

Remark 1. It is useful, before studying the present reading, to review our earlier discussion of Strawson on material objects.

OPTIMISTS, PESSIMISTS, SCEPTICS. Though professing not to know what determinism is, Strawson divides reactions to it into three groups. Suppose that determinism is true. Optimists then believe that this fact leaves open the possibility of justifying punishment. How so? Presumably along the lines articulated already by Hobbes (Quotation 3, Handout 10). In punishing an individual we intend to produce a more favourable future, that includes both the perpetrator and the society as a whole, than it otherwise would have been. Optimists, then, are compatibilists.

Pessimists are not convinced. The optimist conception of punishment is not really ‘fitting’. If determinism is correct, then moral approval, blame, or punishment simply fail to apply. Pessimists come in two flavours. They can be determinists, denying the reality of free will. Or they can be libertarians, affirming that reality. Both are incompatibilists: they agree that the notion of free will is incompatible with determinism.

And finally there is a sceptic, who similarly casts doubt on the concepts just mentioned, but does so regardless of the truth of determinism.

FREEDOM AND BLAME. The possibility of blame is central to the legitimation of punishment, as well as to moral condemnation. In turn, punishment and condemnation are central to the idea of freedom. Yet all that the optimist offers by way of justifying punishment is its social efficacy. The pessimist complains that, so described, the optimist view ignores the centrality of desert and of blame. The optimist’s concept of freedom plays no role whatsoever in justifying the practices of condemnation and punishment. In effect, the optimist is telling us that, since that concept is inept in justifying punishment, we can appeal to the quite different ideas of future improvement in order to achieve our goal of justification.

The pessimist, therefore, insists that the only way for us to justify punishment is to think of freedom as being outside the natural world—for instance, to think of it as being part of the noumenal world. But this notion of freedom requires giving up the claims of determinism. Strawson defines his task as providing some conceptual ammunition to the optimist, sufficient for silencing the pessimist.

REACTIVE ATTITUDES. Strawson now introduces a key idea of this paper, the notion of reactive attitudes. In discussing freedom and kindred notions, in a classroom, we adopt a detached perspective. We examine them as we might examine a natural phenomenon. This is fine. But we can also adopt an involved perspective, one which a person directly involved in transactions with others would adopt.

Within that involved perspective, it is very important to us to how others see us, what attitudes they have toward us. Their actions are but manifestations of their attitudes. The very same physical motion—such as you stepping on my toes—can provoke in me different reactions. In one case, I take it to be a manifestation of your awkwardness, hence a manifestation of no particular attitude toward me. My reaction can be mere annoyance. In another case, it is a manifestation of your hostility. Then my reaction would probably be resentment toward you.

By accident or not, this is a point much stressed by Hobbes. We are always on the lookout of other people’s attitudes. Their acts are taken as signs of those attitudes. We are very quick to identify offenders, that is, those who *intentionally* hurt us. We are also quick (but maybe less so?) to reward those who intentionally benefit us. Significantly, hurts and benefits need not be strictly material (though, of course, pretty much everything is material in Hobbes’ universe). Offences may come in the form of slights, mere words or smiles. Similarly for benefits. In Strawson’s analysis, this is not a mystery. The target of our reactions are the attitudes of others. Bare acts, be they words or punches, serve as mere evidence of those attitudes.

So we develop reactive attitudes, that is, attitudes in response the prior attitudes of others. Instances of reactive attitudes include resentment, gratitude, forgiveness. The latter is especially suitable for articulating Strawson’s view. When I ask you to forgive me, I do not mean to offer you a compensation for the hurt I caused. That compensation would either be determined separately, or else is irrelevant in the given case. Rather, I communicate to you a number of claims: (a) that the previous attitudes I had toward you were rightfully apt to provoke your resentment, (b) that those attitudes were not right, (c) that I no longer hold those attitudes, (d) that because of the change in my attitudes, I ask you not to hold my earlier attitudes against me in the future.