

Freedom from two Perspectives: Strawson and Pereboom

Bachelor Thesis Philosophy

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Utrecht, June 2013

1. Introduction

This paper will be about free will. However, as it is often the case in philosophy, a single subject can hardly ever be explored and understood in a vacuum. In the philosophical work on free will the three most important concepts are free will, moral responsibility, and determinism. Not only free will, but all three are pivotal to the discussion. The debate surrounding free will is extremely substantial, therefore it would be impossible to do justice to it entirely. Instead, I will focus on what I believe is an interesting way to regard the tension between the theories of two influential authors on this subject: P.F. Strawson and Derk Pereboom. These two philosophers signifying two major trends in the discourse on free will and both pose compelling arguments for their case. Further along in this paper I will propose a different way of looking at the discussion between these two thinkers based on varying levels of description, using work of Thomas Nagel. Toward the end of this paper I will, in line with Thomas Nagel, try to explain the discord between Strawson and Pereboom as stemming from essentially different assumptions about how we should perceive ourselves in this world as we engage in philosophy. If this approach has indeed some merit, it could shed some light on why positions concerning free will exist in such a broad spectrum. At the very least, an attempt to try to understand how these different perspectives on free will can exist and present compelling arguments, is a thing of interest.

1.2 Starting point

The discussion about what exactly the status of free will is has been going on for ages. Historically, free will has often been regarded by its antitheses. Take for instance fatalism, our powerlessness under the reign of the gods, which has always been a large theme in antiquity. Democritus in the fifth century B.C. was one of the first to propose a naturalistic view and the consequences as to what the true nature of human life and free will would be: "By convention color, by convention sweet, by convention bitter, but in reality atoms and a void."¹ Through the ages almost all philosophers have had their say on free will. For some, it is an intrinsic property of the metaphysical soul, for others actions need only be consistent with the will of the agent to be free.² There has never been much agreement on the subject, and in recent decades the increase of our knowledge of neuroscience has only fanned the flames, even outside reaching into the public domain.

¹ Diels Kranz, fragment B125

² Examples are, respectively, René Descartes and David Hume.

It is prudent to always first line out the background of any issue one wants to explore. The problem of free will I think is best seen as arising out of a combination of on the one hand the intuitions of free will we have and on the other hand what a theory of determinism has on what we refer to with these intuitions. If we try to incorporate determinism into our worldview, we are forced to look into what we mean with the concepts such as free will we intuitively use, while normally we do not look at those concepts in such a detached manner. These concepts, determinism and our intuitions, play a large role in most of the rhetoric on free will and I believe are a good starting point. Additionally, the concept of moral responsibility often shows up when we discuss free will, and I will try to explain what their relation to each other is.

1.2.1 Determinism

The Stanford Encyclopedia of philosophy defines determinism as “the idea that every event is necessitated by antecedent events and conditions together with the laws of nature.”³ There is no consensus on all the intricacies of what the (correct) theory of determinism is, but there is a general consensus of what aspects should be included. The most important characteristic of determinism can be summed up into the thesis that given a state of the universe, following the laws of nature, the universe has exactly one possible future. Since we as human beings are part of the universe, and the matter we are made up of follows the laws of nature, this would mean we are causally determined in everything we do. This view that everything has only one outcome might look strange when in our daily lives we so often deliberate between two very different outcomes. When choosing between chocolate or strawberry ice-cream, there is an intuition that both are real possibilities. While some philosophers do not accept the theory of determinism, most suspect we at least live in a world bound to such extent by natural laws that we should seriously consider that all of our choices might really only have one possible outcome. On what this would mean for our conception of free will there is less agreement.

A side note has to be made that this picture of determinism is slightly simplified, for example because quantum mechanics appear not to follow such unilateral rules as normal physics. However, the randomness it displays cannot be said to play any meaningful role on human life. If you choose purely random between two flavors of ice-cream, the choice is still out of your hands, so it offers as little freedom as classic

³ See “Causal Determinism” in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. In this article I use determinism to refer to causal determinism, as is common.

determinism does.⁴ For the sake of brevity, I will not go further into the effects of quantum mechanics on determinism, since it either plays no important role in the work of the authors I will discuss or they argue against its relevance.

At this point I think there are very few if any strong cases to be made against determinism. This naturally does not infer its truth, however, this does mean that we should look into what the consequences of the truth of determinism would be. This is also the approach taken by the authors I will discuss. Therefore, for the rest of this paper, I will work from the assumption that determinism, in some form, is true.

1.2.2 Intuitions about Free Will

Now let us consider our intuitions about free will. I already hinted that if our universe has in fact one possible outcome, if we have chosen strawberry ice-cream but could not have done otherwise, our deliberation seems illusory. But what are the implications for our free will? If I claim to be free, most of the time I mean that I can choose between two things. I can either go to the movies, or stay at home. To say I am bound to do either of the two seems to say I am not actually free. So a problem arises if we introduce the theory of determinism: these concepts we use relatively unproblematically, such as free will, seem to lose something of what they mean if the universe has only one possible outcome.

However, these are largely my own intuitions. All sides of the free will debate claim their position has the most intuitive appeal.⁵ What people with philosophical education find intuitively or common sense is often very far from the common sense of actual common people. When asked in questionnaires, the majority of people saw no problem to ascribe free will in a case where someone is predetermined to do something.⁶ That does not correspond with my intuitions, but perhaps my 'intuitions' are already influenced from reading about this subject. What this does show, I believe, is that how we use these concepts in everyday cases seems different from how we interpret them if we put them under the magnifying glass. We should consider how concepts such as free will, which we all already use naturally, behave when we look at them through the lens of determinism, but we should also consider how the fact that we already use those concepts

⁴ See Pereboom (1995) for further argumentation against the relevance of quantum-mechanics on the issue of free will. Alternatively see "Libertarianism and skepticism about free will: Some arguments against both," Vargas, M. (2004). *Philosophical Topics* 32 (1&2):403-26. For an advocate in favor of the decisive influence of quantum mechanics on free will, see Robert Kane's entry on Four Views on Free will.

⁵ See Nahmais, E., Morris, S., Nadelhoffer, T., and Turner, J. (2005), "Surveying Freedom: Folk Intuitions about Free Will and Moral Responsibility,"

⁶ *Ibid.*

influences our philosophical endeavor. From the very start, we do not have a neutral starting position in this discussion, since we already use in our daily lives the concepts we want to investigate. Further along, if our intuitive concepts would eventually show a fundamental contradiction with determinism, the question arises how we should, or if we even could, incorporate that theoretical knowledge into our lives. While the traditional picture of philosophy would be a scholar filling pages with new knowledge and insights, in the case of free will the pages already have things scribbled on them, and the challenge is to find out if you write in between the lines or tear out the page and start anew.

1.3 Moral responsibility

When talking about free will often one suddenly jumps to talking about moral responsibility, and this might seem rather strange. While these concepts certainly have a relation, using the concepts almost interchangeably needs some explanation. Albeit there is some discord on how these concepts relate, most philosophers agree an agent acting out of free will is necessary (but not by itself sufficient) to have any form of moral responsibility.⁷ How to then interpret what the agent did in terms of right and wrong is a discussion best left to ethics, but the question of whether ethics even apply, whether moral responsibility could even be attributed, is one of free will. Moral responsibility is a clear and relevant occurrence, by most interpretations, of free will and it is therefore often used as an example. If you can demonstrate moral responsibility in a case, you have demonstrated free will (or strong intuitions that both are present). Conversely if you can show an agent has no free will in a certain case, you have shown him not to be morally responsible in this case. It is this connection which makes these two concepts highly illustrative of each other. Therefore, moral responsibility is often used to explore the concept of free will.

1.4 Onwards

Now, having outlined some key elements of the free will debate, I will look at an author who has been central in this debate. P.F. Strawson has, since his publication of his article ‘Freedom and Resentment’ been one of the most iconic thinkers in the compatibilist tradition of free will. Compatibilism is the thesis that free will is compatible with determinism.⁸ This is contrasted with incompatibilism, the thesis that freedom and

⁷ For instance see Frankfurt (1969) “Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility”. I will assume in this paper the concepts free will and moral responsibility are linked in this manner.

⁸ See the “Compatibilism” entry in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

determinism are not compatible. Free will skepticism or hard determinism is an incompatibilist position which states that determinism is true and therefore we have no free will, and thus no moral responsibility. Libertarianism is the incompatibilist position that states we do have free will, therefore determinism is false. These very different positions in the debate show up in most incarnations of the free will debate, so it is important to name them.

2. Strawson

The article in which Strawson puts forward his views on free will, 'Freedom and Resentment', is written against the backdrop of the free will discussion of the time, which also in 1960 was highly polarized. The two main positions Strawson names and gives credit to are what he calls the pessimist position and the optimists'. The pessimist believes that if determinism holds concepts such as free will and morality have no place and use of them cannot be justified.⁹The pessimist in Strawson's article assumes an incompatibility of freedom with determinism. The optimist argues that determinism and free will are in fact compatible. The concepts and practices that are viewed, by the pessimist, as endangered by determinism are safe in the view of the optimist. Strawson expresses that he wants to reconcile these two parties but also sees some serious flaws in both their approaches.

The flaw of the optimist, according to Strawson, is where he lays the justification for those problematic concepts and practices at stake. The optimist position Strawson sums up following: "(1) the facts as we know them do not show determinism to be false. (2) the facts as we know them supply an adequate basis for the concepts and practices which the pessimist feels to be imperilled by the possibility of determinism's truth."¹⁰ The justification the optimists gives is "the efficacy of the practices of punishment, and of moral condemnation and approval, in regulating behavior in socially desirable ways"¹¹. Strawson sees the optimist justification using efficacy as "not a sufficient basis, not even the right sort of basis, for these practices as we understand them."¹² Strawson indicates he believes the optimist to leave out something vital, a part just of these practices we try to explain which is left out in the optimist picture. In turn this lacuna might be what sparks the pessimist, out of anxiety for this vital thing, to look for a foundation for these concepts and practices beyond the facts as we know them. As if the

⁹ Strawson, P.F. (1962). "Freedom and Resentment," p. 1.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 2.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 2.

¹² Ibid., p. 3.

vital thing can only be preserved with a kind of freedom which would imply the falsity of determinism.¹³

But Strawson calls him to a halt: there is not yet to need to presuppose such a kind of freedom is needed. Strawson calls for a different perspective, a perspective not as detached as it normally is concerning this issue. Namely, he wants us to look at “The non-detached attitudes and reactions of people directly involved in transactions with each other;[...]¹⁴ We attach very great importance to the attitudes and intentions toward us of others and to the role they play in our own feelings and reactions, Strawson explains. When we engage in philosophy in our detached style, we forget “what it is actually like to be involved in ordinary interpersonal relationships”.¹⁵

The main way Strawson identifies these inter-personal attitudes is through what he calls ‘*reactive attitudes*’. These are the attitudes associated with involvement and participation with others in human relationships. It covers a large spectrum of attitudes from resentment to gratitude and attitudes and feelings beyond and between those, such as love, anger and forgiveness.¹⁶ An informative endeavor is to see in which situations we find them unreasonable or inappropriate to apply. For Strawson, the nature of when we do use these reactive attitudes and when we exempt people from them, is an important point. For his critics, this point is even more important, therefore I will try to set forth Strawson’s line of reasoning on this subject.

Strawson distinguishes two types of occurrences of this suspension of reactive attitudes. First, and least importantly, you have the cases where we say things like ‘he did not mean to’ or ‘he had not realized’. Importantly, these cases do not invite us to suspend our reactive attitudes to the agent as a whole. In such cases, we view an act of injury as one towards which these attitudes are not appropriate, but that does not fall outside of the context of ‘ordinary inter-personal relationships and the manifestation of ordinary reactive attitudes.’¹⁷ Strawson sees this, the ability to suspend or modulate our reactive attitudes to people in abnormal situations or stresses, as an integral element of the complicated practice of human relationships.

Secondly, and more importantly, there are the cases that do invite us to suspend our ordinary reactive attitudes toward the agent. In these cases we would say of the agent ‘he is only a child’ or ‘he's a hopeless schizophrenic’. In contrast to the first category it are not the situations that are abnormal, instead it are normal situations in which the

¹³ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 6.

agents are psychologically abnormal or simply morally underdeveloped. “The agent was himself; but he is warped or deranged, neurotic or just a child. When we see a person in such a light, all our reactive attitudes tend to be profoundly modified.”¹⁸

Cases of this second kind play an important role to Strawson, because they show us how reactive attitudes work. In them, we suspend a certain type of relationship toward the agent and this leads to us handling what Strawson calls ‘the objective attitude’. This attitude stands in contrast with the (range of) attitudes we normally use in human relationships. It is clear the two attitudes are opposed: the way you would deal with a conscious agent stepping on your hand contrasted with a sleepwalker or someone suffering from some severe psychological ail is profoundly different. When we adopt this objective attitude towards another human being, we do in fact see him as ‘an object of social policy’, in the sense of having to be cured or managed or avoided. The attitude can still involve some emotional factors, but not truly reactive attitudes which belong to involvement in inter-personal human relationships. “Even in the same situation, I must add, they are not altogether exclusive of each other; but they are, profoundly, opposed to each other.”¹⁹

Strawson indicates that while we naturally slide into this objective attitude in these cases, it is also available to us as a resource in other cases. We can use it to take a step away from involvement for a short while, or help us form policy, or simply as an intellectual interest. However, Strawson tell us: “Being human, we cannot, in the normal case, do this for long, or altogether.”²⁰ For Strawson, we are, as human beings, intrinsically connected to a certain way of working. We cannot but take up this position of reactive attitudes, to try not to would be practically futile, to succeed would be disastrous. Likely to be a sort of biological imperative, the factors behind this human tendency of ours is not all that relevant for Strawson, since intellectualizing it will not change it.

The question Strawson asks, after having established the nature of these reactive attitudes (and the intricacy of their modulations), is exactly what effect the truth of the thesis of determinism would have upon these reactive attitudes. We have already seen some options to deal with different cases, namely to inhibit either particular reactive attitudes (to a person that didn’t know he was causing injury), or reactive attitudes as a whole towards an agent (to a person that is mentally deranged or a child). Exemptions of this first category would not arise in the case of determinism, since determinism would

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 8.

not imply we see all agents' actions as a result of accident or ignorance. The second form of exemptions of reactive attitudes, Strawson argues, also would not be applied to every human being under the truth of determinism. This is, in part, because the reasons for suspending reactive attitudes in the second category of cases are based on psychologically abnormal agents: "[...] It cannot be a consequence of any thesis which is not itself self-contradictory that abnormality is the universal condition."²¹ Perceiving everyone exclusively in the objective way as a result of accepting determinism is according to Strawson not absolutely inconceivable, but, certainly, practically inconceivable. "The human commitment to participation in ordinary inter-personal relationships is, I think, too thoroughgoing and deeply rooted for us to take seriously the thought that a general theoretical conviction might so change our world that, in it, there were no longer any such things as inter-personal relationships as we normally understand them."²²

This is a large part of what Strawson wants to put forward: We are thoroughly rooted in certain human practices, which are highly unlikely to be cast aside because of any theoretical conviction. A further point Strawson emphasizes is that among the reasons we give to exempt people from reactive attitudes determinism does not play a role. But the question that remains is what would be rational to do if determinism were true. To this Strawson gives us another important answer: "[...] the purport of the preceding answer, [is] the fact of our natural human commitment to ordinary inter-personal attitudes. This commitment is part of the general framework of human life, not something that can come up for review as particular cases can come up for review within this general framework."²³ What Strawson states here is that this essentially human framework in which we operate cannot be reviewed from the outside as it can review elements within itself, but has its own internal validity. We are capable of sometimes taking a more objective position; however ultimately, we as humans are bound to our positions in the framework of interpersonal relationships. Strawson does not see this as a truly restrictive factor, since it is just this connection in the framework and its internally valid concepts (such as morality) which make human life livable and capable of harboring concepts which would not be available living with a purely objective attitude(were that to be even possible).

Cardinal in Strawson's article is his repeated emphasis on the lack of importance determinism seems to play on those concepts it is said to threaten. We cannot hold the position, Strawson argues, that all human behavior is similar to the neurotics, since it

²¹ Ibid., p. 9.

²² Ibid., p. 9.

²³ Ibid., p. 10.

would imply a gross incoherence caused by the way we do deal with neurotics (or children for that matter). What determinism is claimed to do, shift all our inter-personal relationships to an objective attitude as with children, does not follow. The way we ascribe agents with the capacity to be subjects of reactive attitudes, is based on a system of internal justification, the question whether an agent is free in some other sense (that using an external, deterministic) view, does not arise.

Strawson reconciles the pessimist and the optimist by returning to the optimist position those things it was missing: a proper basis for moral responsibility and moral condemnation, based on an approach which does justice to those practices as we know them. This void the pessimist over-zealously tried to fill going beyond the facts as we know them, claiming it can only be done if determinism were false. "The vital thing can be restored by attending to that complicated web of attitudes and feelings which form an essential part of the moral life as we know it, and which are quite opposed objectively of attitude."²⁴

The reason both sides fail to find a proper basis is the detached and objectifying style both utilize. "But a thoroughgoing objectivity of attitude, excluding as it does the moral reactive attitudes, excludes at the same time essential elements in the concepts of moral condemnation and moral responsibility."²⁵ The root of this misguidance by lies in the over-intellectualization of the facts, looking at the matter in an external way while we should understand it internally. "The existence of the general framework of attitudes itself is something we are given with the fact of human society. As a whole, it neither calls for, nor permits, an external 'rational' justification."²⁶ The optimist's style is a form of incomplete empiricism, losing sight of human attitudes. While "it is just these attitudes themselves which fill the gap in the optimist's account"²⁷. The reason for this woeful tendency to over-intellectualize is, according to Strawson, simply because of our overcautious outlook on the cultural dependence and uncertainty of these human attitudes, which caused us to favor, as scientists, to study with detachment.

Especially his idea that this framework of attitudes does not have to nor can be justified or regarded externally is the fundamental aspect of Strawson on which I like to focus. This approach of internal justification is fundamentally different from the approach of another completely different and quite opposed position, that of Derk Pereboom. He argues against compatibilists such as Strawson, and in favor of the position of hard determinism.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 18.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 16.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 18.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 18.

3. Pereboom

Compatibilists such as Strawson seem to have a strong case: surely the concepts and practices of free will and moral responsibility do not turn to dust just if we accept the theory of determinism. But apart from internal justification, moral responsibility in the way we normally understand it uses a kind of agency, a sense of free will. And while we can say this to arise in an internal structure, we seem to always define it in ways which are maybe not ultimately impervious to very fundamental critique. Derk Pereboom in his article ‘Determinism al dente’ put forward a relatively simple argument against compatibilists like Strawson, using a different angle which thoroughly undermines Strawson’s approach.

Pereboom tries to argue in favor of a position which is far from popular in the free will debate, that of hard determinism. The hard determinist’s position can be described as follows: an incompatibilist who believes that determinism is in fact true (or, perhaps, that it is close enough to being true so far as we are concerned, in the ways relevant to free will) and because of this we lack free will.²⁸ The hard determinist is as Strawson’s pessimist, also an incompatibilist. However, instead of not being able to accept the relinquishing of moral responsibility for which Strawson pessimist desires some metaphysical solution, the hard determinist accepts the facts as he sees them and accepts that we are not truly morally responsible.

The point Pereboom puts forward to give hard determinism a serious second chance is, in its simplest form, as follows: Assuming determinism is true, the actions of agents are produced by actions beyond their control, exempting them from moral blame.²⁹ Pereboom’s argument against compatibilism is surprisingly simple in its approach. First, he identifies the essential features of several widespread compatibilist notions of freedom. While Pereboom focuses his arguments against all compatibilists³⁰ for the sake of this paper I will only regard Pereboom’s argument for hard determinism in relation to Strawson. Secondly, Pereboom devises a simple thought experiment regarding a murder that all compatibilist positions would identify as being freely committed. Thirdly, Pereboom slightly alters the case, changing however nothing essential, and thereby showing that in this similar case which also passes the criteria for freedom given by the compatibilist positions, the agent in fact decidedly shows to lack freedom. This altered case basically works by clearly laying the ultimate cause of the agent’s behavior outside of his reach. In an intermediate case, this is done through some hypothetical evil

²⁸ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

²⁹ Pereboom, D., (1995). “Determinism al Dente,” p. 42.

³⁰ Pereboom personally refers to compatibilists as ‘soft determinists’.

neuroscientists who have influenced his behavior thoroughly. But in the final case, these factors beyond the agents control are shown to be not fundamentally different from determinism.

Pereboom gives us his version of the incompatibilist claim: “The incompatibilist’s most fundamental claim is that moral responsibility requires that one’s choice and action not result from a deterministic causal process that traces back to factors beyond one’s control.”³¹ The thought experiment Pereboom gives indicates that, despite the value compatibilist give to causes within the agent, the ultimate causes of human behavior are out of its control. If you replace determinism with neuroscientists programming an agent, complete with second order-desires³² and rational thought processes, this is clear. Replacing the neuroscientist with determinism, while it is not immediately clear, is no different on a fundamental level. Pereboom shows that this claim isn’t easily dislodged by compatibilists, and that therefore the hard determinist deserves a more serious consideration.

In defense, the soft compatibilist could make an appeal to our intuitions. To clarify, the final case is one in which it is merely stated that determinism is true, but where the agent seems as to lack as much freedom as under external manipulation, since the agent is still not in control of the ultimate causes of his actions. However, to refute the incompatibilist claim, one has to go further than simply intuitions, Pereboom argues, since ‘if we did assume determinism and internalize its implications, our intuitions might well be different.’³³

Pereboom argues that a possible cause of the errors of the compatibilists might be an underlying assumption that “her choice does not result from a deterministic causal process that traces back to factors beyond her control.”³⁴ Often, and indeed neither does Strawson, it is not specified whether the agents talked about are causally determined. While Strawson says the internal structure cannot even be regarded through such external means, which includes considering determinism, the value he gives to an agent's free will might be based on that assumption of her choice ultimately being not beyond her control. However, given Pereboom’s argument that determinism entails that choices and actions of agents ultimately do trace back to factors beyond one’s control, this assumption might be flawed.

³¹ Ibid., p. 27.

³² To give a very brief explanation, *second-order desires* or *higher volitions* are volitions about volitions. Harry Frankfurt proposed they are a condition for free will (see Frankfurt, H., (1969). "Alternate possibilities and moral responsibility").

³³ Ibid., p. 25.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 27.

Pereboom agrees with the compatibilists³⁵ that not having the ability to do otherwise, an implication of determinism, is not what is threatening to moral responsibility. What is the main question according to Pereboom, but isn't specified properly by the compatibilists, is whether ultimately the choices and actions of agents are caused by a causal (deterministic) process beyond their control. Since if that is in fact the case we cannot have true moral responsibility.

Pereboom states that while Strawson sees it practically impossible or extremely unlikely to always wield an objective attitude, he sees no reason why this rational tendency would be trumped by our nature not to. Strawson's position that our use of practices associated with reactive attitudes is so deeply engrained in our nature that we could not let it go, while it sounds credible, cannot be said to be a certainty. Pereboom sees no reason why we could not internally accept determinism and alter our worldview accordingly. In doing thing, Pereboom adds, the choices we have are not between either following our conceptions on free will and moral responsibility without looking at determinism, or looking at determinism and forfeiting every form of meaningful interpersonal relationship. "Strawson is right to believe that objectivity of attitude would destroy interpersonal relationships. But he is mistaken to think that objectivity of attitude would result or be appropriate if determinism were to undermine the reactive attitudes."³⁶What the truth of determinism would change is that we would use analogues to these reactive attitudes that would not be based on 'false presuppositions', which are what the reactive attitudes are based on. To suppose we would become stuck in some kind of nihilistic worldview is mistaken and results from the flaws in the assumptions about our psychology made by Strawson, according to Pereboom

To summarize the argument made by Pereboom against Strawson's idea that we are unable to internalize a lack of free will: The psychological explanation Strawson uses falls short, since if we can make exemptions in some cases, we can make exemptions in all cases. We can in fact take a position of hard determinism, both theoretically and practically. Furthermore given we are ultimately not in control of our actions, there is a reason to take up the position of hard determinism. There is however no reason not to use some, what Pereboom calls, 'analogues of reactive attitudes' which enable us to retain all the emotion of human life without the theoretically false presuppositions.

We seem here to arrive at a stalemate. Advocates of a Strawsonian justification for free will and moral responsibility are unlikely to be convinced by Pereboom's argument.

³⁵ Harry Frankfurt showed that the ability to do otherwise is not the determining for having moral responsibility. (Again, see Frankfurt, H., (1969). "Alternate possibilities and moral responsibility").

³⁶ Ibid., p. 38.

They will likely stress the fact that, at least in their view, these concepts do have an adequate basis in the structure of reactive attitudes. Looking outside of it, and regarding the agents which take part in this structure as the physical, causally determined beings they arguable also are, is to move away from what we are really discussing.³⁷ Advocates of hard determinism would reiterate that if you really look at the problem, that is look at it from a detached, objective perspective, the implications of determinism are clear. I think this stalemate itself is a thing of interest. It does not originate from an insufficiency of knowledge, which is the cause of most diametrically opposed theories on a subject, rather it originates from a fundamental difference on how the facts as we know them are to be viewed. Arguments given by either side are often accused of missing the point or changing the subject; One could even say they are speaking a different language. I believe that in a sense they are, but it would be clearer to say they are taking up difference perspectives; Perspectives that might not be translatable into each other. Thomas Nagel has written a great deal on conflicts of this nature, including on the topic of free will.

4. Nagel

In his article ‘Subjective and Objective’ Thomas Nagel argues that a great deal of philosophical problems arise from the difficulty of explaining subjective concepts in an objective world-view, and that this problem has a more fundamental basis than we might realize. Throughout this paper the terms subjective and objective have occasionally played a role, and it is also for this reason I would like to investigate what the view of Nagel on this balance could say of the stalemate between Strawson and Pereboom I have proposed exists. Let us investigate the nature of this problem Nagel proposes exists and how it relates to free will.

Nagel states that the problem arises out of the tendency to always seek an objective account of everything before admitting its reality, while those things that appear to a more subjective point of view cannot be accounted for this way. For the case of free will, Nagel describes an important problem with trying to explain actions externally, “Any external view of an act as something that happens, with or without causal antecedents, seems to omit the doing of it. Even if an action is described in terms of motives, reasons, abilities, absence of impediments or coercion, this does not capture the

³⁷ For an interesting view on Strawson’s inter-personal relation as being very real ‘practices’ which should be taken seriously, with arguments from Habermas, see Anderson, J. (2011) “Vrijheid door betrokkenheid: Strawson en Habermas tegen vrije-wil-scepticisme”.

agent's own idea of himself as its source."³⁸ Implicitly, we often assume that an external, objective perspective is capable to describe everything. However when it comes to these concepts in which subjective experience plays a large role, it does in fact seem to fall short. In 'The View From Nowhere' Nagel restates the problem in the relation between our actions and objectivity: 'Some of its most important features seem to vanish under the objective gaze.'³⁹ In a naturalistic view of the world there seems to be no place for actions to be truly contributed to agents, instead they become components of the flux of events in the world the agent is a part of. The difficulty is that while it is clear where free will and action seems threatened under the force of objectivity or determinism, it is 'impossible to give a coherent account of the internal view of action which is under threat', according to Nagel.⁴⁰

So we are left with the problem that if we take this objective perspective, which we as scientists or philosophers assume is often the best way to further knowledge, some things very real to our daily life seem to be left intelligible. Both standpoints, the objective and the subjective, seem powerful and claim dominance in their ability to explain all there is to explain, including the other position, Nagel argues. "The opposition looks like a stalemate because each of the points of view claims dominance over the other, by virtue of inclusion. The impersonal standpoint takes in a world that includes the individual and his personal views. The personal standpoint, on the other hand, regards the deliverances of impersonal reflections as only a part of any individual's total view of the world."⁴¹ You could fit the personal views into an objective account of the world, even though they would seem to lose some subjective elements. Conversely, you could see an objective stance as merely a reflection on the world still registered from a subjective viewpoint (even though this would slightly discredit the power of an objective viewpoint we normally associate with it).⁴²

We seem to be in an impasse between these two perspectives. However, Nagel supposes, the distinction is not so binary. These two viewpoints are illustrative, but in fact there are no two points, nor even two categories for varying viewpoints. 'Instead, there is a polarity' Nagel states.⁴³ He also speaks of this range from subjectivity to objectivity as a continuous spectrum. At the subjective end of the spectrum there is a

³⁸ Nagel, T. (1979). "Subjective and Objective," p. 199.

³⁹ Nagel, T. (1986). *The View From Nowhere*. p. 110.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁴¹ Nagel, T. (1979). "Subjective and Objective," pp. 205-206.

⁴² While assuming dominance of a subjective perspective over an objective perspective has few adherents these days, idealism has had a large influence on philosophy. Additionally, the always recurring skeptical position might be seen as a version of this subjective dominance.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 206..

particular individual, with his own spatial, temporal and personal relation to the rest of the world. From there, in steps, going towards a more objective standpoint is to go toward a conception of the world which as far as possible is not the view from anywhere within it. Clashes between a more subjective viewpoint and a more objective viewpoint can take place anywhere along the spectrum, meaning that the more objective standpoint is not necessarily totally detached from human 'internal' aspects. Hence Nagel points out this distinction between subjective and objective is, by any account, relative.⁴⁴ What does it mean to shift to an objective standpoint? "Its essential character, in all the examples cited, is externality or detachment. The attempt is made to view the world not from a place within it, or from the vantage point of a special type of life and awareness, but from nowhere in particular and no form of life in particular at all."⁴⁵ By stripping away our personal appearances of the world we can try to reach an understanding of the world as it really is, according to Nagel. We do this, Nagel says, because of an assumption that 'everything must be something not to any point of view, but in itself'.⁴⁶ Similar to how we carry out science, by using instruments that convey information not dependent on a specific observer like our own senses sometimes do, objectivity requires a departure from our personal place in this world, even detachment from our human viewpoint. Nagel goes as far as to call this objective transcendence, which simply means it aims to represent how things actually are, not *for* anyone or *for* any type of being. Martians with completely different sensory modalities should be able to represent the same laws of physics as us.

To recap, Nagel points out that always trying to give an objective account of everything leaves out something important. This also occurs in the case of free will. However, given that the objective perspective is often very powerful in explaining the world as we know it in terms intelligible to everyone, we are stuck in between the appeal of objectivity and the ability of a subjective perspective to leave intact those things we acquire subjectively which deserve explanation but do not fit in the objective picture, such as free will. Now, how does this relate to the opposition between Strawson and Pereboom I have sketched? I believe that what Nagel gives us here, is the tools to understand what leads to the stalemate between the two authors. Both struggle with the threat free will and moral responsibility are under given a naturalistic, determined worldview. Importantly, this worldview is not merely deterministic, it is also looks at the subject in question in a very external, objective way. What sets Strawson and Pereboom apart, is how they choose to deal with this. Strawson, not satisfied with how his optimist

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 206.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 208.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 208.

explains free will in terms which do not do justice to the practices of free will, chooses to argue that the internal structure of human interaction needs no further external justification. To translate this into Nagel's terms, Strawson's external justification is what for Nagel would be assuming the dominance of the objective perspective. For Strawson, free will and moral responsibility should instead be understood in the domain in which we use them, which is, although Strawson does not name it explicitly as such and focuses on the structure that arises out of inter-personal relations, a subjective way to look at them. Pereboom, on the other hand, sees the arguments to halt the objective perspective since they would undermine concepts such as free will as unconvincing. As a result, Pereboom takes the position that what we normally mean when we talk about free will is simply wrong, and we should refrain from using these concepts based on false presuppositions and instead use analogues which are compatible with the objective perspective.

Nagel has more to say on what to do with the problems that threaten the objective viewpoint's claim of comprehensiveness. They arise out of facts or values which are obvious from a subjective standpoint, but do not fit in an objective one. In the case of free will, we assume facts and values connected with free agency and moral responsibility, according to Nagel. If one wishes to insist that everything real must be brought under an objective description, there are a few courses available. However, neither reduction, elimination nor annexation do justice to the subjective matters. A single option remains, Nagel states: "The only alternative to these unsatisfactory moves is to resist the voracity of the objective appetite, and stop assuming that understanding of the world and our position in it can always be advanced by detaching from that position and subsuming whatever appears from there under a single more comprehensive conception."⁴⁷ In short: "perhaps reality should not be identified with objective reality."

Nagel here proposes that the objective picture is in its essence partial. This is a rather controversial claim, given the trend in both science and philosophy is that objectivity is key in understanding the world. An idealist picture would be lacking for similar reasons, Nagel argues. Objective reality cannot be analyzed or shut out of existence any more than subjective reality can. Objectivity is a very attractive path to take, it enables us to pursue a unified conception of reality by detaching from our own point of view, which clearly has great benefits to explore how the world really is beyond our own perspective. However, Nagel warns us not to get too over-zealous. "We just have to keep in mind what we are leaving behind, and not be fooled into thinking we have made it disappear. This is particularly important in connection with philosophical problems about free will, personal identity, agent-centered morality or mind and body,

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 211.

which cannot be dealt with in detachment from the subjective point of view on which they depend for their existence.”⁴⁸ But of course, it can also go the other way, and one should not forget that when appealing to human factors or internal justifications which only make sense from a subjective perspective, that there is also an objective perspective which as just as much claim to being the proper explanation. I think we can again see how Strawson and Pereboom fit into this picture. Strawson denies that determinism even plays a role in his defense of free will. But all the players in his realm of inter-personal relation are, at least from one perspective, human beings which are likely to be causally determined, including in their actions and reactions. Strawson denies the relevance of this view on the workings of free will, but I believe he could give it more credit without letting it undermine free will. Against Pereboom, on the other hand, it could be argued that when we use concepts such as free will and moral responsibility, despite their seeming inconsistency with determinism, we really mean something else by them than what is left over when viewed externally.

Nagel gives his account just of the friction between a subjective versus an objective view on action. It stems from the fact that we do not just feel ourselves to be authors of our actions, we believe to be. This poses a problem, since it is very hard to explain this belief in objective terms. The only way to explain this belief in autonomy would be not to veer outside the point of view of the agent, but this would mean it lacks the power just to answer to the problems threatening free will. There is no easy solution to this. “The problem of freedom and the problem of epistemological skepticism are alike in this respect. In belief, as in action, rational beings aspire to autonomy.”⁴⁹ What Nagel means here, is that like how we deny the epistemological skeptic's position, while we have no rationally closing arguments against him, we also take a similar step as rational being to assume autonomy. This has a slight parallel with Strawson, who also holds the opinion that we are drawn towards having certain views on free will and moral responsibility simply because we are human.

Nagel also explicitly discusses Strawson. He does not agree with Strawson that his general framework of attitudes cannot be externally criticized. “I believe this position is incorrect because there is no way of preventing the slide from internal to external criticism once we are capable of an external view.”⁵⁰ This is an often heard critique on Strawson, which Pereboom also makes, that if exemptions can be made to ascribe free will to some cases, exemptions can be made for all cases. Nagel too sees this opening and says that if one takes up an objective viewpoint, and sees the actions of the agent as

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 213.

⁴⁹ Nagel, T. (1986). *The View From Nowhere*. p. 118.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 125.

events under unchosen conditions, the freedom left to the agent shrinks to zero. An objective viewpoint seems to make free agency unintelligible, even regardless of the status of determinism, Nagel says. He continues: “This is a genuine challenge to our freedom and the attitudes that presuppose it, and it cannot be met by the claim that only internal criticisms are legitimate, unless that claim is established on independent grounds. The push to objectivity is after all a part of the framework of human life. It could only be stopped from leading to these skeptical results if the radically external view of human life could be shown to be illegitimate—so that our questions had to stop before we got there.”⁵¹ Nagel here points out the weakness in using internal justification if you were to use it in a complete description of the world. But, as I have pointed out, Nagel sees a single complete description of the world as impossible, and instead pleads to work out a balance between the two perspectives. Therefore, Nagel leaves room for a Strawsonian account of freedom, but he could argue that it gives only a partial picture, since it does not account for an objective view on human life.

Given this dilemma, Nagel proposes that we ‘try to live in a way that wouldn’t have to be revised in light of anything more that could be known about us.’⁵² This does not entail actual autonomy, which would mean free will, but is a ‘practical analogue of the epistemological hope for harmony in the world’. We can work under the ‘surveillance’ of the objective viewpoint, as he puts it, to preserve subjective values. Basically, Nagel makes a plea to be aware of the problem he postulated, but it should not lead to any skepticism about the usefulness of philosophy. Given the fundamental nature of the problem it is not strange that Nagel does not present a clear-cut way to deal with the situation we are in. Nagel concludes his paper 'Subjective and Objective' with an appeal that this tension between perspectives is not merely a practical problem. “The coexistence of conflicting points of view, varying in detachment from the contingent self, is not just a practically necessary illusion but an irreducible fact of life.”⁵³

5. Concluding

I have explained the position of two influential thinkers in the free will debate, that of Strawson and that of Pereboom. While they represent only a small part of the discussion surrounding free will, their opposition I feel is illustrative of how different positions are on the subject. What I have tried to argue is that Nagel presented us with a useful way to regard their contrasting views as stemming from essentially different assumptions about

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 126.

⁵² Ibid., p. 127.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 213.

how we should engage in philosophy. Strawson sees it as evident we have free will since it exists in the interpersonal nature of our way of life, and external examination or justification is not in order. Pereboom on the other hands sees external examination of practices such as free will as something we can, and should, do. His method of tracing back our actions and showing them to be outside of our control is an argument not just against Strawson, but against all compatibilists. Pereboom believes such an external view on practices such as free will is the right approach, and if our intuitions on free will do not fit in this view, they are simply wrong. That does not mean we cannot use analogues and understand them in different terms compatible with this external, deterministic, perspective. Strawson believes using such an external, what Nagel would call objective, perspective on practices such as free will simply does not do them justice. They cannot be understood externally because they are used internally in human interaction, and to look at them in a detached manner is to talk about something different. This is the main difference between Strawson and Pereboom. They reach different conclusions about free will because they have different assumptions on how we can, and should, approach subjective concepts. I believe Nagel makes their difference understandable, and shows the power of both sides. I think advocates of both Strawson and Pereboom should take into account that, from a different perspective, their opponent has valid points. I tend to agree with Nagel that there is no answer to the question what the best perspective is. Rather, we should try to keep in mind that while an objective perspective is often highly useful, concepts such as free will may best be understood in more subjective terms.

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