

Introduction to Strawson:

Think about the concept of moral responsibility:

Is it a concept of a natural kind? No. It is a socially-constructed notion.

How do socially-constructed conceptions get their content/definitions?

Examples: what counts as feminine, what counts as democracy.

Strawson will give us an analysis of what MR means in contemporary Western culture, and he will assume that the definition comes from the way the concept is commonly used.

But, more than that, his general philosophical stance is that there can never be any solid theoretical grounds for challenging the common usage of a socially-constructed concept. The general idea is that if you claim that common ways such a concept is used are based on a mistake, you are in effect claiming that the concept is not defined properly. But since the concept is defined by the way it is commonly used, you have no standing to challenge the definition or the way it is commonly used. The job of the philosopher is to analyze and clarify, not to change or challenge, philosophically important concepts.

His analysis of our common use of the concept of MR shows that theoretical worries about determinism are irrelevant.

Things to focus on when reading–

What is the analysis he offers for the concept of MR? Is it adequate?

Is his argument sound when he claims that no theoretical reasons challenging the legitimacy of MR can be legitimate?

(By the way, if you understand his argument in the way outlined above, you will have a better understanding than most contemporary professional philosophers. Most commentators on Strawson today don't really understand where he's coming from. They think he's just saying that we are so reliant on the notion of MR that we will never give it up. That interpretation of Strawson is far too weak, for it makes his argument into a prediction about social trends. I'm convinced his argument is not accurately represented in that way. Rather, the argument is about how socially-constructed concepts are defined by the way they are used.)