

MORAL PERSONHOOD

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Professor P. F. Strawson in his celebrated essay "Freedom and Resentment",¹ an essay on moral issues, has drawn a picture of a person on the canvas of inter-personal relationships. However, his business here is not to define or describe a person as it was in his earlier essay "Persons". Rather he is here concerned with the ethical question of the role of determinism, if any, in our ascription of moral responsibility to persons. Although throughout the essay Strawson has never held explicitly that whosoever can be judged morally responsible is a person and those towards whom we suspend moral reactive attitudes, on grounds elaborately discussed in the essay, are not, still this corollary follows obviously from it.

The concept of moral responsibility or obligation, and for that reason, that of a moral agent presuppose the concept of inter-personal relationships. This is but the human commitment to participate in the ordinary human life. This participatory life is characterized by reactive behaviour on the part of its participants towards each-other. Strawson broadly distinguishes two such reactive attitudes -- gratitude and resentment as a typically opposed pair on the personal level. The basis of these reactive attitudes is that --

"we demand some degree of good will or regard on the part of those who stand in these relationships to us".²

However, gratitude and resentment represent only one kind of reactive attitudes -- the "personal reactive attitudes" as he calls it -- that is, that which we show or feel towards others when our personal interests are affected by their actions or behaviour. There are two other kinds - "moral reactive attitudes" -- that which we feel for others for affecting not our own interests but some others' interests and "self-reactive attitudes" - the one which we feel towards ourselves

for affecting others' interests by our action or behaviour. There are also typically opposed pairs in these two latter kinds corresponding to gratitude and resentment on the personal level. We have moral approval and indignation on the vicarious or impersonal level, and pride and remorse on the level in which oneself is involved.

These reactive attitudes, either personal, moral or self-reactive ones, we feel or express towards others or ourselves only in cases when things go normal. Reacting in these ways however, is not always meaningful. When, for example, one does something purely inadvertently, out of ignorance or under compulsion; or when one does something under conditions in which one departs from one's true self temporarily, e.g. "under post-hypnotic suggestion;" or when one is "only a child" or a "hopeless schizophrenic" -- in all these cases we suspend our reactive attitudes towards the agent in question.

The reason for suspending reactive attitudes in all these cases mentioned above is that we do not demand any "inter-personal regard" on the part of those whose actions are now under consideration. We refuse them entry to our ordinary participatory life. And by doing this we start looking down upon them as a *sub-person species*. What they may read in our faces is not any of the reactive attitudes, but only an "objective attitude".

"To adopt the objective attitude to another human being is to see him, perhaps, as an object of social policy; as a subject for what, in a wide range of sense, might be called treatment; as something certainly to be taken account, perhaps precautionary account, of; to be managed or handled or cured or trained; perhaps simply to be avoided ..."³

In this attitude we may have the feelings of repulsion, fear, pity, even some sort of love, for that agent, but not those of resentment, gratitude, forgiveness, anger and the like that are very common in inter-personal relationships. This difference in the attitude makes us treat the *subject* of objective attitude not as a person equal in status with me and other persons, but as an *object* that falls somewhere below the average line. I am afraid of him, I pity him, but I do not love (in the participatory sense) him, I do not hate him either. He is not my friend, nor is he my enemy; he is an object.

This objective attitude when adopted outside the sphere of mere inter-personal relationships, viz. in case of impersonal relationships, makes any

moral evaluation whatsoever of the agent's actions pointless. The agent in question is not a "term of moral relationships" not a "member of the moral community".

Moral responsibility presupposes moral freedom. Although Strawson has not directly defined freedom in the said essay, his conception of it may be said to be something like that of his "optimist" as "nothing but the absence of certain conditions the presence of which would make moral condemnation or punishment inappropriate".⁴

Prof. A. J. Ayer has also defined freedom in a similar way -

"The best way to make clear what is meant by saying that a person was free to perform a given action, whether he actually performed it or not, is to set out the conditions under which this power would not be granted him".⁵

For Ayer, the man who is hypnotized is deprived of the power of choice; the kleptomaniac is represented as one who has no option but to steal; the man at gun-point has no reasonable alternative but to comply with his assailant's order; habitual subservience robs one of any inclination to disobey. These are "constraints". But when the determining factors do not amount to constraints, the agent can fairly be accounted free.

So in all cases where we do not have a Strawsonian "objective attitude" or an Ayerian "constraint", we can hold one morally responsible for one's actions. This is because we consider one to be a free agent - a *person*. The person could have acted otherwise had he chosen so.

But do all these cases of objective attitudes and of having constraints hinder us from ascribing moral responsibility to people, thereby degrading them from the status of person? We may however venture to arrive at the opposite conclusion viz. that the so-called cases of adopting objective attitudes or of having constraints do not always inhibit our holding of reactive attitudes.

Professor Rajendra Prasad in his ingenious essay "Reactive Attitudes, Rationality and Determinism"⁶ maintains that the "logic" of holding such reactive attitudes towards others is that, the reactive attitude -

“implies or presupposes a hope, and not merely a wish, that it is going to influence the behaviour of the agent ... the belief that it is possible for the agent to be influenced by it, i.e. possible for him to modify his behaviour in the required or suggested manner. It is *not rational*, therefore for me to blame A for having done X when I know or believe that my doing so is going to have no influence at all on him”.⁷

Prasad may be thought to be right in connecting the having of reactive attitudes and the hope or belief to influence the agent's behaviour thereby. But it does not show the *logic thereof*. Because in both the ends of the connection there exist only two psychological factors. The psychology of having reactive attitudes is no less complex and complicated than the psychology of hope and belief. We may have no reactive attitude even when both, we and the agent whose action affects our interest, are normal adult human beings. Again we may *hope* to influence the behaviour even of a lunatic by showing our ‘resentment’ over his actions. We cannot be deprived of this psychological freedom by calling it “irrational”. It would at most involve a psychological inconsistency if we give up all hope to correct the lunatic's behaviour and still continue to have reactive attitudes towards his action. Logically there would be no contradiction. Nor is it empirically impossible. Once it is granted, we may say that adoption of objective attitude and suspension of reactive ones do not always go hand in hand. In fact, we very often adopt what may be called *corrective* reactive attitudes towards children who are supposed to be non-moral agents and hence objects of objective attitude. Of course, since a child is *ex-hypothesi* a non-moral agent, the reactive attitudes shown towards him may not be strictly moral ones. The conclusion to which we are led from such considerations is that it is possible, without being irrational, to hold an objective attitude in the Strawsonian sense and at the same time to show some reactive attitude towards someone. This is of course not to say that we cannot have objective attitudes without having reactive ones. But in those cases where we have reactive attitudes, there must at least be some moral content. We may not hold an object of objective attitude morally responsible and may not, therefore, go to reward or punish him, but the reaction (if) we show to him itself serves as reward or punishment in so far as it happens to be encouraging or corrective one.

We should get here two points clarified to a little more extent: one is about the object of an objective attitude, and the other is what is mentioned just above that a reactive attitude must have a moral content.

(1) What Strawson means by the adoption of objective attitudes is the suspension of reactive ones either temporarily, i.e. during the short time of the action's being done, or wholly throughout the life, or a part of life, of the agent who is for some reason or other counted either temporarily or wholly, a non-moral one. On this explanation a normal adult human being when acts *inadvertently* or when he is *unusually impaired* by abnormal circumstances, or when the agent himself is abnormal, in these circumstances, is *immune* from moral appraisal -- his immunity being due to his insanity or immaturity. Strawson classifies these three types of inhibitors into two groups - the first one in the first group and the remaining two in two sub-groups. Then, any agent falling under either of the above groups is an object of objective attitude. We shall, for convenience, call the three kinds of objects of objective attitude 'Object-1', 'Object-2(a)' and 'Object-2(b)' respectively.

When it is a case of 'object-1' then we suspend the reactive attitudes only very temporarily -- i.e., during the time of the involuntary action's being done. For all other times he is a normal person and therefore an object of reactive attitudes.

The case of 'object-1' therefore seems to be clear. The agent is not held morally responsible for his unintentional deeds. But these unintentional actions require to be precisely described. There must not, for example, remain any scope for any counter-plea, such that - "You could have been a little more careful not to tread on my toes". Or again, should the agent be allowed to repent long after the action was done, may be after persuasion, in order to withdraw the reactive attitudes towards him?

'Object-2(a)' are normal persons acting under abnormal circumstances - "under very great strain", "under post-hypnotic suggestion" (Strawson) or "at gun-point" (Ayer). Here also the abnormal situation or the unusual impairment needs to be precisely defined so that the possibilities of augmenting the list of such situations by adding "under alcoholism" and the like, be ruled out. Again, acting under physical compulsion or force from outside do not always make one

an object of objective attitudes. We may, as an example, consider the case of the man at gun-point. Clearly he is not free. He has to comply with the assailant's order. And, *ex-hypothesi*, as we adopt an objective attitude to him, we do not feel any moral indignation at his actions. But, suppose, the assailant demanded of the man at gun-point an action the consequence of which will be very much harmful to the society or humanity at large, then shall we refrain from exhibiting any moral reaction (supposing that the man complies with the order) on the plea that the man was not free? For example, if the demand was to obtain a permit for selling contaminated baby food? Or shall we suggest that the man should get rather killed than to comply with such a demand?

'Object 2(b)' are abnormal or sub-normal human beings -- "a hopeless schizophrenic" or "a child". Their abnormality and immaturity make them immune from moral evaluation. But, as mentioned earlier, the immaturity of a child cannot stop us from holding what we called corrective reactive attitudes. For reacting in this way is proved to be *fruitful*.⁸ Again, we also react in the same corrective way, often fruitfully, to a lunatic. It may be said therefore that only in extreme cases of insanity and/or in extreme cases of immaturity holding of reactive attitudes would not be *rational*.⁹ These two extreme cases may then be said to be the proper objects of objective attitudes.

These three kinds of objects of objective attitudes modified in the required way are exempted from moral evaluation. In so far as reactive attitudes are suspended towards them, they are not persons. ('Object 1' and 'Object 2(a)' would say, for example, "I was not the *person* I am).

The above analysis is meant to bring out the exact antagonism between the adoption of the two kinds of attitudes -- reactive and objective. That is, objective attitude is to be re-defined in strict terms so that the very possibility of holding both of them towards any one at the same time is ruled out outright. In such a redefinition we must be more specific about the conditions under which an objective attitude is to be adopted. Standing on such a precise definition we can hold, as a working conclusion, that an object of objective attitude, either temporarily or permanently - depending upon the span of time throughout which it is taken towards one, is not counted as a person; whereas an object of reactive

attitude, of necessity is a person. Because --

(2) All reactive attitudes have a moral content in various degrees, and it implies that anyone towards whom it is adopted is a responsible moral agent - a person. However, Strawson has not clearly held in "Freedom and Resentment" that all reactive attitudes have moral counterparts. Of course he has revised his view after it was pointed out by Jonathan Bennett in his "Accountability".¹⁰

So it confirms the second part of our working conclusion. It shows that any object or subject of reactive attitudes is a responsible moral agent which we take here to be the characteristic of a person. On this point, however, we have to exclude a few familiar cases :

(a) On the personal level -- when resentment is not based on a justified demand e.g., the demand for sweets by a child with disordered liver. Such demands have no moral counterparts.

(b) On the level of oneself -- when one is guided by self-biasness, and when it is a case of emotional overwhelming. A lunatic is perhaps overpowered by either of these two factors which is why he does not count as a moral agent.

But we have yet to confirm the first part of our working conclusion, viz. objects of objective attitudes are not persons.

We shall take two extreme cases of objects of objective attitudes for consideration - an extremely lunatic and a very young child. Considered from the point of view of moral responsibility both are on the same status, i.e. immune. But are we on that plea ready to deny them personhood? Of course we may very aptly deny them to be responsible persons; but denying them personhood as such would be to arbitrarily draw the limiting line of the realm of persons.

The only plea, then, to deny them personhood is that they are not moral agents. We do not hold them responsible for their deeds. So we do not react towards them. It means, we do not demand any "good will or regard" on their part towards us. It may be thought to rule out the possibility of there being inter-personal relationships between them and us. But are we ready to say that I have no inter-personal relationships *with* my young child? Or even *with* my

insane brother? The relation may not be one of give and take. I may not hold them responsible for their deeds, but can I evade *my* responsibility towards them? I may not demand a good will and regard from them, but do they not demand them from me? If I recognize this responsibility of mine and their demands, it implies that I look with a different eye at them than I do at a physical object. In this look I have good will, regard, love, sympathy and what not. And this qualifies them to be, what may be called *unqualified* persons as distinct from persons qualified with responsibility.

This question has been disputed over by a vast majority of thinkers on the issue of moral personhood. The tendency found among them to be almost common is to deny an infant or a lunatic personhood on this or that plea. What do they do is somewhat ridiculous in that they try to limit the scope of persons by haphazardly laying down a number of criteria which they themselves satisfy. These conditions are rationality, consciousness, higher-order intentional capacity, ability for verbal communication, capacity for inter-personal relationships and the like. Laying down such criteria is meant to narrowing the scope of persons and thereby to present it as a sacrosanct ideal. In doing this, they become selfishly quick. Because a child's or a lunatic's personhood can be defended even within the framework of such conditions. For example the adoption of a Strawsonian objective attitude prevents one from being a person. But Strawson cannot dictate towards whom an objective attitude is to be taken. It will be determined by the degree of attachment I feel for someone.

"If, for instance, I predict that a particular plant -- say a potted ivy -- will grow around a corner and up into the light because it "seeks" the light and "wants" to get out of the shade it now finds itself in, and "expects" or "hopes" there is light around the corner, I have adopted the Intentional stance towards the plant, and lo and behold, within very narrow limits it works".¹¹

NOTES

- 1 *Proceedings of the British Academy* (1962). Reprinted in his *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (1974) and in Watson, G. (ed.) *Free will* (1982). All references here are to *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*.

2. *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* Methuen & Co. Ltd., London, 1974, p.6.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
5. *Freedom and Morality and Other Essays*, p. 12.
6. *The Philosophy of P. F. Strawson*, Sen, P. K. & Verma, R. R. (ed.), I. C. P. R., New Delhi, 1995.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 354 (emphasis added).
8. Here I assume Rajendra Prasad's thesis of the connection between expressions of reactive attitudes and their fruitfulness to be true for the time being.
9. 'Rational' in Prasad's sense.
10. *Philosophical Subjects*, Van Straaten, Z. (ed.) Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1980, p. 46. Also Strawson's reply in the same volume, p. 266.
11. Dennett, D. : "Conditions of Personhood" in Rorty, A. O. (ed.) *The Identities Of Persons*, University of California Press, 1976, p. 180.

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