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.
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.
“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.”
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).
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).
“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?
“It is the individual's 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.”