

Morality and personal ideals: Strawson

IDEAL LIFE. We can all envisage different ideal images of how a human being should live. You might feel the pull of a life dedicated to selfless service one day, only to be captivated by the pursuit of power, artistic luxury, or a quiet retreat into nature the next day.

These visions aren't just different. Often they are mutually exclusive. You can't realistically live out a life of ascetic monk-like contemplation and a life of high-stakes political dominance at the same time.

In the ethical region there are many local truths but no single global Truth. Reading a great novel or biography can make a specific lifestyle seem like the only sane way to exist, yet another book might convince you of the exact opposite.

Strawson argues that trying to force all these messy and contradictory ideals into one perfectly balanced life is actually absurd. The richness of human life comes from the fact that these irreconcilable attitudes exist in conflict with one another.

Remark 1. The Russell–Lawrence encounters are narrated at great length in Russell's *Autobiography*, ch. 8.

Question 2. Narrate *The Lady with the Dog* from the point of view of Strawson's theory of the multiplicity of ideals.

MORALITY. But if everyone is pursuing their own conflicting ideals, how do we live together without total chaos? Strawson introduces a 'minimal' conception of morality as a solution.

Think of basic morality embodied in rules like 'don't kill' or 'don't lie' as a public convenience. It isn't necessarily the meaning of life, but it is the *precondition* for everything else that matters. It's the framework that allows you to safely pursue your personal ideals. Most of our moral weight comes from our specific roles—e.g., as a student, a parent, or a professional. Being 'moral' often just means being someone others can count on to fulfil the demands of their specific role.

These station-induced obligations are universal. That is, every one must perform the duties of his station. The universality here is merely formal. We allow indefinite variety of such stations (=social positions), rather than insisting on just one moral or political station (human being, citizen etc.). Hence the content of these duties is left open.

SHOULD I CARE? Why should an individual follow these social rules if they don't feel like it? Strawson argues that a system only becomes morally binding when it is reciprocal.

If a society demands things from you but offers you no protection or benefit in return, you aren't morally obligated to obey: you are simply being *coerced* by those in power. A true moral community is a two-way street. You acknowledge your duties to others because the system ensures that those others have duties to you.

Well, a pure egoist might try to fake being moral just to get the benefits. But, Strawson notes, human nature rarely works that way. Most of us are genuinely ready to recognize the claims of others made upon us. And here is the only reason that society functions at all.

UNIVERSAL INTERESTS. Strawson pooh-poohs the idea that this universality implied in minimal morality—i.e. the universality of doing your duty as someone in the position *X*—may be abstractly represented as self-legislation. But at the same time he warns against relativising every conceivable duty. There are some human interests that every human group protects. Hence there are universal duties such as: 'some' duty of aid, some prohibition of injury, some prohibition of lying. In this regard, we are not entirely free to choose just any principle to govern human association.

It is not clear from Strawson's discussion where this list of universal interests is to be found. Nor is it clear why it exists in the first place. And supposing that it exists, it is not clear what weight must be attached to it.

Quite probably, however, Strawson means to say that these universal interests, opaque as they may be, are parts of the glue holding the society together. They represent a constraint on the viability of any society. Secondly, and more ambitiously still, these interests characterise 'almost any conceivable moral system'. Hence, one might argue, we can't even understand how a group exists, what kind of life it leads, unless such interests are respected.

LIBERALISM? Because there is no single correct way to live, Strawson concludes that a liberal society is the most rational way to organize ourselves. Such a society doesn't try to pick just one ideal life or an ideal set of norms. Instead, it creates a space where different moral environments can coexist.

The biggest threat to this system is the person with a 'single intense vision' who tries to force everyone else to live by their personal ideal. A liberal doesn't support this diversity because they think it will eventually lead to a perfect world, but simply because they value the ethical variety of human life itself.

But this refuge in liberalism appears to me illusory. Toleration of opposite views is possible when either the substance of these views is generally unimportant, or else when, though important generally, it is unimportant for *me*. To take a classical example, it may be that you prefer breaking eggs from the larger end, and I from the smaller end. Very well, I can tolerate your preference. Anything less than that would be laughable. Or it may be that you insist that the retirement age should be 65, and I say it should be 67. Well, I have independent means, and it is the same to me. So I tolerate your views, indeed your policy, which under different circumstances I might not have.

All such disagreements, at any rate, are technical and local. They are not disagreements over values or Strawsonian ideals. When it is the latter kind of disagreement, and when I continue to care about those values and ideals, *then* I don't see how I can tolerate your alien views. If I am a feminist and you beat your wife, can I say, 'Well, that's your preference, and I'm OK with it, as long as you don't force it on me' and yet continue to describe myself as a feminist? If I am Catholic, and you abort your child, can I say, 'Well, good for you, as long as you don't force me to abort mine' and still remain *Catholic*? Indeed, supposing you don't *do* anything and merely declare your allegiance to alien values, I can't very well say, 'That's fine, you're entitled to your views, just like I am to mine.'

Liberalism, including its commitment to the freedom of speech, appears to be a luxury ideology available only to those who exist in a homogeneous community where the question of values and ideals has already been settled, where alien values, if present at all, are only allowed to persist on the margins. Else, it is an ideology of those individuals who don't care one way or the other, and who can magnanimously tolerate alien values only because their own values, at least on a range of issues, are in a flux.

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