MORALITY AND THE PUSH FOR RESULTS

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Abstract:

In "Freedom and Resentment" P.F. Strawson proposes that the dispute between compatibilists and incompatibilists can be resolved if we can identify what is missing in the compatibilist account of our morality, an account intended to reconcile determinism and moral responsibility. Strawson argues that our common morality requires us to take an involved attitude toward others. He says that compatibilist accounts of that morality suggest that we take an objective attitude toward others, which precludes being morally involved with them. I argue, on the contrary, that taking an objective, results-oriented attitude toward others does not preclude moral involvement and moral community. This leaves us with the original problem of why compatibilism seems to leave something out. I argue that compatibilist accounts of morality lead to a radically altered conception of individual responsibility and its relation to general social causes of individual wrongdoing.
Morality and the Push for Results*

If everything we do is an effect of our heredity and environment, are we still morally responsible for our wrongs? This question is at the center of the free will controversy. Some philosophers (usually called compatibilists) have held that determinism (the view that all our behavior is an effect of heredity and environment) is compatible with moral responsibility while the incompatibilists, including some determinists and some anti-determinists, have held that determinism precludes moral responsibility.

In discussions over the last sixty years it has been assumed that the key condition of moral responsibility is being able to do otherwise than as we do. Compatibilists offer analyses of the meaning of "could have done otherwise" that attempt to reconcile determinism with being able to do otherwise. Then their opponents offer criticisms of these analyses. But despite extended discussion of these analyses little seems to have been settled between the compatibilists and the incompatibilists.

In "Freedom and Resentment" P.F. Strawson approached this dispute differently. He bypassed the question of how to analyze "could have done otherwise" and asked what is the connection between the thesis of determinism (insofar as we understand it) and common sense morality.1

Strawson criticizes both compatibilism and incompatibilism. His criticism of compatibilism is that it does not give adequate weight to the reactive attitudes. Reactive attitudes are ones we adopt in reaction to the perceived intentions of others. He believes that the natural desire for good will from others leads us to respond with resentment when we feel others have meant us harm or shown indifference to our welfare and to respond

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with gratitude when we perceive in others the intent to benefit us. Moral reactive attitudes, the vicarious analogues of resentment and gratitude, include the moral indignation felt in response to an intention of harm to someone with whom we feel moral community. The reactive attitudes are an ingredient of human morality: for example, punishment cannot be correctly understood except as including a subjective willingness to see someone else suffer (part of the attitude of indignation).

The reactive attitudes are the very fabric of life, Strawson says, something without which normal human relationships are inconceivable. Without them there is no morality, no interpersonal love, no quarreling with others, not even reasoning with others.

Sometimes we suspend our reactive attitudes towards others. We do this generally only with children, the insane, or others we would regard as mentally or morally incompetent. Toward them we adopt what Strawson calls an objective attitude. The objective attitude implies a concern with how we can modify the behavior of another in a desired direction; thus we regard him as something to be treated, taken account of, trained, handled, managed or cured. Someone to whom we consistently take an objective attitude is excluded from moral community; he is someone with whom we cannot share mature love, someone with whom we can neither quarrel nor reason.

Now we can present Strawson's attempt to resolve the free will controversy. The dispute between the compatibilist and the incompatibilist is to be resolved by "a formal withdrawal on one side in exchange for a substantial concession on the other." The compatibilist claims that our common moral practices of blame and punishment in response to moral wrong are justified by the social purposes they serve. Strawson asks the compatibilist to concede a criticism. Compatibilist justifications of our common morality involve our using the following yardstick in determining our behavior toward others: those actions on my part are to be preferred which will lead to shaping the behavior of others in the most desirable way. In offering these justifications the compatibilist adopts an objective attitude toward others, thus excluding them from moral community with himself. Compatibilist justifications of our common practices leave out the reactive attitudes essential to morality.
The incompatibilist correctly senses that his opponent's account of morality is inadequate, but misidentifies what has been left out. He feels that our morality can be justified only by the metaphysical assumption of a contra-causal free will. But for the metaphysical claim there is no justification.

So the incompatibilist is right that there is an incompatibility, not between determinism and our morality, but between compatibilist justifications of morality and moral justification. And the compatibilist is right that our moral practices generally lead to good consequences. But each must yield. The incompatibilist must withdraw his claim that there is a contra-causal free will and the compatibilist will concede that his "justification" of our morality excludes those reactive attitudes which are essential elements in the concepts of moral condemnation and moral responsibility.

I do not feel that Strawson's account of what the compatibilist leaves out is correct. While compatibilists have long recognized that their moral views leave little room for purely retributive emotions or behavior, Strawson feels that he must go further if his account is to make the compatibilist view seem seriously incomplete. He must claim that the objective attitude implied by compatibilism precludes moral relationships with others.

The objective and involved attitudes as described by Strawson each encompass many different elements. One can define the objective attitude as one that excludes reactive emotions and moral relations with others. Then Strawson must show that consequentialist justifications of our moral practices imply an objective attitude. I suggest another approach. Let us agree with Strawson that compatibilist justifications involve a results-oriented approach to our relations with others: we decide how to behave towards others based on an estimate of the effect of our actions on the future. Strawson is claiming that in adopting a results-oriented approach toward someone we are suspending our moral reactive attitudes toward that person and are excluding him from moral community with

2Strawson feels that determinism and claims that we are morally responsible are logically consistent. But he does not feel that this is the nub of the issue.
ourselves. For this premise in his argument, however, Strawson provides no justification.

In a recent article Lawrence Stern tries to fill in just this gap in Strawson's account. He argues that a results-oriented approach is inconsistent with moral community with others.

Stern points out that reasoning, moral argument, and quarreling are, for Strawson, part of the involved, not the objective, attitude. He says that each of these involves a recognition of equality between oneself and others. In engaging in these forms of dialogue (as Stern calls them), we are attempting to act on another, but at the same time risk that we will be persuaded that we are wrong. Just as we try to change others through these forms of dialogue, we give others the opportunity to change us.

Stern argues that a focus on results precludes dialogue, "for if we want above all the result--that the other should come to believe just this or do just that--then we do not want the other to lead us to want something else." Dialogue (an activity characteristic of moral community with others) involves this risk and hence is inconsistent with an exclusive focus on results. If we accept Stern's argument, then we have support for Strawson's claim that compatibilist defenses of common morality imply an approach to others--focusing exclusively on the results of our behavior--which is inconsistent with treating others as part of a moral community with oneself, a community based on dialogue and mutual criticism among its members.

Stern's claim sounds plausible, but it depends on the hidden premise that it is generally or frequently true that the most likely way of achieving the results we want in our relations with others is by treating them as objects, by refusing to engage them in dialogue. It is easy to see that he needs this premise if we look at a particular case.

I have a good friend with a weakness of character that is quite common: he molds his behavior too readily to accord with the expressed desires of others without making

his own evaluation of what he should do, and the more strongly others express their feelings about what he should do, the more likely he is to cave in. He and I have undertaken a joint responsibility to carry out a year long project that we both agree is important. However, he hasn't been doing his end of the work and as a result I have been overburdened. He knows what he has done, and the omissions which slight my welfare are intended. He is at fault and is to blame for my being overburdened. I have a right to be angry with him, and I may well be angry or at least displeased with him. That does not imply, however, that if I am to treat him as a member of a moral community with myself that I should angrily tell him that he is to blame for my being overburdened (as Strawson seems to imply). This would not achieve any long-lasting result; the cause of his slight of my needs was pressure to do tasks asked of him by others combined with his weakness of character--not making his own judgment about priorities. To get the result I want--his cooperation for the next year in carrying out this joint project--I need to deal with the weakness of his character that has caused the problem. This can only be done, I believe, by sitting down with him and explaining the problem as objectively and unemotionally as possible and trying to show him, by argument, that he must himself be more objective in evaluating the demands others make on him, figuring out how this might be done, and helping him to carry out a plan to overcome his weakness. This is treating him as a friend and a co-member of a moral community.

Stern would agree that this is treating him as a friend and moral equal, but he feels that such an approach as the one I described is not expression of the objective attitude, defined as a policy of focusing on results. If I am intent on results, I will not take the risk, implicit in the approach described above, that my friend will convince me that I should accept his non-participation and the resulting burden on me. Stern feels that the truly results-oriented person will resort to coercion or manipulation instead.

Stern is wrong, however, for two reasons. First, what means one will use to achieve the results one wants depends on what results one wants. If the result I want is my friend's help in this project and that alone, then I might consider means other than dialogue to the end of securing his cooperation. But the problem of gaining his
cooperation takes place in a general context of friendship, and one result I want from my own behavior is the strengthening of my friendship with him. The reason I would not avail myself of coercion and manipulation is not that I am not results-oriented, but that I am oriented toward a variety of results, including friendship. The use of coercion or manipulation would undermine our friendship. Usually when we seek to affect the behavior of another person in a particular direction, the person is one with whom we have the expectation of a longer-standing relationship than the next few moments, days or weeks. The desire to maintain relationships with others over a period of time is one of the ends we seek in our actions and therefore limits the means we will use.

Second, the means one will use in achieving the results one wants depends on the means at one's disposal. I do not know how I could coerce or manipulate my friend to get him to cooperate. I have no power over him, over his income, employment, or any other aspect of his life. I am not so much smarter than he is that I can manipulate his wishes. I do not control his access to information—so I cannot manipulate his beliefs. Given our equality, the only means I have of affecting him is dialogue. (Stem mentions facts such as these, but does not perceive the consequences of equality for his argument that a results-oriented approach precludes dialogue.)

Whether a focus on results leads to dialogue or something else is determined by the relationship of the particular means at one's disposal to the ends one seeks. Almost everyone has the means (for example, lying) to achieve some short term goals by coercion or manipulation. The longer the term of our goals, the more relevant equality is to what means the results-oriented will use. Only the very powerful can rely on long term use of coercion and manipulation to achieve cooperation from others.

I have already said that the character of the ends one seeks determines what means one can use; it is equally true that the general means at one's disposal has an effect on what goals one seeks. Maintaining the general means to our ends becomes one of our ends. Friendship, for example, is not just one of the pleasures of life; it is also a means of achieving those things which can only be achieved through interpersonal cooperation. Where achievement of a goal requires uncoerced cooperation one of two things happens: either trust, respect, and other
qualities of friendship develop, or the task at hand becomes more difficult. The same is true of moral community: respect for the welfare of others, a willingness to give and take moral criticism (as well as other kinds of criticism) are aids to interpersonal cooperation. To achieve goals that require cooperation most of us need friendship, moral community, and the dialogue required to sustain these. Since many of the goals we seek require cooperation, friendship and the maintenance of moral community are among our most important ends.

Someone might object that a results-oriented approach would lead to the disappearance of moral community in all but those cases where the results to be achieved include friendship and moral community or where our equality with others makes coercion and manipulation impossible. I would reply that friendship, moral community, and dialogue do as a matter of fact exist primarily where people must work together and cannot achieve the results they want through coercion or manipulation. When someone has the means to coerce and manipulate others to behave as he wishes and can succeed in this generally and over a long term, the relationship between the individuals is shaped by this background fact; what exists is not community (moral or otherwise) but relationship of power. If human society did not depend on uncoerced cooperation—and to the extent it does not depend on uncoerced cooperation—moral community, in fact community in the strict sense, would not exist. Hence moral community exists primarily in marriages and among friends and is much more infrequent between employer and employee and generally between those in authority and those who are under their power.4

We can understand the compatibilist justification of common sense morality in the following light: feeling that the determinist thesis may require us to abandon our common moral practices, he asks whether those practices can be justified by the results they achieve in our relationships with others. He concludes that the practices can be justified by their effects; so determinism poses no threat to them. In making this judgment he need not be regarding others as objects to be manipulated or coerced.

4I state here a view of the relationship between distribution of power in society and the existence of moral community which is fundamentally Marxian. I don't expect that the mere statement of it will convince those who disagree. Stern and Strawson tend to speak glibly of moral community in a way that assumes that the larger society is a moral community. I wish to point out that this is a debatable assumption.
Regulating our behavior toward others by our evaluation of its effects does not exclude them from dialogue or moral community.

If this is correct, why are Strawson and Stern so convinced that compatibilist justifications are inconsistent with moral community? I would like to make two suggestions. The first is this: if we are results-oriented and have the power to coerce or manipulate others, then we may bypass dialogue in favor of coercion or manipulation. If we imagine the compatibilist justification of our common morality as being made in behalf of or as an appeal to the powerful, we may understand that justification as leading the powerful to adopt any means at their disposal, including coercion and particularly manipulation of education, information, and so forth, to bring the rest of us to accept a morality they deem justified by its consequences. Then indeed the powerful would not be treating us as co-members of a moral community. This would happen, however, not solely because they take a results-oriented approach to dealing with problems raised by human behavior, but also because they are powerful and because they do not include among their goals friendship and moral community with the rest of society. The supposition that Strawson and Stern imagine the compatibilist justification as being addressed to the powerful might explain why they believe that a results-oriented approach excludes moral community.

There may be a second reason why Strawson feels that being results-oriented excludes reactive emotions and normal human relationships: he seems to confuse feeling with its expression. (This criticism does not apply to Stern, or at least not to the same degree.) In trying to influence the behavior of others to ends we desire we must calculate what to do and what emotional expressions to make. Does this objectivity of attitude preclude moral involvement and interpersonal relationships? Strawson seems to feel that it does. But why? Surely it is true that if we are involved with another we care greatly about what they do, whether they slight or ignore us or others, for example. But objectivity may require of us, as in the case I discussed earlier, that we suppress strong feeling in order to achieve the result we want in

5 As I have indicated, I believe there is an inverse correlation between power to coerce and manipulate others and need for friendship and moral community.
our relationship with the other person. But suppressing a feeling is not suspending one's attitude of regarding another as one about whose behavior one may well be angry. It may simply be making a mature judgment about what we can do to improve our relationship with the other person (or whatever other goal we may have). In another situation, where we may judge that someone who has slighted us is not sufficiently conscious of how his behavior distresses us, we may give full vent to our feelings of anger or indignation. But whether to suppress or vent our feelings should be determined, in a moral community, by what reaction will strengthen the relationship among the people involved and hence the quality of their lives. (One factor to be taken into account is the effect of suppressing one's feelings.) The calculation of when to express and when to suppress one's emotions implies neither that one is not treating another as an equal member of a moral community nor that one does not have very strong emotional reactions to another's behavior. If Strawson confuses suppression of emotion with suspension of interpersonal involvement, this would explain why he feels that a results-oriented calculation excludes reactive emotions and interpersonal relationships.

As an aside let me concede that individuals who are very results-oriented seem to have a low emotional tone, that they are less subject to strong surges of emotion. One might think that this is a direct result of being calculating --one ceases to have strong feelings because such feelings are found inconvenient. (Stern suggests something like this.) I would speculate that a low emotional tone is not a direct consequence of being results-oriented, but a consequence of not being surprised by the behavior of others and of having confidence that we can deal with the problems that arise in our relationships with others. We should distinguish between caring about others (strongly) and surges of emotion. Strong feeling for others makes one liable to extreme disappointment and elation over their actions. However, such surges of feeling are a consequence not just of caring about others but also of surprise and uncertainty. If one can anticipate the behavior of others, the disappointments and gratifications are not experienced in such sharp peaks. And if one has a plan about how to deal with the disappointments one experiences and a long term outlook toward correcting these problems one is more likely to keep an "even keel." (Compare first love with longstanding stable marriage.) Strong surges of feeling do not simply disappear because they are inconvenient,
and the absence of strong surges does not indicate a lack of intimate or strong interpersonal relationships.

Strawson hypothesizes that compatibilist justifications of our common morality exclude the involved moral attitude. Thus compatibilism leaves something out in its account of morality. But Strawson fails to show why the stress on results precludes reactive moral attitudes or moral community. Stern tries to defend some of Strawson's more debatable remarks, arguing that a focus on results precludes dialogue, intimacy, and strong emotion. I have argued in reply that stress on results does not preclude moral community when (as is most often the case) the result we want and the means at our disposal indicate that dialogue is the most likely way of getting the result.

Before concluding I would like to deal briefly and speculatively with the question that motivated Strawson: what is missing in compatibilism?

What I have to suggest as an answer to this question is less spectacular and novel than what Strawson says and some of it will sound more familiar. The incompatibilist feels that determinism undermines moral responsibility. Strawson proposes that the inconsistency is actually between results-orientedness and moral community and the reactive emotions entailed by it. We have rejected his suggestion. Perhaps, however, the inconsistency is not between results-orientedness and moral relationships per se, but between results-orientedness and a particular morality.

For reasons that will be apparent shortly I define incompatibilism, not as the view that determinism and moral responsibility are logically incompatible, but as the view that they are incompatible.

And what is the connection between determinism and results-orientedness? Strawson says that there is no logical inconsistency in being a determinist and eschewing results-oriented practices. Yes, but there seems to be a connection. I suggest it is this: determinism suggests the possibility of our acquiring general knowledge of the causes and effects of human behavior. The application of general knowledge of causes is to use that knowledge to shape the way the world will be. So a results-oriented approach to relations with others is the application of the knowledge determinism says we can have of the causes of human behavior.
There is a strain or tendency in our common morality, what I will call the retributive strain; it can be described as follows: when someone does something wrong we hold the agent responsible (unless he had a valid excuse) and respond with blame, censure, criticism, or some other unfavorable treatment; this response is justified by its being deserved. (This is not the only tendency or strain in our common morality; there is, in addition, a practical, results-oriented strain). It seems to me that much of this retributive strain may be undermined by results-orientedness.

We noted in the first section that unfavorable, emotionally strong responses to wrongdoing are often precluded if we aim at the result of improving things; so results-orientedness is often inconsistent with the retributive response. Also the justification by desert, implicit in the retributive morality, seems psychologically inconsistent with justification by results. Insofar as our concern is results, we are not moved by considerations of desert as such.

These incompatibilities between results-orientedness and the retributive strain are commonplace and may by themselves be sufficient to explain what motivates incompatibilism. However, incompatibilists have felt that the threat of determinism is to moral responsibility. This suggests another possibility: does results-orientedness undermine the focus on the individual agent as responsible?

This second inconsistency between styles of justification has been often noted in the literature, particularly on punishment, and has spawned a range of views within the compatibilist camp. All the compatibilists recognize the incompatibility of styles, but some adhere to the justification by desert. Nowell-Smith for example, says that justification by results is appropriate in selecting moral rules and laws, but justification by desert is appropriate when we are applying the laws to particular cases. Schlick, on the other hand, rejects retributivism as barbarous. In between is Mill, who largely disagrees with retributivism, but feels that in some cases punishment as retribution is justified by the satisfaction it gives to the emotions of indignation and resentment, emotions he feels are worthy of cultivation.
Perhaps what is wrong with compatibilism is that it overlooks how results-orientedness may alter our conception of the responsibility of the individual. Consider any case of individual injustice, where we characteristically hold the individual agent responsible (unless he has an excuse). Determinism guides our thinking into a results-oriented mold as we attempt to apply the knowledge we have of the causes of individual wrongdoing in a constructive way to stop injustice. It seems plausible that there are general social causes of particular injustices, that one can know what they are, and therefore that a policy of focusing on results will lead us to seek elimination of those social causes of injustice. This leads to the politicization of morality: we see the individual agent as but one link in a causal chain, a link we will focus on in attempting to achieve short-term improvements in particular situations while dealing also with the social causes which lie at the root of the problem. The possibility of such a radically revised picture of moral action, implicit in a results-oriented approach, may well be the cause of the incompatibilists' feeling that determinism undermines moral responsibility.

I will try to show quite briefly how results-orientedness leads to the politicization of morality, a process which undermines the focus on the individual implicit in the retributive strain. If we are morally opposed to a particular instance of wrongdoing then we should, in all consistency, be opposed to similar wrongdoing in others. (We are familiar with this generalizing effect in results-oriented discussions of punishment, which estimate the effect of deterence as relevant to punishment.) Moreover, it is not just a question of being consistent. If the behavior in question is bad and also common, then future instances of it are likely to affect us or our families or people we care about. So it is a matter of self-interest, broadly construed, as well as a requirement of consistency, that we should extend our concern beyond a single instance of wrong behavior and seek to eliminate other instances as well.

It is plausible to suppose (I will not attempt to prove it here) that much individual bad behavior has social causes. Problems in many marriages stem from male chauvinist attitudes fostered by much literature, movies, advertising, and so forth. Individual racism is often caused in part by misconceptions that are fostered in the movies, television and newspaper reporting, and
other popular sources of information. Behavior ranging from simple rudeness to backbiting, cheating, and attacks on someone else's job may result from competitiveness (success means getting ahead of others); these attitudes too would seem caused by a society which frequently defines individual worth in terms of success in competition. Finally, much bad behavior toward others is a response to stress—we respond by mistreating innocent others. Often this stress has general social causes. Job insecurity is one. Others are need for medical care one may not be able to afford, stress of working two jobs, need for house repair one cannot afford, need to move to find work, and so forth. Such stresses are familiar to most of us.

Consistency and self-interest require us to seek to eliminate the general wrongdoing not just the individual instances which may originally motivate us. And the causes of the general wrongdoing are frequently social. So we cannot avoid the effort to eliminate the social causes of wrong behavior. The social cause gives us the handle that enables us to do what consistency and self-interest require. So the morality of someone who seeks results will be a political morality.

There is an obvious objection to what I have said: it is that the social factors that one might attack are here to stay; male chauvinism, racism, and competitiveness may be felt to be part of human nature and inevitable in any social organization. Economic insecurity may seem to be something that will always plague substantial portions of humanity. Or one may object that we cannot know what the social causes of injustice are or what action on our part would eliminate them. To answer these objections would take us too far afield of the present subject matter. More important, it is not necessary.

9For example, one common misconception is that economic gains for blacks relative to whites mean economic losses for whites (in absolute terms). But statistical evidence is that gains for blacks mean gains for white workers and losses only for the wealthiest whites. See Michael Reich, "Economic Theories of Racism" in Martin Carnoy (ed.) Schooling in a Corporate Society (New York: McKay, 1971).
We are trying to discover the origin of the feeling of the incompatibilist that determinism (or on our interpretation, results-orientedness) undermines moral responsibility. Now it turns out that it is at least arguable that the adoption of a results-oriented morality leads to a greatly altered perception of the relationship between individual responsibility and social evils and to a corresponding practice of attacking pervasive social causes of individual wrongdoing. The retributivist focus on the individual agent becomes as problematic as the claim that, for example, male chauvinism is part of human nature, and that is very problematic indeed. Even if one argues, in opposition to the views I have expressed, that the exclusive focus on the individual implicit in the retributive strain is justified, one feels less secure.

The cause of the incompatibilists' apprehensions about determinism may well be the threat that our morality will become politicized, that the individual wrongdoing will no longer be viewed in isolation, but will be responded to as one part of a political morality. Such a radically altered view of individual responsibility is anathema to those with sympathy for retributivism. The fear that determinism may lead to such an alteration may be the source of incompatibilism.

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