

# Responsibility and the Limits of Evil

Variations on a Strawsonian  
Theme

# Traditional Theory of Moral Responsibility Defined

- ◆ *Traditional theories of moral responsibility* hold that reactive attitudes are connected with holding one another responsible
- ◆ Traditionalists believe that these attitudes are “emotional side-effects” to independent theories of responsibility
  - ❖ The reactive attitudes are secondary to seeing others as responsible

# Basic Overview of Strawson's "Expressive Theory"

- ◆ There is no independent theory of responsibility governing reactive attitudes
- ◆ To regard others as responsible is just being *prone* to express our concerns and demands about the treatment of others (reactive attitudes)
- ◆ Reactive attitudes are constitutive of moral responsibility

# Reactive Attitudes Defined

**Reactive Attitudes:** human reactions to the treatment of people as displayed in attitudes and actions (pg. 222)

**Examples:** gratitude and resentment, indignation, guilt, shame, (some kinds of) pride, hurt feelings, forgiveness, and (some kinds of) love (pg. 220)



# 3 Types of Reactive Attitudes

- ◆ Personal Reactive Attitudes

- ❖ Regarding others' treatment of yourself

- ◆ Vicarious Reactive Attitudes

- ❖ Regarding others' treatments of others

- ◆ Self-Reactive Attitudes

- ❖ Regarding your own treatment of others (and yourself)

# Consequentialism Defined

- ◆ **Consequentialism:** the consequences of an action form the basis for any moral judgment of that action.
  - ❖ i.e., a morally wrong action produces a bad outcome
- ◆ Used as a form of social regulation
- ◆ Consequentialism is a compatibilist theory



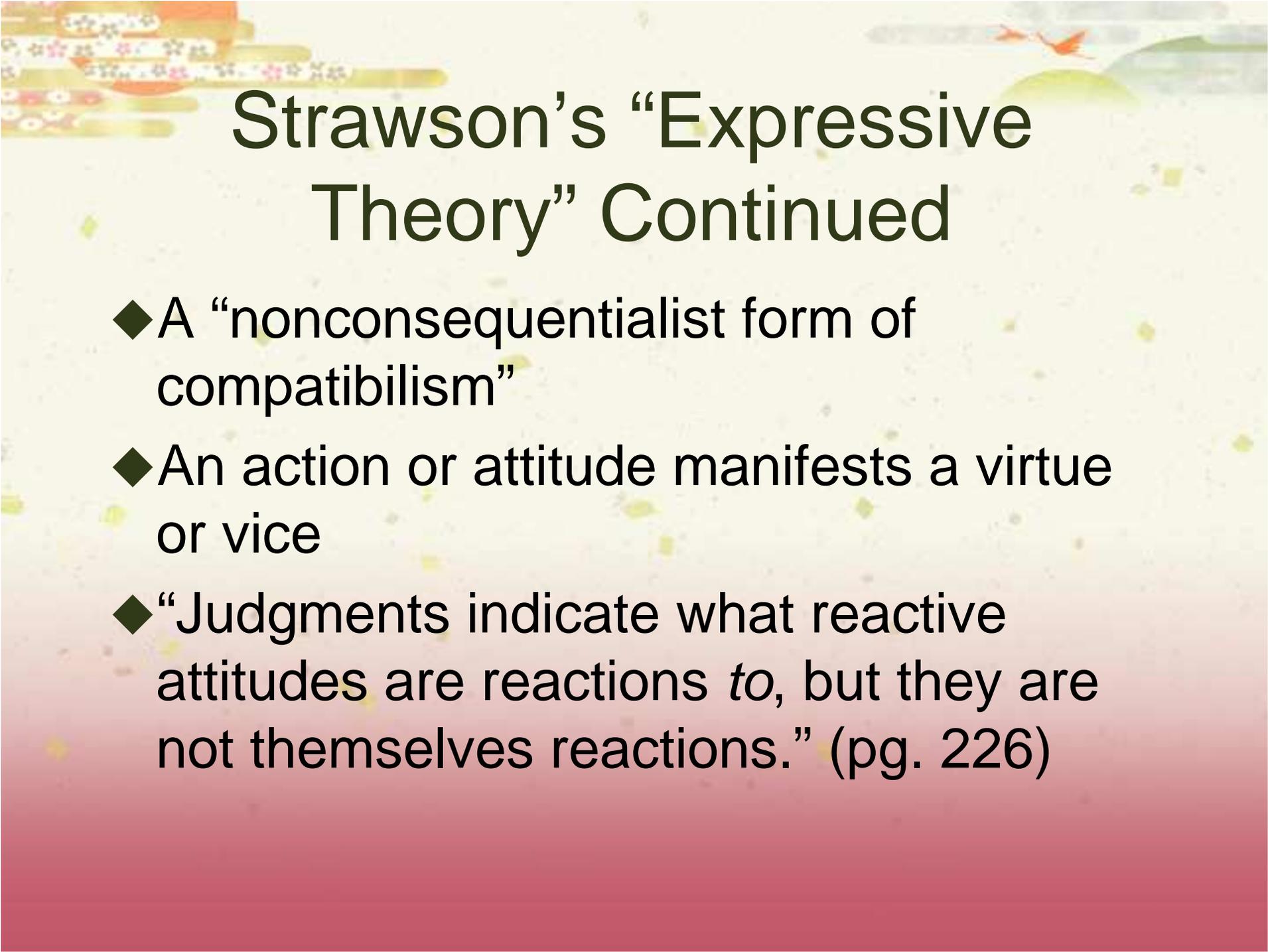
# Libertarianism Defined

- ◆ **Libertarianism:** people are the absolute owners of their lives; they have metaphysical freedom.
- ◆ Brings in “vital thing” to human agency
  - ❖ Human choice based on sense of self
- ◆ Libertarianism is an incompatibilist theory



# Independent Notions

- ◆ **Consequentialism:** blaming and praising judgments and acts are to be understood, and justified, as social regulation
- ◆ **Libertarianism:** embracing a metaphysical freedom of human agency



# Strawson's "Expressive Theory" Continued

- ◆ A “nonconsequentialist form of compatibilism”
- ◆ An action or attitude manifests a virtue or vice
- ◆ “Judgments indicate what reactive attitudes are reactions *to*, but they are not themselves reactions.” (pg. 226)

# Strawson's Expressive Theory Continued (again)

- ◆ Strawson's view has no independent notion of responsibility (unlike consequentialism and libertarianism):
- ◆ “It is not that we hold people responsible because they *are* responsible; rather, the idea (*our* idea) that we are responsible is to be understood by the practice, which itself is not a matter of holding some propositions to be true, but of expressing our concerns and demands about our treatment of one another” (pg. 222).

# Interpreting Reactive Attitudes

- ◆ Strawson believes that reactive attitudes have no rationale-- they neither require nor permit a rational justification, but--
- ◆ He also claims that reactive attitudes do have internal criteria (pg. 223)
  - ◆ They are reactions based upon an interpretation of conduct

# Moral Demands

- ◆ “The basic demand is a moral demand, a demand for reasonable regard, a demand addressed to a moral agent, to one who is capable of understanding the demand” (pg 229-230)
- ◆ Reactive attitudes are like a language-- to communicate, both people have to understand the language.

# Strawson's Crowd Example

- ◆ If you feel resentful when pushed in a crowd, you will see the behavior of others in the crowd as being rude, disrespectful, etc.
  - ◆ Your resentment might be inhibited if you're too tired, or busy, or fearful (causal inhibitors) -OR- you might think the other was pushed or didn't mean to get in your way.
- ◆ **Can you think of any other situations where your reactions could be influenced by outside factors other than the actual action?**

# Type 1 Pleas

- ◆ Excusing Conditions
- ◆ Does not deserve a negative reactive attitude because although it appears as though she has failed to fulfill the basic demand-- she has not satisfied the internal criteria for a negative reactive attitude.

# Examples of Type 1 Pleas

- ◆ **Excuse:** “Officer, I didn’t know I was speeding and driving aggressively...”
- ◆ **Justification:** “I’m sorry officer for speeding and cutting people off, but my wife is in labor!”
  - ◆ “An excuse shows that *one* was not to blame, whereas a justification shows that one was not to *blame.*” (pg. 224)

# Type 2 Pleas

- ◆ Exempting Conditions
- ◆ The agent is, temporarily or permanently, globally or locally, exempt from the basic demand
- ◆ To be exempt is to be:
  - ◆ Not acting like yourself due to extraordinary circumstances
  - ◆ Psychologically abnormal
  - ◆ Morally undeveloped





# Examples of Type 2 Pleas

- ◆ Being a sociopath (a moral idiot)
- ◆ Being a child (morally undeveloped)
- ◆ Being under great strain
- ◆ Being “unfortunate in formative circumstances”\* (pg. 224)
  
- ◆ Not members of the moral community

# To Sum Up Strawson's "Pleas"

- ◆ **Type 1 Pleas** bear upon whether the basic demand has been met.
  - ◆ These pleas inhibit negative reactive attitudes because they show that their internal criteria are not satisfied (pg. 225)
- ◆ **Type 2 Pleas** inhibit reactive attitudes because they inhibit the demand those attitudes express
  - ◆ Incorporates Strawson's Objective View: Individuals are not resented or esteemed, but as ones to be controlled, managed, manipulated, etc. (pg 225)
    - ◆ The objective view does not preclude all emotions.

# Strawson's Objective View

- ◆ We have an ability to objectively view agents, whether they are psychologically abnormal or capable
  - ❖ We can take the objective view with capable agents for therapeutic relationships or to relieve the “strains of involvement”



# Discussion Question

- ◆ In considering people who are psychologically abnormal/ morally undeveloped, since they are not morally responsible, would their parents/guardians then be held responsible or worthy of bearing the negative reactive attitudes?
- ◆ If not, who would be held responsible?

# Blaming and Finding Fault

- ◆ Blaming is not merely fault-finding, it also includes a range of reactive attitudes to the agent on the basis of the fault-finding appraisal.
- ◆ This appraisal is constitutive of the practice of holding someone responsible (pg. 227)

# Demanding and Understanding

- ◆ Children may lack an understanding of the effects of their behaviors on others
  - ❖ They may understand what it is to hurt somebody physically, however they might not understand what it is to hurt someone's feelings.
  - ❖ Even when these things are mastered, they may “lack the notion of reasonable regard” (or justification) (pg.229)
- ◆ The moral demand is a demand for reasonable regard assuming that the agent is able to comprehend this regard.

# Demanding and Understanding Continued

- ◆ Blaming and praising those with a lack of moral understanding seems to lose its “point”
  - ❖ “smacks of consequentialism” because it implies the “point” of blame/praise is inherent in communicating “resentment.”
- ◆ Example: A kid reading his sister’s diary-- lacks moral understanding of “privacy”
  - ❖ **Any other examples you can think of?**
  - ❖ (Inflicting physical vs. emotional pain)

# Strawson's take on Understanding

- ◆ The reactive attitudes lose their point as forms of moral address because the child doesn't understand the demand that is behind the "resentment," et al.
  - ❖ Strawson finds that the most appropriate and direct way of expressing "resentment" is to address the agent with a complaint and a demand. (pg. 230)
- ◆ Ex. "You shouldn't invade your sister's privacy. Don't do it again."

# Discussion Question

- ◆ Watson himself doubts that diminished moral understanding is the only relevant factor for exempting an agent from moral responsibility.
- ◆ What other factors besides diminished moral understanding would exempt an agent from moral responsibility?
  - ❖ According to Watson: “Capacities of concentration”/ “volitional control” (pg. 230)

# Acting Uncharacteristically 1

- ◆ We sometimes reinterpret people's behavior based on extraordinary circumstances
  - ❖ However, unlike type 1 pleas, this interpretation doesn't contradict the *judgment* that the agent treated you rudely, rather it provides an *explanation* for the behavior

# Acting Uncharacteristically 2

- ◆ “We shall not feel resentment against the man he *is* for the action done by the man he is *not*; or at least we shall feel less.” (pg. 231)
- ◆ In his “true self,” the agent receiving the negative reaction would repudiate (or not endorse) his “uncharacteristic” behavior.
- ◆ Ex: Sleep-deprived Sally regretted making a mean comment to her roommate once she took a nap. Sally’s “true self” doesn’t endorse nasty comments.

# Watson's Problems with "Acting Uncharacteristically"

- ◆ "Why are our responses under stress not reflections of our moral selves-- namely, reflections of the moral self under stress?" (pg 233)
- ◆ **What do you think?** We are "unable to take up here," as it is "exceedingly sketchy."

# To Sum Up:

- ◆ Two conditions necessary to garner a negative reactive attitude:
  1. Target of the attitudes has a full moral self
  2. The conduct in question reflects that moral self
- ◆ (pg. 232)

# Evil and The Moral Community

- ◆ Watson does not want to make compliance with the basic demand a condition of moral understanding.
  - ❖ Ex. Children “comply,” but often without full moral understanding.
- ◆ In order to be subject to negative reactive attitudes, a willful rejection of the basic demand is required.
  - ❖ Strawson: willful rejection of the basic demand requires an understanding of the basic demand (pg. 234)

# Evil and Moral Community Continued

- ◆ Strawson believes that a morally responsible agent is a member of the moral community.
- ◆ Watson, however, asks: “Can we be in a moral community with those who reject the basic terms of moral community?” (pg 234)
- ◆ Paradox! Extreme evil disqualifies one from blame.

# The Case of Robert Harris

- ◆ Death row inmates anxiously looked forward to the execution of one of their own, Robert Harris. Why?
- ◆ Harris and his brother stole a car (complete with two teenage boys) for a future bank robbery they would commit.
- ◆ After reassuring the boys that they would not get hurt, Harris shot the two in cold blood.
- ◆ Following the murders, Harris showed no remorse and proceeded to eat the boys' lunch casually.





# Robert Harris Continued

- ◆ While in prison, “he acted like a man who did not care about anything.”
- ◆ His sister described Harris’s eyes as “the eyes of a killer”-- there was nothing but meanness in them.
  - ❖ “He told me he had his chance, he took the road to hell and there’s nothing more to say.” (pg 238)
- ◆ One of Harris’s fellow inmates said: “You don’t want to deal with him out there, we don’t want to deal with him in here.”

# Can We Blame Harris? (1)

- ◆ At first glance, Harris is an “archetypal candidate” for blame.
- ◆ Our initial response is moral outrage
- ◆ However, if reactive attitudes were “invitations to dialogue” (between moral interlocutors), then Harris would not be an appropriate object of such attitudes--
  - ❖ He declares himself to be a moral outlaw.
    - ◆ Is he beyond or at the limit of the moral community?

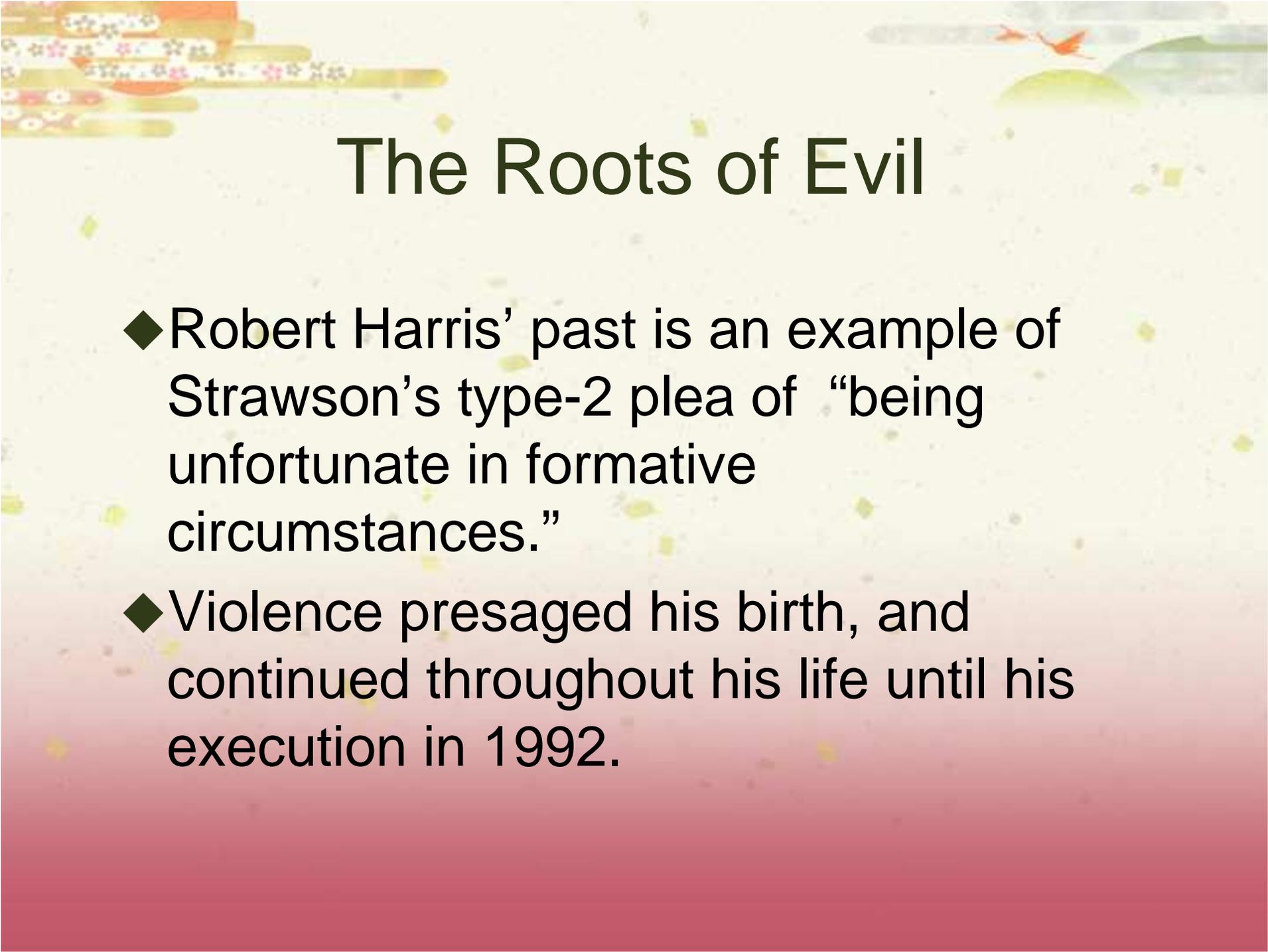
# Can We Blame Harris? (2)

- ◆ He exhibits an “inversion” of moral concern, not a lack of understanding.
  - ❖ “His ears are not deaf, but his heart is frozen” (pg 239)
- ◆ This “inversion” of moral concern *intensifies* rather than *inhibits* reactive attitudes
  - ❖ His form of evil consists in part of being beyond the boundaries of the moral community



# Examples of “Evil”

- ◆ Can you think of other archetypes of evil? That is, individuals who understand moral demands but disregard them.
- ◆ Does one who acts contrary to moral demands but does not understand them deserve the same reactive attitude as one who comprehends the moral demands?

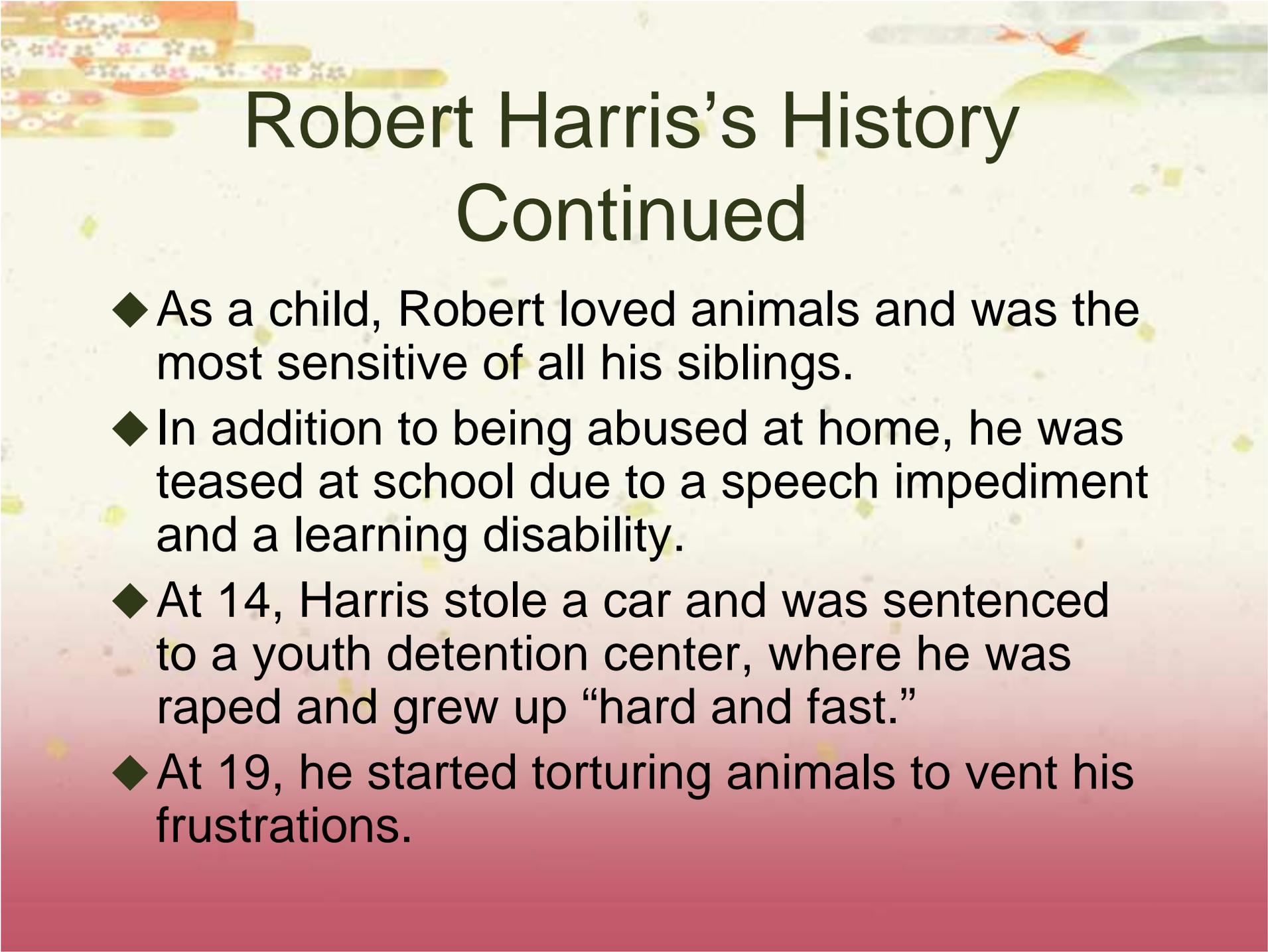


# The Roots of Evil

- ◆ Robert Harris' past is an example of Strawson's type-2 plea of "being unfortunate in formative circumstances."
- ◆ Violence presaged his birth, and continued throughout his life until his execution in 1992.

# Robert Harris's History

- ◆ Robert Harris was born prematurely when his father kicked his pregnant mother due to his insane jealousy.
- ◆ The first thing his father said upon his birth was, "Who is the father of that bastard?"
- ◆ Because of the unfortunate circumstances of his birth, his mother began blaming her problems on him, and "she grew to hate the child."



# Robert Harris's History Continued

- ◆ As a child, Robert loved animals and was the most sensitive of all his siblings.
- ◆ In addition to being abused at home, he was teased at school due to a speech impediment and a learning disability.
- ◆ At 14, Harris stole a car and was sentenced to a youth detention center, where he was raped and grew up “hard and fast.”
- ◆ At 19, he started torturing animals to vent his frustrations.



# Reinterpreting Reactive Attitudes

- ◆ His sister said that if she did not know her brother's past so intimately, she would support his execution without hesitation.
- ◆ How does Harris's background affect our reactive attitudes and why?



# Discussion Questions

- ◆ Would the intensity of your reactive attitude change depending on your proximity to (or investment in) the situation?
- ◆ How do reactive attitudes differ, if at all, between a fictional situation and a real situation?

# The Expressive Theory Applied

- ◆ Robert Harris's history does not undermine judgments that he is "brutal, vicious, heartless, mean." (pg. 242)
  - ❖ Although, as Watson points out, we are less inclined to use such reactive epithets such as "scumbag."
- ◆ His history provides an explanation for why he is the way he is.

# The Expressive Theory Applied (again)

- ◆ Can the expressive theory explain why reactive attitudes should be sensitive to such an explanation?
- ◆ Watson claims that exempting Harris on the grounds of the type-2 plea of “being incapacitated for ordinary interpersonal relationships” is problematic.
  - ❖ Then everyone who is evil in Harris’s way will be exempt from the moral demand regardless of their histories.

# History: Compatibilism vs. Incompatibilism

- ◆ For the compatibilist, to be responsible, the emphasis is on who you are, not how you came to be.
- ◆ For incompatibilists, there is a historical dimension to responsibility.
  - ❖ Seeing someone as a product is inconsistent with seeing him as a responsible agent.

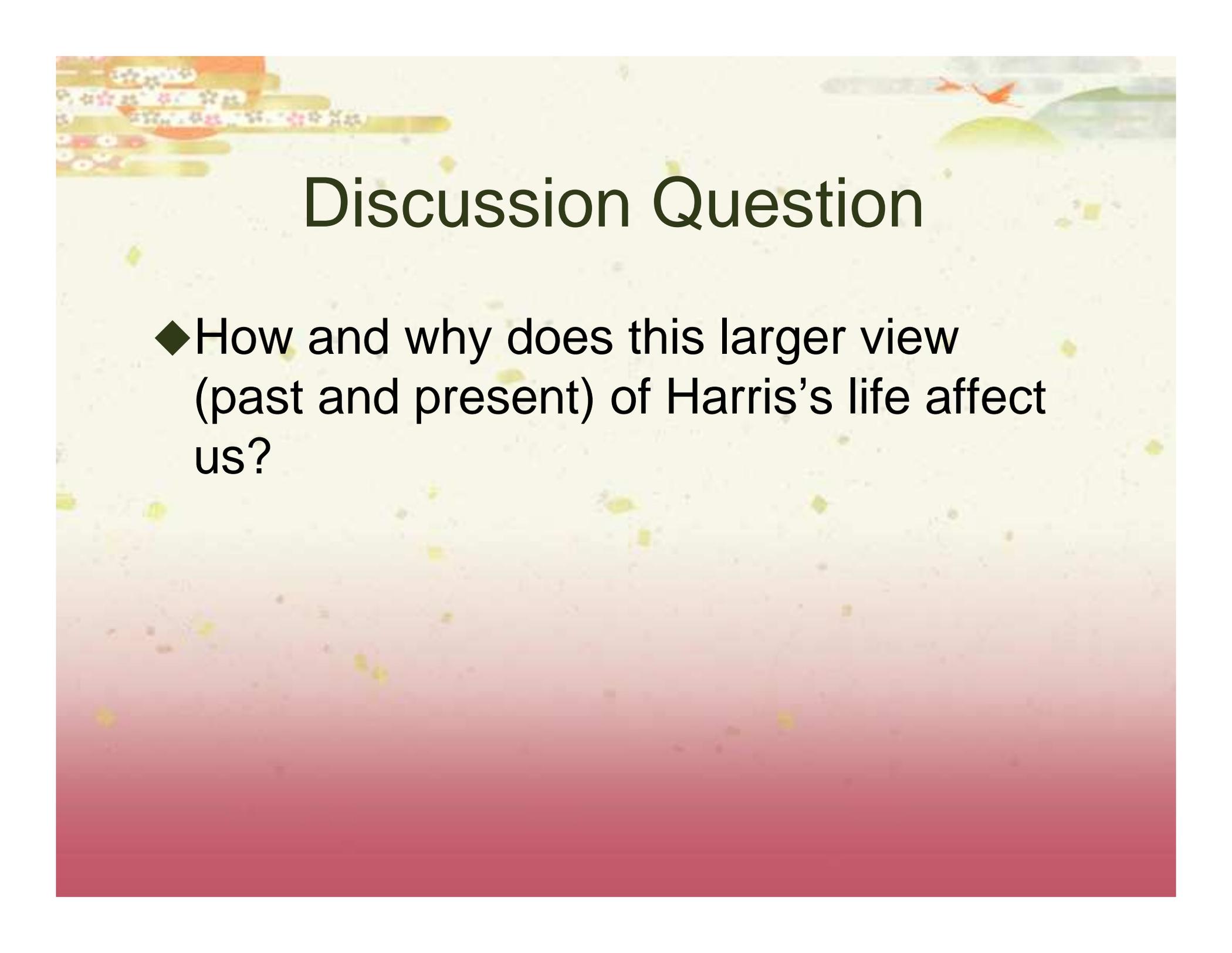
# Watson's Criticisms of the Incompatibilist Diagnosis

- ◆ Watson sees a problem with the incompatibilist view of responsibility.
  - ❖ We do not simply suspend our reactive attitudes, as the incompatibilist suggests, rather we are “ambivalent”.



# Watson's Criticisms Cont.

- ❖ In addition, we are not committed to the inevitability of the upshot.
  - ◆ Not “It had to be,” but “No wonder!”
  - ◆ The upshot is explained, but is not necessary



# Discussion Question

- ◆ How and why does this larger view (past and present) of Harris's life affect us?

# Sympathy and Antipathy

- ◆ Feelings of both sympathy and antipathy are appropriate reactions to Harris which makes it difficult for us to respond overall in a coherent way. (244).
  - ❖ Sympathy for the boy he was.
  - ❖ Antipathy for the man he is.

# Sympathy and Antipathy Cont.

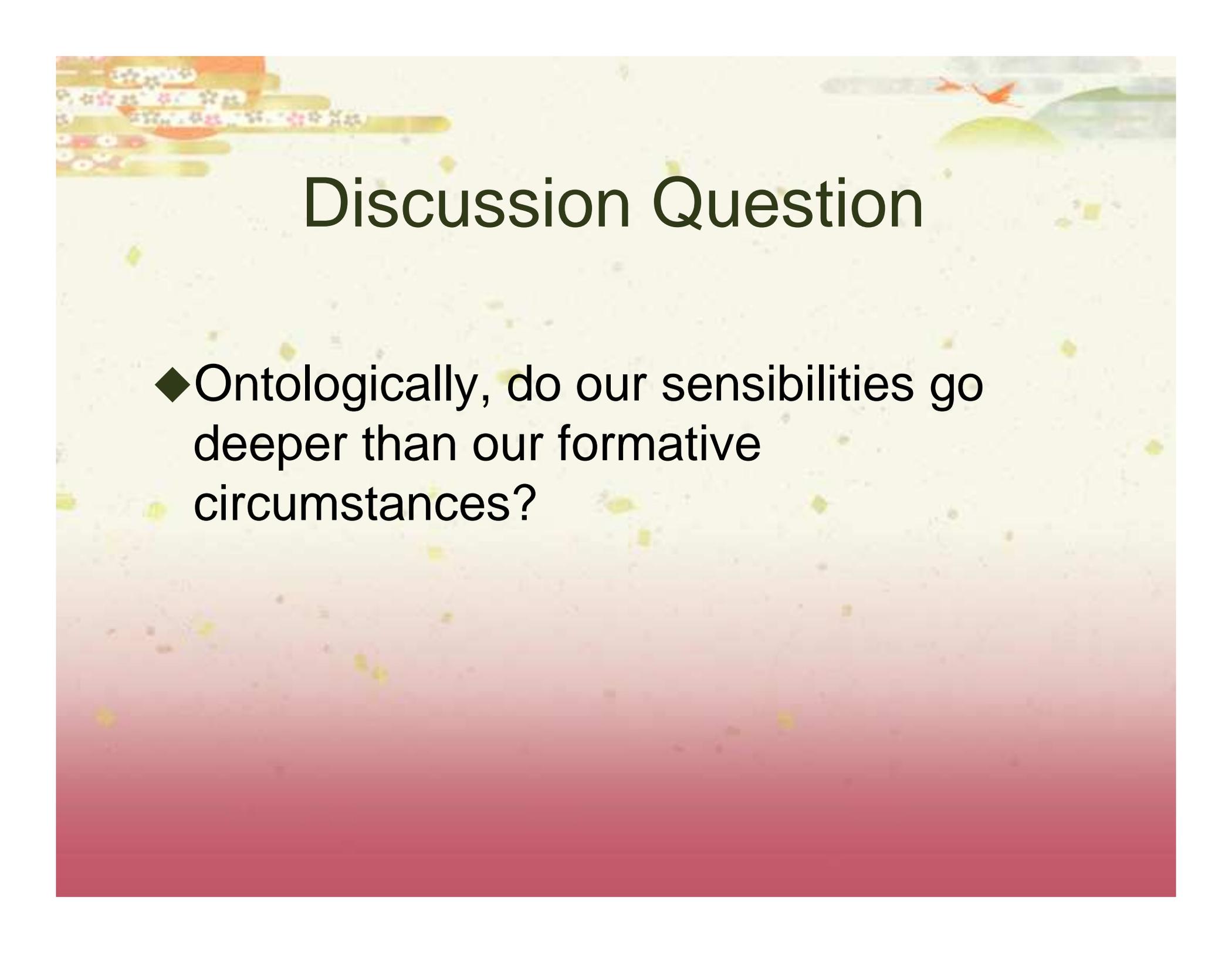
- ◆ Harris represents a case in which the criteria of “victimhood” are satisfied and violated at the same time.
  - ❖ “The clash occurs from a single point of view” (244).
- ◆ “Unless one knew Harris as a child or keeps his earlier self vividly in mind, sympathy can scarcely find a purchase” (245).

# Moral Luck and Moral Equality

◆ “One’s moral self is such a fragile thing” (245).

❖ If you had been subjected to the same circumstances that Harris dealt with as a young boy, how would you have turned out?

- ◆ Just as vile?
- ◆ Healthy?
- ◆



# Discussion Question

- ◆ Ontologically, do our sensibilities go deeper than our formative circumstances?

# Moral Luck and Moral Equality Cont.

- ◆ Moral luck possibly explains how fortunate we are for having a positive upbringing, or vice versa.
  - ❖ It turns the gaze inwards: Depending on my moral luck, “I too am a potential sinner” (245).

# Moral Equality

- ◆ “Equality of moral potential does not mean that Harris is not actually a vile man; [but] it means that in similar circumstances I would have become vile as well” (245).
  - ❖ Only those who have lived through circumstances such as those that ravaged Harris would be in a position to know what they would have done.
  - ❖ How do you feel? Agree or disagree??



# Determinism and Ignorance

- ◆ Having a horrid background is not a sufficient cause of becoming a horrible person.
  - ❖ Also, having a great background is not a sufficient cause of becoming a great person.
- ◆ What do we suppose makes the difference?



# Harris's Background

- ◆ Harris's vileness is a response to the suffering he dealt with during his "process of socialization" (246).
- ◆ His cruelty was directed not only towards his victims but to the "moral order that mauled and rejected him" (246).

# Types of Viciousness

- ◆ Someone with a positive socializing environment can still be just as vicious as Harris, but not in the same sense.
  - ❖ Striking back at society vs. killing for enjoyment.
- ◆ Harris's actions seem motivated by his history while the actions of a "bad apple" seem inexplicable.

# Question

- ◆ “Bad apples” don’t seem affected by moral luck, but still don’t we assume that something has gone wrong in their process of socialization or in their genes/brains?
  - ❖ Ex. The malicious-behavior-causing tumor.



# Determinism Cont.

- ◆ If we accept determinism, then evil is the “joint product of nature and nurture” (247).
- ◆ This implies that the only difference between an evil person and oneself is a matter of moral luck (ex. having a good upbringing).
- ◆ In this account, determinism seems to be relevant to reactive attitudes (248).

# Room for Argument

- ◆ Watson leaves room for the thought that “there is something ‘in me’ by virtue of which I would not have become a vicious person in Harris’s circumstances”.
- ❖ This does not mean that Harris is evil while I am good, but that I would not have succumbed to the same circumstances that defeated Harris (248).

# Historical Responsibility

- ◆ “Libertarians believe that evil is the product neither of nature nor of nurture, but of free will” (249).
  - ❖ Harris acted on his own free will and was detached from his formative circumstances.
    - ◆ Would you agree?

# The Libertarian View

- ◆ “It is the individuals own response that distinguishes those who become evil from those who do not” (249).
  - ❖ We are not responsible for our formative circumstances: they are a matter of moral luck.
  - ❖ But we are responsible for how we respond to our circumstances.

# Abélard's Notion of Consent

- ❖ “The development of the moral self...is mediated by consent” (249).
- ❖ To consent is to willingly acquiesce to the formation of the self.
- ❖ Harris was headed down a pernicious path and he accepted this direction.

# Problems with Consent

- ◆ “A self cannot itself be seen simply as a product of consent” (250).
  - ❖ Only a morally marred self would consent to an immoral path.
  - ❖ This morally marred self cannot be a product of consent.

# Responsibility for the Self

- ◆ Libertarian view: “They are responsible for consenting only if they are responsible for the self in which that consent is rooted” (251).
  - ❖ The self must therefore simultaneously be the “author” and the “product” of its actions and attitudes.
  - ❖ Watson: “This enterprise seems hopeless.”

# Ignorance and Skepticism

- ◆ If the historical dimension of an action (of which we are regularly ignorant) influences our reactive attitudes, how then is the validity of our reactive attitudes affected?
  - ❖ Not an issue of who is responsible or blameworthy, but who is qualified to react?
  - ❖ In terms of moral luck, I could be in your situation, so by judging you I am merely being self-righteous.
    - ◆ Tend to your own faults first (253).

# Ignorance and Skepticism 2

- ◆ We can judge someone as cruel, thoughtless, or cowardly, but, in the Strawsonian view, this is not equal to holding someone responsible.
  - ❖ Reactive attitude does not necessarily reflect blameworthiness.
    - ◆ Suspended reactive attitudes
    - ◆ Empathy

# Objectivity and Isolation

## ◆ Isolation vs animosity

- ❖ Einstein: admires “detachment” within the person “to whom aggressiveness and resentment are alien” (256).
- ❖ Strawson’s notion of reactive attitudes requires “a partial withdrawal of goodwill” (i.e. resentment, indignation) through retribution and punishment.

# Objectivity and Isolation 2

- ◆ The ideal of love:
  - ❖ entails no retribution, no punishment
  - ❖ but still holding someone responsible, still confronting, “urging and even demanding consideration for themselves and others” (258).
    - ◆ Ghandi, Martin Luther King Jr., Jesus

# Expressive Theory Clarified

- ◆ Retributive sentiments are not necessary to hold someone responsible, as Strawson implies.
- ◆ Rather, in the expressive view, “to regard another as morally responsible is to react to him or her as a moral self” without malice or vindictiveness (258).
  - ❖ Harris “was one of us.”