

## 'ON STRAWSON'S FOUNDATION OF MORAL REALITY'

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As a naturalist of non-reductive kind Strawson defends the reality of the moral life against the threat of universal determinism. In "Scepticism and Naturalism': some varieties", Strawson was concerned to bring out the specific features of our ordinary talk the distinctiveness of which could be preserved though there were challenges to our acceptance of them as justifiable. Strawson's descriptive metaphysics was an attempt on his part to describe the most general structures and features presented within our moral thought and practice. In order to defend the distinctive features of our moral talk, Strawson felt, one ought to face the challenges which came from two fronts, one from the traditional philosophical scepticism and the other from reductive scientism. While traditional scepticism doubted the adequacy of grounds for our belief in some basic matters (for e.g. 'freedom', 'determinism' etc. in moral talk), for a sort of reductive scientism it would be an illusion to suppose the reality of anything other than the subject matter of physical science. It would be an illusion to hold that moral attributes objectively characterise human actions.

Strawson is close to Hume in his response to traditional scepticism. Hume showed that the philosopher's move to meet sceptical arguments with counter arguments was futile: "This is so because of our being what we naturally are, our faith in Induction is so deeply ingrained in our nature that no rational or critical philosophy can shake or weaken it".<sup>2</sup>

In his response to traditional scepticism, Strawson, like his predecessors Hume and Wittgenstein, contented that we are naturally and inescapably

committed to certain beliefs such as the reality of the external world, the reality of the moral life, etc. Made as we are, there is in us a moral commitment to such beliefs. Even a strong assertion of the thesis of universal determinism would remain ineffective against the force of our nature. We are humanly committed to this moralistic view. No scientific claim could effect our having reactive attitudes and our practice of ascribing responsibility. Our strong commitments to certain range of reactive attitudes and practices ensures the moral reality of mankind. This non-scientific perspective reveals what is unique in us. We are so constituted as inevitably to occupy this standpoint. Moral realism derives its essential meaning only in relation to in the personal standpoint.

The logic of our reactive attitude decides when it is appropriate to have it. There are certain conditions, which keep an act beyond the perview of moral assessment. Actions done under compulsion, actions of children and insane persons, accidental actions etc. are exempted from moral judgements. We suspend our reactive attitude to such actions and adopt an objective attitude.

Strawson observes that morality in practice does not require any metaphysical anchoring. In his response to Mark Platt's article 'On the Metaphysics of Morals' Strawson comments: "... If Nietzsche had in fact successfully identified the essential nature of morality or more precisely, the theoretical foundation of the whole institution, then that institution would indeed be, as Platt put it, 'in a less philosophical scepticism about morality', would be justified. According to Nietzsche, the theory internal to moral thought and practice, whether tacitly held or explicitly acknowledged, incorporated one variety or another of false or incoherent conception of the nature of obligation and the freedom of the human will: either the notion that moral obligation is to be understood in terms of divine commands which human beings are endowed, obey God, with the capacity freely to obey or disobey, or the kind of noumenal freedom mysteriously associated by Kant with reason as the source of the moral imperative, or some other equally obscure idea of 'spiritual causality'. Platt points out that when we turn to consider our actual

practices with such notions as those of duty and obligation, moral responsibility, blameworthiness etc., it becomes clear that these practices have in fact no such theoretical attachments and can survive their abandonment without loss or demise. Morality in practice requires no such metaphysical anchoring, even if some of its practitioners are disposed in their reflective moments to imagine that it does.<sup>2</sup>

Strawson finds Mark Platt's contributions substantial. Platts has made a substantial contribution as he has freed the actual grounds of our ascriptions of responsibility and accountability from any entanglement with 'the almost entirely, abstract debate between 'determinist' and liberationist'.

Strawson considers the traditional sceptic's doubt as purely theoretical. It would not represent a 'stance that it would be in practice open to us to occupy'. That theoretical part of establishing or rejecting the thesis of determinism was not a precondition to be satisfied by a moral practitioner. The moralist uses the term 'responsible person' meaningfully in describing a moral situation: a responsible person is not subjected to external or internal compulsion, he knows what he is doing etc. these are the pre-requisites of human responsibility, the situation does not alter much even if it is proved that 'every event has a cause'. Strawson comments: "But I find in none of this an explicit or implicit denial of a thesis of determinism stated for example in such simple and familiar terms as 'every event has a cause'".<sup>3</sup>

Some scholars have taken a serious note of Strawson's contention that our moral commitments do not require any adequate theoretical justification. They accept a position that a belief in determinism and the moral practice of ascribing responsibility would manifest a profound irrationality in our nature. Professor Rajendra Prasad comments: "According to Strawson, our natural human commitment to ordinary interpersonal attitudes...' is part of the general framework of human life, not something that one came up for review as particular cases can come up for review within this general framework'. Therefore we can not ask for a rational justification of ordinary interpersonal attitudes in general. That is we can not ask the question whether

or not it is rational to have reactive attitudes if determinism is true, since we can not live without them. I have mentioned above that it is not rational for a person to have them if he believes or acknowledges that determinism is true"<sup>4</sup>

Strawson believes that moral practices of ascribing responsibility etc. can survive the abandonment of any related theoretical claim. The moral practices with such notions as duty and obligation need not be understood in terms of divine commands etc. So our actual grounds of ascribing responsibility for e.g. lies not in any rational justification of the theory of determinism but on our natural and human commitment to interpersonal relationships. Strawson considers our reactive attitude as that which is unavoidable in the structure of human thought. The peculiarity of our moral talk is founded on this unavoidable structure of human thought. To abandon this structure because theoretical reason demands such an abandonment, is humanly impossible. It would be a demand to transcend over human situation.

Strawson observes that morality faces another challenge from reductive scientism which seeks to reduce the moralistic view to the scientific view of the same phenomenon. For Strawson, reality is many faced; its human face makes interpersonal talk meaningful and to this aspect of reality we express our reactive attitudes. Our reactive attitude is connected with involvement or participation in a human relationship. Reactive attitude is contrasted with objective attitude which is detached and scientific. There is no scope of argument and communication. The person then ceases to be in a relation of interpersonal relationship. "If your attitude towards someone is wholly objective, 'says Strawson, 'then though you may fight him, you cannot quarrel with him, and though you may talk to him, even negotiate with him, you can at most pretend to quarrel or to reason with him".<sup>5</sup>

In reductive scientism one is in a slightly better position. This standpoint is open to one and all as we have access to both the standpoints. Sometimes it may be necessary that we judge phenomena from the scientific standpoint. For Strawson each position has its own validity 'from its own

standpoint'. While reductive scientism posed to threaten the human and moral standpoint, Strawson vehemently opposed this move as he considered the reductive standpoint strictly limited. No one can view things objectively on all occasions. Strawson makes his position clear : "So while concession is made to it - it is allowed exclusive rights, so to speak, in a certain theory of human thought - the challenges it seems to present to the natural human standpoint is decisively rejected."<sup>6</sup>

Thomas Nagel in his article 'Moral Luck' and in his 'The View from No where' gives a detached and scientific account of men. "... Nothing of the agent is left out as an ultimate source of contributing to the outcome of the action in question. Rather than facing the world in the role of an actor, we become part of the world. As such, we and our lives are seen as products and manifestations of the world as a whole. And in thus being part of the world whatever we do gets assimilated to the larger course of cosmic events that are nobody's doings' but mere happenings."<sup>7</sup>

Nagel's scepticism challenges the validity of the non-sceptical conclusions of Strawson's theory of freedom and morality. Unlike Strawson, Thomas Nagel presents a gloomy picture of our human situation. Nagel visualises the real threat that is posed by the scientific perspective, which can and does encroach the moral perspective and undermines the latter. All we can have for our moral and human concerns is a sentimental plea, a wishful thinking that it could be safeguarded for the good of mankind, "... yet, I think even Nagel would admit that the life of the internalist must not be allowed to evaporate, the overwhelming pressure of the externalist theory not withstanding. Pragmatic wisdom must prevail. But the ghost of theory also can not be exorcised, as Nagel would add. I therefore see in all this our being effortlessly capable of tolerating a magnificent inconsistency."<sup>8</sup>

The principal contention of Strawson's thesis is that our objective standpoint is not a substitute for our reactive standpoint, the one can not encroach the other. Our reactive attitude is strongly grounded on the very nature of humanity, this can be brought out in the light of the following

observation: "A sustained objectivity of interpersonal attitude and the human isolation which that would entail, does not seem to be something of which human beings would be capable even if some general truth were a theoretical ground for it."<sup>9</sup> We can sustain our reactive attitude when there is a practical necessity for it. One can imagine a situation when only the objective view of reality prevails, even then the reactive attitude, the moral and the personal standpoint can not be wholly undermined. To remove it completely is to transcend our human situation.

There may be other priorities and a different evaluation of human life might accord highest value to a stage in which the limitations of the human situation are transcended. In the classical Indian tradition the goal of life is a stage of non-dual consciousness, to transcend the limitations of duality, to suspend the reactive attitude. The goal is Ātman-Brahman in which there is no diversity. The *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanisad* (IV. V,19) describes : 'Only by the mind is it to be perceived. In it there is no diversity. He goes from death to death, who sees in it, as it were, diversity. One who attains liberation, is free from duality and transcends the human limitations. As wise man is one who would accord a lower status to the reactive and interpersonal dimension of human life, it is a concession to the empirical consciousness, which refuses to part with the idea of the reality of the world.'

As the Bhakti mysticism and the philosophy of visistadvaita (qualified non-dualism) strongly reacted to a relationless, non-dual stage of existence, they saw in it a threat to bhakti and to interpersonal relationship. It also threatens the absolute reality of separate individuals which would, in its turn, eliminate all relationships and all communal ties. It also eliminates interpersonal dependence. People who do not need people lack an essential ingredient of what it means to be a human being. Abraham Joshua Heschel writes : "Animals are content when their needs are satisfied; man insists not only on being satisfied but also on being able to satisfy, on being a need not only in having needs. Personal needs come and go, but one anxiety remains: 'Am I needed?' There is no man who has not been moved by their anxiety."<sup>10</sup>

To sustain reactive attitude and to transcend the limitations of interpersonal relationships is a conceivable state of life, it is akin to 'living death'.

For Strawson, a drastic switch-over to the detached objective standpoint is inconceivable, our commitment to attached and reactive standpoint is a part of the general framework of human life. Strawson's relativizing mode is a recognition of the fact that reality is many faced. Both the reactive and the reductive perspectives are distinct and unique, there is no third way to reconcile them. For Nagel, the objective vision can be widened to include as well as explain the earlier local, narrower vision of the internal perspective, the objective view can throw sparks of scepticism to the personal view. The external objective view is continuous with and a progressive departure from the earlier internal view. "The push to objectivity is after all a part of the framework of human life."<sup>11</sup>

Can the detached objective perspective completely substitute the reactive perspective? Michael Polyani rejects the ideal of a detached objective perspective, for Polyani, the objective ideal of knowledge is a sickness because it denies the healthy functions of the individual and society. Our reactive attitude is connected with 'involvement and participation' in a human relationship which is rejected by the detached objective attitude. Polyani is critical of the detached objectivity of science as objectivism repudiates our valid contribution to what we know by trying to reject the framework of knowledge transmitted to us as our natural habitat through which we continue our explorations. Such attempts are not mere ideas but deformations of the structure of our own existence. Persistent efforts to deny our nature would be bound to produce pathological condition.

Strawson's relativizing mode is one way to resolve the conflict of these two standpoints by allowing each position its own validity from its own standpoint. His descriptive metaphysics lays bare the distinctiveness of the institution of morality in which the objective standpoint it cannot replace or encroach the reactive and the interpersonal perspective. Strawson accords each perspective its own exclusive rights as this is one possible way to explore the underlying form of the ordinary moral discourse.

## NOTES

1. Rajendra Prasad, 'Reactive Attitudes, rationality and Determinism' in "*The Philosophy of P.F. Strawson*, ed. Pranab Kr. Sen and Roop Rekha Varma, ICPR, New Delhi, 1998, p 346
2. P.F. Strawson : 'Replies', 'Mark Platts on the Metaphysics of Morals' in "*Philosophy of P.F. Strawson...*", pp 432-433.
3. *Ibid*, p-431.
4. Rajendra Prasad, '*Reactive Attitudes...*', P-346.
5. *Ibid*, p-340.
6. *Ibid*, P 8-9  
(In '*Mortal Questions*', Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979)  
Oxford Univ. Press, New York, 1986
7. Bijoy Baruah : "*The Non-rational Foundation of Moral Reality*", P-336.
8. *Ibid*, p-344
9. *Ibid*, p-68.
10. Abraham Joshua Heschel, 'The Concept of Man in Jewish thought', in "*The Concept of Man : A study' in comparative Philosophy*, ed. S. Radhakrishnana and P.T. Raju. (London, George Allen & Unwin) p-109.
11. Thomas Nagel, 'The view From Nowhere', p-126.
12. B. Barua, in "*The Philosophy of P.F. Strawson*", p-342.