

1. Background: Strawson

One way in which we might read Strawson is as emphasizing a different aspect of what moral responsibility is about. Typically, questions about moral philosophy have been framed as questions about when we should judge someone blameworthy or morally responsible. We can see Strawson as shifting our focus.

Moral responsibility is first and foremost a *practice*. And it's a practice that comprises much more than judgments – it involves reactive attitudes, actions, speech acts, etc.

For any practice, we can ask two very different kinds of question. We can ask about the nature of the practice itself, its constitutive norms and rules. These are internal questions. We can also ask external questions: questions about why the practice is a good one to have, what purpose it fills, whether it's a practice worth keeping.

Our focus for this lecture course will be on the former. We will try to get a better understanding of what our practice of moral responsibility involves.

2. Giving Credit as Holding Morally Responsible

When we think of holding others morally responsible, we typically think of blaming them. But of course, in giving someone credit for what they have done, we also treat them as morally responsible for it:

To be held liable is to be on the hook, and we lack a ready phrase for the positive counterpart to the “hook.” But clearly we do have a counterpart notion; just as (moral) blame is sometimes called for as a response to the flouting of (moral) requirements, so praise is an appropriate response to respect for moral requirements or moral ends. We express praise by recognition: bestowing a medal, or, more commonly, remarking on the person's merits. (“It was good of you [him] to help.”)¹

Recall that while Strawson typically gets credited with identifying blame with resentment, he also talks a great deal about gratitude as an example of a reactive attitude.

3. Kant on Moral Credit

Kant starts by discussing the concept of a good will:

A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes, because of its fitness to attain some proposed end, but only because of its volition, that is, it is good in itself and, regarded for itself, is to be valued incomparably higher than all that could merely be brought about by it in favor of some inclination and indeed, if you will, of the sum of all inclinations. Even if, by a special disfavor of fortune or by the niggardly provision of a stepmotherly nature, this will should wholly lack the capacity to carry out its purpose – if with its greatest efforts it should yet achieve nothing and only the good will were left (not, of course, as a mere wish but as the summoning of all means insofar as they are in our control) – then, like a jewel, it would still shine by itself, as something that has its full worth in itself.

A good will manifests itself in actions that are done from duty, not from inclination:

¹ Watson [2004], p. 284.

To be beneficent where one can is a duty, and besides there are many souls so sympathetically attuned that, without any other motive of vanity or self-interest they find an inner satisfaction in spreading joy around them and can take delight in the satisfaction of others so far as it is their own work. But I assert that in such a case an action of this kind, however it may conform with duty and however amiable it may be, has nevertheless no true moral worth but is on the same footing with other inclinations, for example, the inclination to honor, which, if it fortunately lights upon what is in fact in the common interest and in conformity with duty and hence honorable, deserves praise and encouragement but not esteem; for the maxim lacks moral content, namely that of doing such actions not from inclination but *from duty*.

What is so special about actions done from duty? Actions that are done from the motive of duty are not just accidentally right:

In the case of what is to be morally good it is not enough that it [i.e. the action] conform with the moral law but it must also be done for the sake of the law; without this that conformity is only very contingent and precarious, since a ground that is not moral will indeed now and then produce actions in conformity with the law, but it will also often produce actions contrary to law.

According to Kant then, morally worthy actions are those that are done because they are right, from a sense of duty.

4. Arpaly on Moral Worth

Arpaly objects to the Kantian picture. She suggests that Kant's conception of moral worth is too demanding. She argues that agents can perform morally worthy actions even when they are morally ignorant, and so cannot be acting from a representation of the moral law.

Arpaly's central example is that of Huckleberry Finn. Huckleberry Finn escapes his abusive father. He meets Jim, a fugitive slave and together they embark on a trip down the Mississippi river on a raft. They make it through quite a few adventures together. Then, suddenly, it occurs to Huckleberry that helping a fugitive slave is like "stealing". In the grip of his ill-trained conscience, Huckleberry resolves to turn Jim over to the authorities. But when the crucial moment comes, Huckleberry finds that he cannot go through with his resolution. Instead, he makes up an elaborate story that protects Jim. In doing so, he clearly does the right thing. However, he believes that he is acting wrongly: he continues to believe that he is complicit in "stealing property" from Jim's "rightful owner", Miss Watson.

Arpaly argues:

Huckleberry Finn [...] is not a bad boy who has accidentally done some- thing good, but a good boy.

She argues:

We all have friends, family members, or acquaintances of this sort. We can all recall the likes of a student who, waving his copy of *Atlas Shrugged* in one's face, preaches that one should be selfish and then proceeds to lose sleep generously helping his peers. If philosophers were right in believing that only those actions subjected to prior deliberation are done for reasons, or that only actions derived by deliberation from one's moral principles are done for moral reasons, we would have to view these people as bad people who happen to have some fortunate

inclinations in their makeup. More commonly, however, we treat these people as fundamentally good people who happen to be incompetent abstract thinkers.²

According to Arpaly, cases like Huck and the Randian student show that a good will – understood as a desire to do what the moral law requires – is not *necessary* for moral worth.

She also argues that it's not *sufficient*:

After the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, some Jewish extremists expressed the opinion that the murder was a horrible thing simply because it involved a Jew killing a Jew. Imagine for a moment that Ron is such an extremist, believing deeply that killing a person is not generally immoral but that killing a fellow Jew is a grave sin. Ron would very much like to kill Tamara, but he refrains from doing so because he wants to do the right thing and he believes the right thing to do is to refrain from killing Jews like Tamara.³

Arpaly argues that Ron is not morally praiseworthy for refraining to kill Tamara, even if he does want to do act as the moral law requires him to.

Arpaly proposes an alternative set of necessary and sufficient conditions for moral worth:

For an agent to be morally praiseworthy for doing the right thing is for her to have done the right thing for the relevant moral reasons—that is, the reasons for which she acts are identical to the reasons for which the action is right.⁴

What is it to act for right-making reasons? Arpaly's original proposal is that it involves being motivated by a *de re* desire for what is in fact a right-making reason.

More recently, Arpaly (in a book co-authored with Timothy Schroeder) suggested that more is required:

The reference of an intrinsic desire that counts as complete good will must, naturally, be the right or the good. But [...] a given referent can be conceptualised in many different ways. Sparse conativism holds that the sense required for perfect good will is to be determined by normative moral theory: the concepts deployed in grasping the correct normative moral theory are the concepts through which one must intrinsically desire the right or good in order to have good will.⁵

5. Objections & Questions

Is Ron's case really a counterexample to a Kantian Account? Would Kant agree that Ron acts from the moral law?

Is it really that obvious that Huckleberry deserves moral credit for his action?

Is a *de re* desire really enough to make an agent's doing the right thing non-accidental?

Is Arpaly's more recent account plausible?

² Arpaly [2003], p. 78

³ Arpaly [2003], p. 74

⁴ Arpaly [2003], p. 72

⁵ Arpaly & Schroeder [2014], p. 164.

