

Underestimating the World

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Abstract. Galen Strawson has contrasting attitudes to consciousness and free will. In the case of the former, he says it is a fundamental element of nature whose denial is the “greatest woo-woo of the human mind.” In the case of the latter, by contrast, he says it is not merely non-existent but “provably impossible.” Why the difference? This paper suggests this distinctive pattern of positions is generated by *underestimating the world* (to adapt a phrase Strawson uses himself in another context). If you underestimate the world, and correlatively overestimate your level of understanding of the world, it is natural to think both that consciousness is fundamental, and that free will is non-existent. If you don’t underestimate the world, on the other hand, a more uniform and attractive treatment of these topics becomes available.

In 2006, I contributed a commentary on Galen Strawson’s impressive paper “Realistic Monism: Why Physicalism Entails Panpsychism”; see (Strawson 2006, Stoljar 2006a). As I said in the commentary, there is much that seems right and important in the paper. I agree with Strawson that people tend to mistakenly assume that they know in outline what the physical world is like, and I agree also that this assumption, which seems so innocent and natural, is largely the cause of our troubles over the metaphysics of consciousness. If we take a very different view of the physical, if we do not “underestimate” it, to adopt a wonderful phrase Strawson uses in a later paper (Strawson 2019), the problems go away or at any rate are transformed into something quite different; see, e.g., (Stoljar 2006b, 2020a, Kind and Stoljar 2023)

But, as I also indicated, my agreement with Strawson on this central point is tempered in several ways. One of Strawson’s main aims in his paper (you can see this from the subtitle) is to draw out a consequence from the kind of physicalism he and I both find plausible—the kind that drops the idea that the physical world is exhaustively accounted for using physical theory of the kind available to us now. His thesis is that this form of physicalism entails a kind of panpsychism.

I don’t and still don’t see that this entailment thesis is true. Strawson’s main consideration in support of it is that if consciousness in the form that we humans have it is derivative, then the things on which it is derivative must have a nature such as to yield consciousness. I agree with that, though I don’t think that it begins to show that panpsychism is true. At best it shows what David Chalmers (2015) calls ‘panprotopsychism’ is true. But as I have argued in other places (Stoljar 2018, 2020b), this is just a misleading name for any view on which the world contains some fundamental elements that somehow or other have the capacity to combine together to yield consciousness, just as it contains some fundamental

elements that somehow or other have the capacity to combine together to yield every other derivative, existing thing, such as chicken salt or the Promenade des Anglais. Perhaps this modest kind of world-view is deniable in principle but it is a long way from panpsychism.

Lying behind this disagreement about whether physicalism entails panpsychism is another disagreement, or to put it more accurately, a suspicion I had that Strawson has not given a proper account of the relation between two different ideas in the paper. One idea is that consciousness in some form or other is fundamental (i.e. not derivative on anything else); if correct, this entails that the only world-views that could possibly be right are classical dualism, panpsychism or idealism—positions that entail it is fundamental. The other idea is to reject the widespread assumption that we know exactly what the physical is, if not in detail then in outline.

Strawson wants, if I understand him correctly, to combine these two ideas together, suggesting that if we don't know something important about the physical, we can't rule out it includes fundamental consciousness. The problem with this, as I tried to bring out in my commentary, is that the two ideas are in significant tension. It is not that there is any logical problem in conjoining them. It is rather that, if it is really true that we are ignorant of some relevant features of the physical world, we lose whatever reason we had to endorse the fundamentality of consciousness in the first place. To put it another way, Strawson underestimates underestimation: he misses the radical consequences of the view that we underestimate the physical. In principle you can combine that view with the claim that consciousness is fundamental, but there is no philosophical point in doing so.

In this follow-up commentary I thought I would step back from these specific criticisms and ask Strawson a question that I am sure he has heard before, but which seems to me to become prominent when you bring out the tensions in his 2006 paper in the way I tried to do. The question concerns, not Strawson's attitude to physicalism and what it entails, but rather his contrasting attitude to two issues: consciousness, which is of course the main topic of 'Realistic Monism', and free will, something on which he has written extensively; see., e.g., (Strawson 1986, 2002, 2018).

The contrast I have in mind is this. Regarding consciousness, Strawson is extremely hardboiled about the view that consciousness does not exist. He says it is the "greatest woo-woo of the human mind" (Strawson 2006), and elsewhere "the silliest claim" (Strawson 2018). I'm not sure I would initiate this language myself, but I do agree with the sentiment.

But let's consider the parallel position on free will. Just as there are people who deny consciousness, there are people who deny free will. For my part, I regard this as just as

implausible as the denial of consciousness. When people say that free will doesn't exist, I don't believe them. In fact, I don't think even they believe it, though they may believe they believe it. If we compare the likelihood of what they are saying with the likelihood that they are confused or mistaken or imagining things, the answer I think is quite clear.

However, while the denial of free will seems to me just as implausible as the denial of consciousness, this is not how it seems to Strawson. He thinks free will doesn't exist; it is "provably impossible" (2018, p. 97). The options that confront us when we think about free will, he thinks, are well understood, and when we consider them dispassionately, the only acceptable one is to deny free will. Of course, Strawson agrees that it seems to us that we are free—that is a psychological fact. It is just that in reality we are not.

So the question is this: what if anything justifies this asymmetry of attitude? How can Strawson (or anyone) say it is a woo-woo to deny consciousness but not a woo-woo to deny free will?

Before trying to answer this question directly, it is worth reminding ourselves of some of the grand figures. One is Emil Du Bois-Reymond, recently described as the "the most important forgotten intellectual of the 19th century" (Finkelstein 2013); see also (Bois-Reymond 1886, 1886a). Du Bois-Reymond's overall position is in outline similar to Strawson's. He says, as regards consciousness or sensation, that while there is nothing in 19th century science that can explain it, it doesn't follow that there is nothing at all that can explain it; all that follows is that we are ignorant of the explanation and will remain so to the extent that we remain confined to the epistemological framework of 19th century science—"ignoramus et ignorabimus", in Du Bois-Reymond's memorable phrase. As regards free will, however, which he lists along with consciousness as one of the seven biggest problems confronting science and philosophy, Du Bois-Reymond takes a different view. In this case, as in the case of consciousness, there is nothing in 19th century science that could explain it. But here Du Bois-Reymond concludes that free will doesn't exist. Not only is there nothing known that could explain it, there is nothing that could explain it all.

An even grander figure is Noam Chomsky. Chomsky doesn't discuss consciousness in quite the way that Strawson or Du Bois-Reymond do, but it is natural to read into what he says on related topics a position that in general terms is similar; see, e.g. (Chomsky 2016). What about free will? Here Chomsky takes a position very different from Strawson and Du Bois-Reymond. For him free will exists (Chomsky 1988). Indeed, its existence, he thinks, is completely undeniable; giving it up is not a psychological option, but it is not an epistemological option either.

Is Chomsky therefore a compatibilist in the sense that, e.g., Dennett (e.g. 2021) or Sartorio (e.g. Kane and Sartorio 2022) are compatibilists? No; Chomsky thinks the existence of free will is incompatible with determinism, which we may assume to be the thesis that every actual event is determined, i.e., necessitated by the past and the laws. But he also thinks it is incompatible with the thesis that most people move to when they deny determinism, namely, that every actual event is either determined or random. What Chomsky thinks instead is that these theses don't exhaust the options. It is true, in fact it is a logical truth, that every event is either determined or not determined. But it is not true, and it is certainly not a logical truth, that every event is either determined or random. Some events are neither determined nor random; among these are the free actions.

Chomsky doesn't think we can easily understand what these events are. On the contrary, not only does he say we can't at present understand what they are, it is a real possibility we will never do so; if so, the situation here too is one of *ignoramus et ignorabimus*. But none of this, he thinks, undermines the reality of free will.

Whatever else we may say about it, Chomsky's attitude has the attractions of uniformity, while that of du Bois-Reymond and Strawson does not. What then justifies their asymmetrical position, or, if set aside our colleague from the 19th century, what justifies Strawson's?

One answer to this question is the noble one: this is where the argument leads. In other words, Strawson may insist that there is an argument that leads decisively against free will but there is no similar argument in the case of consciousness.

Now Strawson does indeed have a distinctive argument against free will. It is contained in several of his works but comes out most clearly for me in "Luck Swallows Everything", reprinted in (Strawson 2018). The leading idea is that you are free, and so responsible for what you do, only if you are responsible for the way you are; but since you are not responsible for that, you are not free. In premise and conclusion form, the reasoning is something like this:

P1. You do what you do because of the way you are. [Presumed fact]

C1. You are responsible for what you do only if you are responsible for the way you are.

[From P1]

P2. You are not responsible for the way you are. [Presumed fact]

C2. You are not responsible for what you do (and so are not free). [From C1 and P2]

I think there are several questionable features of this argument. For one thing, P1 as stated is subject to counterexample. Suppose mild Mildred swears at her neighbour. Clearly her behaviour is out of character. “That’s not the way I am” Mildred might remorsefully say afterwards. In this case, there is something Mildred did, namely swear at her neighbour; in normal circumstances we would describe this as something she did freely, and something for which she can be held responsible. Nevertheless, she did not do it because of the way she is; on the contrary she did it in spite of the way she is.

Strawson might reply that the phrase ‘the way you are’ is not to be understood as limited to somebody’s character, something that may or may not be reflected in their action. Such phrases are certainly slippery; in context, they could attribute almost any property at all. Let us therefore read P1 in a more general way, as follows: you do what you because you have some property, any property, which explains what you do. Now the premise is unlikely to be subject to counterexample. But the argument remains unpersuasive since, if we understand P1 in that way, both the inference from P1 to C1 and C1 itself look very implausible.

For C1 now entails that you are responsible for doing what you did only if you are responsible for having the property, whatever it is, that explains what you did. That is an eminently deniable claim. For example, the property that explains what Mildred did might be incredibly complicated, including all manner of features of her constitution and history, things neither she nor anyone else has any inkling of. Is she responsible for having that property? Surely not. Yet she remains, as she herself may well agree, responsible for swearing at her neighbour. If so, we should reject C1, and moreover reject that it follows from the first premise of the argument.

There is also a different way to bring out the problem for C1. Suppose for the sake of argument I am a free agent. If so, I am responsible for what I do, at any rate for what I do freely; that is what it means to be free. But more than this, being free is surely part of ‘what I am’ in any reasonable sense; being free if you are free isn’t just some arbitrary property, it is built into your nature. Am I therefore responsible for being a free agent? Certainly not. I was born this way, to echo both Rousseau and Lady Gaga. If anybody (or anything) is responsible for my being a free agent, it is certainly not me. Hence we again have a good reason to reject C1: I am responsible for what I do (since I am free) but am not responsible for what I am.

I don’t mean these brief remarks about Strawson’s subtle argument to constitute any quick refutation. What I do think, though, is that they motivate an attitude to this and similar arguments that I would argue is the correct one, namely, that since the conclusion is so

implausible—since it leads, as we might say, to one of the greatest woo woos of the human mind—there must be a flaw in the reasoning somewhere, even if it is a challenge to say exactly where, and even if in this particular case I am mistaken to be so suspicious of the phrase ‘the way you are’.

I asked above why Strawson defends his asymmetrical position. One answer we have just been considering is that this is where the argument leads. But we may take the question in a slightly different way, in which what is at issue is not so much what philosophical or scientific arguments lead Strawson to hold his view, but why he finds it a rational position in the first place. I suspect the reason is again that he underestimates underestimation, i.e., he has not quite appreciated how claims about ignorance cast a shadow over all these issues.

As regards his 2006 paper, as I said, this lack of appreciation comes out in the argument that physicalism entails panpsychism, and in the attachment to the view that consciousness is fundamental. In the case of free will, I think it comes out in the view that, if you reject determinism, you must be committed to the view that every event is either determined or random. It is certainly plausible that *if* that is the only way to deny determinism, free will would be provably impossible; it would then be incompatible both with the truth of determinism and with its falsity. On the other hand, to assume that this is our only option if we deny determinism is to underestimate the world—not so much its physical nature, as in the case of consciousness, but its dynamics: it is to underestimate the forms that indeterminacy can take.

So it seems to me that, in both his work on consciousness and on free will, Strawson underestimates the world, or at least underestimates the significance of doing so. If you underestimate the world, and if you correlatively overestimate your level of insight into the world, you will almost inevitably think there is no place in it either for consciousness or free will. In turn, you will almost inevitably adopt either fundamentalism or eliminativism with respect to both. Having arrived at this crucial choice point, it may be that there are reasons to follow Strawson in going one way in one case, and the other way in the other case. Perhaps, for example, appeals to fundamentality don’t work in the case of free will; or perhaps appeals to intrinsic features of matter have more force in the case of consciousness; or perhaps the argument above about ‘what you are’ can avoid the objections I raised. Perhaps; but the more important thing is that you should never have arrived at this choice point in first place. The way to avoid doing so is to not underestimate the world.

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