to do otherwise. Consider an example of Duncan, who steals a loaf of bread in soviet russia to keep his family fed for the night. Kant asserts for this action to be morally wrong, it must have been in his control. That is, he defines "control" as "had the ability to do otherwise" — that is, it was within his power to *not* have committed the theft. If it was not under his control, then it is incorrect to call this action morally wrong. Punishing his act might be useful, insofar as it can mold the behavior of others, but his action per se continues to be morally right. Moral rightness and wrongness apply only to free agents who control their actions.

4 P F Strawson: Freedom and resentment

P F Strawson jokingly remarked that he would work on moral philosophy when his insight waned **TODO** With that disclaimer out of the way, we show how Strawson manages to sidestep the entire question of determinism with a slick argument.

Strawson begins by asserting that it is a mistake to think that moral responsibility requires free will. He rejects Kant's style of constructing a system of ethics, whereby one begins from moral principles and then constructs an ethical system. Rather, he wishes to build a system from the ground up.

He examines our everyday intuitions of moral responsibility. We notice that we do assign moral blame and praise to other people who we believe are blame or praise worthy. He calls these styles of reaction where we hold people morally culpable as our **reactive attitudes**. There are individuals such as children and madmen whom we do not hold morally responsible. However, our interactions with children and madmen are objective, where we hold our reactive attitudes in check, to interact with them with what Strawson calls the **objective attitude**

This is an account of moral responsibility that does not require a freedom condition. Being morally responsible is being a fitting target of the reactive attitude. According to Strawson, to be a fitting target, one needs to display a quality of will — if you display me hostility or indifference, then I can punish you. If you show me gratitude or happiness, I might reward you.

The truth of determinism cannot force us to give up our subjective viewpoint,

since the reactive attitudes are too deeply embedded in our humanity. Hence, all we can do is to *embrace* the reactive attitudes. This forces us to conclude that even without free will, one can hold people morally responsible. Thus, Strawson is a compatibilist.

5 Synthesis

My problem with Kant’s account of ethics is that it is far too easy to break it with thought experiments that lead to absurd results. What I do enjoy is the fact that Kant begins with a reasonable framework for how ethics *ought* to be constructed.

On the other hand, while Strawson’s account agrees with our everyday experience, this is the problem — Strawson chooses to defend the state of the world with *is* statements, and essentially dodges the question of “what should responsibility be”.

It is hard to bring these two views together, but an attempt can be made. It is reasonable to argue that Strawson’s position is the reasonable one, since it does reflect our moral intuitions, and does not lead to paradoxical situations the way Kant’s does. So, let us try to construct a set of axioms that would allow us to derive Strawson’s position. These might be:

- Humans interact with one another using our emotions, and these are the most important form of social interaction.
- Our reactive attitudes define the shape of our social interactions.

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