

Institution: University of Reading
Unit of Assessment: 32 Philosophy
Title of case study: Stimulating popular debate around philosophy of mind and its ethical implications
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Prof. Galen Strawson has developed ideas challenging our central conceptions of the self, freedom, agency, responsibility, and the nature of mental life. The impact of his research at the University of Reading has been a continuing one on cultural life and civil society, helping to shape the views of people outside the academy on these most important aspects of our thought about ourselves. Very unusually for an academic philosopher, Strawson has made significant contributions to popular debate on philosophy of mind, in particular free will and consciousness, and its implications for ethical thinking. This impact includes contributions on national and international radio, television, newspapers and blogs. Through these means, Strawson's radical thinking about subjectivity, the mind, personal identity, free will, and moral responsibility has had a direct impact on non-academic opinion and stimulated lively debate as a result.</p> <p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The unifying theme of the research is the experience of human beings in the thick of life: their sense of themselves, their agency, freedom, and responsibility, their moral sense, their conception of how their lives are developing. In the background stand Socrates' ethical questions: How should we live? How should we live well?</p> <p>Among Strawson's principal influences are Hume and William James. Other important sources are the ethical writings of Nietzsche and Montaigne. He also draws regularly on current empirical work in experimental and clinical psychology, on 'life-writing' and literary sources.</p> <p>The research underpinning the impacts of Strawson's work on non-academic opinion falls under five main headings: consciousness; free will; the self; personal identity; and the notion of narrative. All these topics interconnect; all are of recurrent interest to the wider community; passions can run high. Strawson has published work on all these questions, and has discussed them on radio (BBC4, CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation), NPR (US National Public Radio)) and on television (US PBS), in newspapers, in public debates, in podcasts, and in online videos.</p> <p>Consciousness: The main drive of the work on consciousness is to combat reductive approaches: to show, for example, that there is no conflict between materialism, properly understood, and full acknowledgement of the reality and overwhelming importance of consciousness. Of particular relevance here is Strawson's vigorous defence of the reality of subjectivity and the impossibility of explaining it in narrowly physicalistic terms. Rather, he questions whether we know enough about the nature of matter to be confident that physics alone, at least as currently understood, can account for the emergence of consciousness.</p> <p>Free will: There is intense debate in the public sphere about the notion of free will and about whether it is threatened by scientific advances, particularly advances in brain science. Strawson's main work here is to cast doubt on one popular but overly strong conception of free will, and at the same time to show that scientific advances pose no threat to any viable notion of free will. Here, the focus is on moral responsibility, where Strawson challenges the commonly held belief that we can be truly morally responsible for our actions, in the strong sense of being the ultimate cause of the mental states in virtue of which those actions are ours.</p> <p>The self, personal identity, and narrativity: these three topics are particularly closely connected. There are two highly influential views worth mentioning. The first is that normal people experience or conceive of their lives and themselves in a 'narrative' way, and in some manner live in and through this conception; the second is that people ought to live in this way. Strawson has questioned both these claims, arguing that they're not true for everyone, and can even be damaging for some.</p>
<p>2. References to the research</p> <p>The research has been externally peer-reviewed and assessed to be of at least 2* quality.</p>

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Books:

1. *Mental Reality*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010

Articles:

2. 'The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility', revised and reprinted in his *Real Materialism and other Essays*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008.
3. 'Against Narrativity', originally published in *Ratio* 16 (2004): 428-52; revised and reprinted in his *Real Materialism and other Essays*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008.
4. 'Narrativity and Non-Narrativity' in *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Cognitive Science* 1 (2010): 775-80
5. 'Real Materialism', in L. Antony and N. Hornstein (eds), *Chomsky and his Critics*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2003: 49-88; revised and reprinted in his *Real Materialism and other Essays*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008.
6. 'Realistic Monism: Why Physicalism Entails Panpsychism', in A. Freeman (ed.), *Consciousness and its Place in Nature*, Thorverton: Imprint Academic, 2006: 3-31; revised and reprinted in his *Real Materialism and other Essays*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008.

4. Details of the impact

It is notoriously rare for academic philosophers to have their research discussed outside academia. There are quite a number of professional philosophers who make a career as popularisers of the views of others; many non-academics are familiar with such people. But for a philosopher to have their own original research discussed, repeatedly and at length, outside academia, in the 'public square', is uncommon. Strawson's own research is rigorous and original. His views are sometimes radical, challenging our preconceptions about such topics as free will, consciousness, personal identity, and moral responsibility.

This has stimulated non-academics to question their assumptions and to engage in debate with each other about Strawson's theories. The impact is direct and continuing, significant in its reach, and clearly a prime example of how philosophy, done at its best, can influence public opinion. What is especially noteworthy is that so much of Strawson's impact derives from his *theoretical* rather than ethical research, though the former has ethical implications. In philosophy, it is nearly always ethicists who, for obvious reasons, have the most impact. Strawson's case is unusual and important in this regard.

Strawson's research, embodied in monographs and articles on the topics listed above, has been disseminated directly by Strawson and through third parties. Examples of direct dissemination through non-academic channels include Strawson's popular presentation of his own original research in his enormously popular *New York Times* opinion piece, 'Your Move: The Maze of Free will' (2010) (<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/07/22/your-move-the-maze-of-free-will/>) and his appearances on radio and television, presenting and discussing his ideas, such as his participation in the 500th episode of the BBC Radio 4 programme of ideas, *In Our Time* (2011, weekly audience of 2 million) discussing free will with two other philosophers. Comments on the programme can be found at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/features/in-our-time/comments/b00z5y9z/>, with a commentary by the host, Melvyn Bragg, at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/features/in-our-time/newsletter/b00z5y9z/>. Strawson has also appeared on television in the US (PBS, 2012, and NPR, 2010) and Canada (CBC, 2010).

Strawson's research is also widely disseminated and discussed by non-academics on Internet blogs. For example, Strawson's article 'Against Narrativity' was the subject of a 2011 blog post, with follow-up discussion: (<http://whoistheabsurdman.blogspot.com/2011/01/living-episodic-life.html>). In another instance, a non-academic posts a discussion of, and is clearly persuaded by, Strawson's research in philosophy of mind: <http://integral-options.blogspot.com/2010/04/toward-science-of-consciousness-galen.html> (2010). At <http://guidetoreality.blogspot.com/2006/04/thank-you-galen-strawson.html>, a non-academic blogger explicitly thanks Strawson for persuading him of the truth of panexperientialism, of which Strawson is the leading exponent. (Originally posted 2006 but updated 2009.)

Strawson's work has also been promoted and stimulated debate through online video clips. For example, there are a number of YouTube videos in which non-academics, or Strawson himself,

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present and discuss his research. At <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kBUrkd4f1s> a non-academic discusses Strawson on free will (420+ views), and at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CtDgCQ5vehE> Strawson presents his views on the self (1,380+ views). In the YouTube video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYUZWyAY9Lw> (2009), someone who is not a professional academic (though evidently educated in philosophy) presents Strawson's research on moral responsibility to a lay public, generating discussion.

(In all cases the content, context, or what the authors/discussants say about themselves in their profiles, suggests that these are non-academics responding to Strawson's work.)

While these instances give a general indication of interest in and engagement with Strawson's research beyond academia, two more-detailed examples will serve to illustrate the nature and extent of the debates that Strawson's work has fuelled in the public arena:

Example 1: Strawson on the narrative conception of personal identity.

Strawson argues against the popular view, defended increasingly within professional philosophy by narrative theories of identity, that people construct their identities over time by means of a narrative of their lives that continually builds on past experiences. The narrative takes on a certain shape peculiar to each individual. The normative claim often associated with this descriptive claim is that we ought to live our lives as if they were ongoing narratives.

Strawson subjects narrativity to sustained criticism in his 2004 *Ratio* article, revised and reprinted in his widely-discussed collection of essays, *Real Materialism* (2008). This article is read and discussed at length in the blog referred to above, where non-academic bloggers outline Strawson's case and express reasons for agreement with it. There follow comments by readers of the blog, some agreeing and others disagreeing. Some praise the more episodic conception of personal identity championed by Strawson and the freedom he thinks it entails. Others warn of the dangers of living life as if it were a series of episodes. Clearly these are non-academics engaging directly with Strawson's research, not merely agreeing or disagreeing but explaining it to each other, finding good and bad points in the argument, and subjecting Strawson to some decent non-academic evaluation. (Strawson himself has received a considerable number of private communications from people who do not fit the narrative mould, thanking him for developing and defending the non-narrative position.)

Example 2: Strawson on free will and moral responsibility.

Strawson's original 1994 paper 'The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility' was revised, updated, and published in *Real Materialism* (2008) as 'The Impossibility of Ultimate Moral Responsibility'. This paper has generated an enormous amount of debate both within and without academia. The research was presented by Strawson in popular form in 2010, as a *New York Times* opinion piece. The public response was massive (for a piece by a philosopher) – over 600 comments, with people agreeing, disagreeing, or just commenting on Strawson's belief that ultimate moral responsibility is impossible. This on its own is an extraordinary example of impact.

Commenters on the *New York Times* site defended or disputed various premises in Strawson's argument. Many focused on the key idea that we cannot be ultimately responsible for the way we are. Others wondered about a world in which free will was an illusion, or something other than what most people think it needs to be for there to be ultimate moral responsibility.

Bloggers on other sites, such as <http://www.thewarfareismental.net/b/2011/04/01/on-galen-strawsons-basic-argument/>, explain and discuss Strawson's views (with over 100 comments on this site alone). On <http://blip.tv/exploring-the-illusion-of-free-will/28-galen-strawson-s-nothing-can-be-causa-sui-refutation-of-free-will-5539216>, George Ortega has produced a series of videos on free will, including an episode devoted to Strawson. (He also produces TV shows and other videos on sundry philosophical topics.) Clearly, Strawson's impact on non-academics is significant and ongoing.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Public discussion of Strawson's research by non-academics, via the channels outlined above.
BBC Radio 4, *In Our Time* (2011)
http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b00z5y9z/In_Our_Time_Free_Will/

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Contact details are provided for the following:

- Managing Editor, New York Times (The impact of Strawson's Opinionator piece on free will)
- Producer, In Our Time, BBC (Impact of Strawson's appearance on In Our Time, programme on free will)
- Creator, Writer, and Host of *Closer to Truth* TV series, PBS (Impact of Strawson's series on consciousness and panpsychism)
- Author, broadcaster and blogger, Philosophy Bites podcast (Impact of Strawson's podcasts on the self and on panpsychism)
- Organizer, London Philosophy Club (Impact of Strawson's talk at the London Philosophy Club (Sept. 19th, 2013) on consciousness and panpsychism)