

*Strawson on Excusing/Exempting*

According to Strawson, responsibility is a practice that does not rest on a prior theory of responsibility.

“The explanatory priority is the other way around: 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 proposition to be true, but of expressing our concerns and demands about our treatment of one another.” (p. 222)

What are these concerns and demands? We expect respect and good will from others.

Reactive attitudes are “natural human reactions to the good or ill will or indifference of others toward us as displayed in *their* attitudes and actions.” (Strawson, p. 80)

But Strawson does not deny that our reactive attitudes are systematically affected by our beliefs about the situation and the context of action. In particular, Strawson distinguishes between two kinds of “pleas” that modify our stance towards others.

First, there are ordinary excusing conditions.

“To the first group belong all those which might give occasion for the employment of such expressions as ‘He didn’t mean to’, ‘He hadn’t realized’, ‘He didn’t know’; and also all those which might give occasion for the use of the phrase ‘He couldn’t help it’, when this is supported by such phrases as ‘He pushed’, ‘He had to do it’, ‘It was the only way’, ‘They left him no alternative’, etc.”

They invite us to see the *injury* as one for which he was not fully, or at all, responsible. They do not suggest that the agent is in any way an inappropriate object of that kind of demand for goodwill or regard which is reflected in our ordinary reactive attitudes.

Second, there are *exempting* conditions. These include: being a child, being psychotic, being a sociopath (a “moral idiot”), being under great strain, being “unfortunate in formative circumstances”.

Seeing someone, then, as warped or deranged or compulsive in behaviour or peculiarly unfortunate in his formative circumstances – seeing someone so tends, at least to some extent, to set him apart from normal participant reactive attitudes on the part of one who so sees him, tends to promote, at least in the civilized, objective attitudes.

These conditions then *do* undermine the thought that the agent is an appropriate object of demand for good will that’s part of our reactive attitudes.

Question: Why do these conditions call for a suspension of our reactive attitudes? And what does this tell us about our practice of holding others responsible? In particular, does it cause trouble for Strawson’s claim that this practice does not depend on any prior theory?

*Watson on the Limits of Evil*

Watson’s proposal on behalf of Strawson: we can think of reactive attitudes as forms of *moral address*, they are “incipient forms of communication”. As such, they have felicity-conditions. An important felicity condition is that the party to which they are addressed can recognize them as such. Addressing another party only makes sense when the address can be understood.

(Watson is focussed on Strawson in particular. But something like his suggestion also looks very attractive from the point of view of a Scanlonian theory of moral responsibility. It should also be attractive to Fricker.)

Watson thinks that this suggestion ultimately faces a difficult challenge. This is because this way of thinking about reactive attitudes presupposes that it only makes sense to hold those morally responsible who are members of our moral community:

If holding responsible requires the intelligibility of moral address, and if a condition of such address is that the other be seen as a potential moral interlocutor, then the paradox results that extreme evil disqualifies one for blame. (p. 235)

Watson asks us to consider the case of Robert Harris.

According to Watson, our reaction to Harris is of blame and resentment. He's the "archetypal candidate" for blame. But how can we reconcile this with the idea that reactive attitudes are forms of moral address? After all, Harris' evil consists precisely in his being immune to moral communication.

Watson then observes that our reaction to Harris upbringing is to suspend our reactive attitudes (at the very least, the story gives them pause). But what does this story tell us that we didn't already know? Surely, we already knew that Harris was morally incapacitated! The story only tells us how he came to be morally incapacitated.

Watson suggests that a Strawsonian story struggles to explain the relevance of such historical circumstances and the moral ambivalence that we experience in response to someone like Harris more generally.