**Responsibility, Libertarians, and the “Facts as We Know Them”: A Concern-Based Construal of Strawson’s Reversal[[1]](#footnote-1)\***

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**Abstract**

Here, I put forth a construal of P.F. Strawson’s so-called “reversal,” his view that what it means to be morally responsible is determined (in some way) by our practices of holding responsible. The “concern-based” construal that I defend holds that what it means to be morally responsible is determined by the basic social concerns of which our practices are an expression. This construal, I argue, avoids a dilemma that Patrick Todd has recently raised for the reversal.

***1. Introduction***

Many theorists have attributed the following sort of thesis to P.F. Strawson: what it means to be morally responsible is determined (in some way) by our practices of holding responsible. This so-called “Strawsonian reversal” is taken to be one of Strawson’s key innovations in “Freedom and Resentment.”[[2]](#footnote-2) It is also taken to tell against libertarian views of moral responsibility, according to which responsibility requires a kind of freedom incompatible with determinism.

Still, despite its influence, and despite the amount of ink spilled attributing this reversal to Strawson, it remains unclear how precisely we should understand the Strawsonian reversal. This is especially evident in light of Patrick Todd’s recent paper, “Strawson, Moral Responsibility, and the ‘Order of Explanation’: An Intervention.”[[3]](#footnote-3) There, Todd argues that extant developments of the reversal face a dilemma: either they aren’t plausibly antilibertarian in the way theorists suggest or they’re simply implausible. Todd leaves it to his Strawsonian readers to provide an account of the reversal that avoids this dilemma. For his part, though, Todd is doubtful about this possibility.

In a way, I’m sympathetic with Todd’s doubts. His dilemma presumes that the reversal is meant to be antilibertarian in the sense of being strictly incompatible with libertarian views, and it doesn’t seem possible to articulate a plausible conception of the reversal that is antilibertarian in this sense. In another way, though, I disagree with Todd. Even if the reversal isn’t strictly incompatible with libertarian views, I believe there is another sense in which the reversal can be antilibertarian: the reversal might give us prima facie reason to reject libertarian views. In this paper, then, I develop an account of the Strawsonian reversal that might plausibly be antilibertarian in this second sense. My ultimate aim is to show, *contra* Todd, that there is a clear and compelling way to develop the reversal, one that avoids Todd’s worries about the reversal’s general plausibility but that might still importantly bear on the debate between compatibilists and libertarians.

***2. Todd’s Dilemma and Two Senses of “Antilibertarian”***

Todd’s paper proceeds by examining representative articulations of the Strawsonian reversal and by critically engaging with them one-by-one. Through this painstaking process, he arrives at his dilemma.

Todd finds that theorists have generally interpreted the reversal in one of two ways:

1. Whether a given agent is morally responsible is determined by whether it is appropriate to hold her responsible. Or
2. Whether a given agent is morally responsible is determined by whether we, as a community, hold her responsible (or, alternatively, are disposed to hold her responsible).

Depending on whether one accepts (A) or (B), one faces a different horn of Todd’s dilemma. If one accepts (A), then, Todd argues, the Strawsonian reversal isn’t plausibly antilibertarian. This is because, according to Todd, a libertarian can, in principle, accept (A). The libertarian need simply hold that it is appropriateto hold someone morally responsible only if that person possesses a sort of freedom incompatible with determinism. On the other hand, a libertarian cannot accept (B). But, Todd argues, she shouldn’t want to. (B) doesn’t allow for objective conditions on being morally responsible, conditions that can check a community’s actual responsibility practices. Consequently, (B) cannot explain why we’d be going wrong if we, as a community, held (or were disposed to hold), say, very young children or severely mentally ill people responsible. On (B), if we hold these agents morally responsible, then they simply are morally responsible. This is clearly problematic. Thus, Todd concludes, extant articulations of the Strawsonian reversal either aren’t plausibly antilibertarian or are simply implausible.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Todd leaves it open that there could be an interpretation of the reversal that avoids the problems that (A) and (B) face, but he expresses doubts about this possibility. Given Todd’s starting points, I believe his doubts are well grounded. In fact, if we accept those starting points, I think we needn’t even leave the foregoing question open. Todd’s dilemma presumes that the reversal is supposed to be *formally* antilibertarian. Todd, that is, takes it that the reversal is supposed to be strictly incompatible with libertarian views.[[5]](#footnote-5) And it doesn’t seem possible to articulate a plausible conception of the Strawsonian reversal that is antilibertarian in this sense.

If the reversal is supposed to be formally antilibertarian, then a libertarian must be, in principle, unable to accept it. The problem, however, is that a libertarian can accept any view about what determines whether someone is morally responsible, so long as that view allows that (1) whether someone is morally responsible depends on their meeting some objective conditions and (2) it remains possible that there is a libertarian condition among these conditions. But as we’ve already seen, with (B), above, the reversal cannot rule out (1) and remain plausible. And if the reversal allows for (1), then it cannot rule out (2). The Strawsonian reversal, after all, is a view about the grounds for the concept of moral responsibility; it is a view about what determines what it means to be morally responsible. If being morally responsible requires that one meet certain objective conditions, then the Strawsonian reversal simply tells us that what those conditions are depends, in some way, on the nature of our responsibility practices. Nothing about this, though, can rule out the possibility of a libertarian condition on moral responsibility. We’d need more information about the nature of our practices. A Strawsonian could still argue that, given the nature of those practices, being morally responsible doesn’t require one be free in a sense incompatible with determinism. But this is a substantial claim. It remains open, in principle at least, for the libertarian to adopt the reversal and to argue that our practices suggest one is morally responsible only if one meets a libertarian condition.

It doesn’t seem possible, then, for the Strawsonian reversal to be both formally antilibertarian and plausible. If we construe the sense in which the reversal is supposed to be antilibertarian in a formal way, it doesn’t seem any articulation of the reversal can avoid Todd’s dilemma.

But all is not lost for the Strawsonian reversal. There is another way, I believe, that the reversal can be plausibly and importantly antilibertarian, a way that Todd’s dilemma overlooks. The reversal might give us prima facie reason to doubt libertarian views of moral responsibility. In this sense, the reversal might be *substantively* antilibertarian; it might, so to speak, favor compatibilist views, grounding a prima facie argument against libertarians. If the reversal is antilibertarian in this sense, then libertarians can certainly adopt the reversal, at least in principle, but I doubt they’d want to—adopting the reversal would also mean adopting a significant dialectical burden. The question, then, is whether there is a plausible construal of the Strawsonian reversal that can also be antilibertarian in this second, substantive sense. If there is, then the reversal can still importantly bear on the debate about whether moral responsibility is compatible with determinism.

***3. The Strawsonian Reversal: A Concern-Based Construal***

As Todd is at pains to show, though, it remains unclear how we should understand the Strawsonian reversal. Here, I aim to remedy this. In this section, developing a line of thought owed to Gary Watson and using Todd’s challenge as a guide, I’ll develop a clear and compelling construal of the reversal. I’ll then conclude, in the next section, by briefly gesturing at how the construal of the reversal that I give might also plausibly be substantively antilibertarian.

In “Freedom and Resentment,” Strawson suggests that we understand holding people responsible in terms of the various attitudes it involves, like resentment, gratitude, indignation, and guilt, among others. Strawson calls these attitudes, which form the basis of our responsibility practices, the “reactive attitudes.” For Strawson, it is only by attending to this “web of attitudes” that we can “recover from the facts as we know them a sense of what we mean, i.e. of *all* we mean, when, speaking the language of morals, we speak of desert, responsibility, guilt, condemnation, and justice.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Thus we have, from Strawson himself, something close to an articulation of the Strawsonian reversal. What is he getting at? When Strawson makes this suggestion, he is contrasting his approach to moral responsibility with that of his interlocutors in “Freedom and Resentment,” the “optimist” (a consequentialist-style compatibilist) and the “pessimist” (a libertarian). Both optimist and pessimist, Strawson argues, “seek, in different ways, to overintellectualize the facts.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Specifically, both seek a justification for our responsibility practices—for the web of reactive attitudes—as a whole. This, Strawson thinks, is misguided. “Inside the general structure or web of [reactive] attitudes,” Strawson explains, “there is endless room for modification, redirection, criticism, and justification.” “But,” he continues, “questions of justification are internal to the structure... The existence of the general framework of attitudes itself is something we are given with the fact of human society. As a whole, it neither calls for, nor permits, an external ‘rational’ justification.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Gary Watson has dubbed Strawson’s argument here the “normative framework argument.” Watson helpfully explicates it.[[9]](#footnote-9) He explains that, for Strawson, our responsibility practices, and particularly the reactive attitudes undergirding them, are an expression of our “social sentimental nature,” which can be understood in terms of certain basic social concerns human beings have.[[10]](#footnote-10) These concerns are brute—“given to us with the fact of human society.” However, they are themselves a source of reasons; they constitute a distinctive evaluative standpoint. It is only in terms of these basic concerns, then, and so from within this evaluative standpoint (this “framework”), that we hold people responsible. Thus, whether some consideration is relevant to someone’s being responsible is a matter of these basic social concerns and the evaluative standpoint they constitute. These concerns and this standpoint mark “the boundaries within which critical assessment of the correctness of our responsibility practices makes sense.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

The optimist and pessimist thus “overintellectualize the facts” because both, according to Strawson, are unwilling to understand moral responsibility in terms of our social sentimental nature. Instead, both attempt to justify our responsibility practices from outside of the evaluative standpoint from within which we hold people responsible. Such an “external” justification, though, cannot be the same sense of justification relevant to moral responsibility. This is because the notion of moral responsibility gets its very sense from the standpoint the optimist and pessimist eschew. Strawson therefore holds that we can only recover what it means to be responsible by attending to the reactive attitudes. Our susceptibility to those attitudes directly expresses our social sentimental nature and, in this way, reflects the concerns—the evaluative standpoint—that nature involves.

Watson’s explication of Strawson is a helpful starting point, but it isn’t yet a precise statement of the Strawsonian reversal. We can develop it, though, in contrast with two views Todd considers. Todd holds that a successful construal of the Strawsonian reversal needs to find a path between these two views.[[12]](#footnote-12) Strawson, understood in the foregoing way, clears such a path.

The first view Todd discusses is a foil to Strawson’s—a Platonic view, according to which the notion of moral responsibility is “logically and explanatorily prior to there being any human beings at all.” In other words, on this view, there are “objective standards” on being morally responsible that are completely mind-independent, “written, as it were, in Plato’s heaven.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Strawson, of course, would reject such a Platonic view. What it means to be morally responsible, for Strawson, including any conditions required for it, depends on what we’re like and what we do.

While Strawson would reject this Platonic view, however, he also wouldn’t accept the alternative that Todd discusses. The alternative is a radically relativistic view, like (B), above, which holds that whether someone is morally responsible for something is determined by whether we’re inclined to hold that person responsible for it. But such a view has difficulty accounting for why certain agents, like very young children, aren’t morally responsible, even if we hold them morally responsible.

The question, then, is how Strawson can allow for objective conditions on being responsible, conditions that can check our practices of holding responsible, like those on the Platonic view, while still grounding those conditions in our practices somehow. The answer lies in our social sentimental nature.

The foregoing relativistic view takes what it means to be morally responsible to be grounded merely in what we do. On Strawson’s account, on the other hand, what it means to be morally responsible is grounded in *why* we do what we do. Our responsibility practices and the reactive attitudes undergirding them are an expression of certain basic social concerns, and these concerns thus normatively structure our practices. In this respect, they also put normative constraints on our practices.

To see how this works, consider a simple example: a particular restaurant’s kitchen practices. Let’s say these practices express a concern with efficiently producing food for customers. If these practices are an expression of this concern, two things follow. First, the kitchen’s practices will reflect the concern. The kitchen’s practices, that is, will be, on the whole, organized around efficiently producing food for customers, even if they do so poorly. Second, criticism of these practices or of decisions made by participants in them will be based on this concern. Thus, if the practices are organized in a way that fails to efficiently produce food, they’re criticizable, and if a participant makes a decision contrary to this concern, that person is criticizable.

For Strawson, similarly, our responsibility practices are an expression of certain concerns, and they thus reflect these concerns and are answerable to them. It is important, though, to mark a crucial difference between the social concerns underlying our responsibility practices and the kitchen’s concern in the foregoing example. The latter concern isn’t basic; it’s best understood in terms of other concerns about, e.g., running a profitable business. These further concerns give reason to organize the restaurant’s kitchen around efficiently producing food for customers, and they might also give reason to organize it differently if circumstances change. The social concerns our responsibility practices most essentially express, on the other hand, are, according to Strawson, basic. Having these concerns is simply an essential part of being the social creatures we are.

This point about *basic* concerns is crucial to understanding the Strawsonian reversal.[[14]](#footnote-14) These concerns aren’t merely concerns that are deeply held or important in some community. Rather, they’re concerns that form the general structure for how we (humans) think about moral responsibility; they’re the concerns that, so to speak, ultimately explain why we have responsibility practices. In this respect, Strawson explains, they’re closer to the “human commitment to inductive belief-formation” than to a cultural commitment to, say, respecting one’s elders: they’re “natural, original, non-rational, in no way something we choose or could give up.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Thus, for Strawson, while different communities might hold each other responsible for different things in different ways, these differences aren’t as significant for understanding the concept of moral responsibility as what we share. For we share, according to Strawson, a common evaluative standpoint when it comes to responsibility, which makes the same sorts of general considerations salient for us.[[16]](#footnote-16) Our variable responsibility practices, Strawson holds, express the same basic concerns, and so they’re subject to the same general standards.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The idea, then, is that there will be room for criticism of our responsibility practices when those practices aren’t in accord with the basic concerns they’re an expression of. At this point, however, it might seem like I’ve obliterated the Strawsonian reversal’s key thought, which is that what it means to be morally responsible is determined by our *practices* of holding responsible. Haven’t I put too much emphasis on the concerns underlying those practices? The way I’ve developed Strawson’s line of thought might even seem to resemble the Platonic view: there are simply certain basic concerns that, it might seem, fix what it means to be morally responsible, regardless of what we do.

It is a mistake, though, to so starkly distinguish our responsibility practices from the basic concerns they’re an expression of. A constitutive part of our having the basic social concerns that we do is being sensitive to certain patterns of salience and being disposed to respond to people’s conduct with various attitudes in particular ways. We thus can’t, in reality, pull apart our practices from the basic concerns they express, not entirely. I suspect that this is why Strawson claims that we can recover what it means to be morally responsible only by attending to the reactive attitudes. Those attitudes, which form the core of our responsibility practices, are the direct expression of our basic social concerns, of our social sentimental nature.

This marks a key difference between Strawson’s view and the Platonic view. On the latter, the concept of responsibility is radically divorced from humans and our practices. It is thus possible that our practices are structured around a mistaken conception of moral responsibility. Given this, we can see why such a view might tempt one to offer an external justification for our responsibility practices, one that goes beyond our social sentimental nature and standpoint—beyond “the facts as we know them.” For Strawson, on the other hand, our practices cannot be structured around a mistaken conception of moral responsibility, because those practices are the expression of the concerns—the evaluative standpoint—that give sense to the notion of moral responsibility in the first place.[[18]](#footnote-18)

But if our practices are so tightly connected to the concerns they express, how can they run afoul of those concerns?

The concerns that our responsibility practices express commit us to certain standards. There is a fact of the matter about whether and how those standards apply to particular situations, and so we can be mistaken about whether those standards have application. Moreover, we can be mistaken on an individual or a group level. The mistake thus won’t be with the conception of moral responsibility our practices employ but, instead, will be epistemic in nature, concerning our beliefs about the relevant features of a situation—whatever is relevant to the standard that makes it appropriate to hold someone responsible.

For example, Strawson famously argues that our responsibility practices express a basic concern about the “quality of will” with which people act. We blame people for their ill will, their cruelty, their indifference; we praise them for their goodwill—for their consideration, kindness. And this concern, with people’s quality of will, makes certain kinds of considerations relevant to determining whether someone is appropriately held responsible. For instance, what we’re holding them responsible for has to in fact be connected to their will. If someone is pushed into me, what happened doesn’t reflect any attitude on their part, and this is because it didn’t issue from their practical agency—their choice or reason. Nevertheless, I might mistakenly blame the person who is pushed into me, maybe if I wrongly take them to have deliberately (and inconsiderately) pushed past me. Relatedly, if our practices are organized around a basic concern about quality of will, then the reasons for which people act will matter for responsibility. My friend, for example, might make a decision for reasons I’m unaware of but that show she properly took into account my interests. Still, I might incorrectly take her decision to reflect disregard for me. Finally, a concern about quality of will makes it necessary that agents have certain sorts of rational and evaluative capacities, capacities that are required for that agent’s actions to reflect good or ill will. Perhaps very young children or severely mentally ill people, for instance, aren’t able to appreciate the consequences of their actions, and we, as a society, fail to understand this. If this is the case, then we, as a society, might go wrong in holding such agents responsible, because without such an appreciation these agents might simply be unable to show the sort of ill will, indifference, or kindness with which our responsibility practices are concerned. Holding such agents responsible would, in this case, contradict the standards our basic concerns commit us to.

The account of the Strawsonian reversal I’ve developed here, then, drawing on Watson and Strawson, finds a middle ground between the Platonic and radically relativistic views that Todd discusses. It explains the existence of objective standards that can check our responsibility practices, and it does this by grounding those standards in the basic concerns that those responsibility practices express.

Still, although the reversal can supply objective standards for moral responsibility, these standards are different from those on the Platonic view. The reversal’s standards are relative to and contingent on our responsibility practices and the basic concerns they express. Should the relativity and contingency here worry us?[[19]](#footnote-19)

It isn’t obvious that it should. To begin, it is worth remembering that the relativity and contingency here isn’t as far-reaching as it may seem. As I mentioned above, the basic concerns Strawson has in mind are deep-seated features of *human* psychology and sociality. The reversal thus doesn’t devolve into a kind of cultural relativism. Consider, for instance, Strawson’s view that our responsibility practices revolve around a concern about the quality of will with which people act. This concern can manifest in different ways. Some communities might be harsher than others, for instance, and what counts as ill will, indifference, or kindness—what merits a reactive response—might vary, depending on the norms and values at stake in that community. But Strawson’s point is that these various communities’ practices will nevertheless express the same basic concern about quality of will, and they will therefore be constrained by the same general sorts of considerations.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Of course, one might doubt that human responsibility practices really *do* express the same basic concerns. Maybe there is no distinctively humanevaluative standpoint when it comes to responsibility. Admittedly, this is an empirical matter, which I can’t resolve here. Still, I’m hopeful about the reversal on this point. There do, after all, seem to be certain general patterns across cultures’ responsibility practices. Strawson’s quality of will proposal is perhaps a good example of such a pattern. All human communities seem to recognize the difference between someone’s accidentally tripping into another person and someone’s shoving that person; we all seem to recognize the difference between someone’s offering help out of genuine concern and someone’s offering help for self-serving purposes. And such distinctions seem to play a central role in human responsibility practices.[[21]](#footnote-21) It is no wonder that so many theorists have taken up this aspect of Strawson’s thought, even as they’ve distanced themselves from other aspects of it.[[22]](#footnote-22)

But do these points about *humans* and *human* responsibility practices really address Todd’s worry? What if we were different? Or what if there was a community of rational agents with responsibility practices that expressed different basic concerns? The reversal, as I’ve construed it, seems to leave it open that such a community might appropriately hold responsible very young children or severely mentally ill people. Isn’t this a problem?

Not obviously—but it’s complicated. First, I think this way of putting it, that a community with different basic concerns might appropriately “hold responsible very young children and severely mentally ill people,” is misleading. Consider, once more, the depth of the sort of basic concerns on which the Strawsonian reversal focuses. These concerns, Strawson suggests, are akin to our commitment to inductive belief-formation; they’re “part of the framework for human life.”[[23]](#footnote-23) We shouldn’t underappreciate this thought. What would life be like for us if we had different basic concerns, if we didn’t, say, have a basic concern about the quality of will with which people act, if we weren’t in this way invested in other people’s intentions and regard? Surely our basic concerns cannot easily be plucked out of our psychology, not without changing many other aspects of what we’re like, how we develop, and how we coexist. Our basic concerns are contingent, not arbitrary. And it isn’t obvious that rational agents who relate to each other in fundamentally different ways, who have fundamentally different evaluative standpoints, which are constituted by fundamentally different basic concerns, would orshould operate with the same conceptual equipment as we do, or that such agents would be or should be subject to the same reasons.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Here, though, we’ve arrived at a significant metaethical dispute. Some philosophers are tempted by the thought that moral concepts and standards must be non-contingent and must apply to rational agents *qua* rational agents. Strawson, of course, along with his reversal, rejects these commitments. The Strawsonian reversal, however we construe it, is committed to the idea that what it means to be morally responsible is grounded in substantive features of human beings and our practices. Such features are contingent, and, so, the reversal must allow for the possibility of rational agents who don’t have them, who operate with and are subject to different concepts and standards. The Strawsonian reversal thus has certain broadly Humean commitments. These Humean commitments are surely controversial, and the foregoing theorists, who take moral concepts and standards to be non-contingent and to apply to rational agents as such, will surely balk at them; but I doubt that this itself makes the reversal implausible. After all, the reversal represents one side to this dispute, and it isn’t clear that the other side is correct. Strawson holds that moral responsibility is a human concept, which reflects human interests and concerns. He would thus argue that the foregoing theorists, who doubt this, “overintellectualize the facts” in their attempts to account for moral responsibility apart from its natural foundations. And he isn’t alone in this sentiment.[[25]](#footnote-25)

There is, of course, plenty more to say here. My point is simply that the concern-based construal of the Strawsonian reversal isn’t obviously implausible in virtue of the relativity and contingency it allows into our concept of moral responsibility. This relativity and contingency isn’t as far-reaching as it may seem, and it is far from clear that such relativity and contingency is itself problematic. The concern-based construal I’ve developed here can supply objective standards for moral responsibility, and it provides a plausible basis for accounting for the particular standards that we observe in our (human) practices. This is enough, I think, to answer Todd’s general worries about the reversal.

***4. Conclusion***

We have, then, a clear and plausible construal of the Strawsonian reversal. But, as Todd points out, Strawson and Strawsonians claim that the reversal also somehow tells against libertarian views. In closing, I’d like to speak to this aspect of the reversal, gesturing at why the concern-based construal I’ve given might plausibly be antilibertarian.

In section 2, I distinguished two senses in which the reversal might be antilibertarian. The concern-based construal clearly isn’t antilibertarian in the first, formal sense. But I think there is a case to be made that it is substantively antilibertarian; it might, so to speak, favor compatibilism, giving us prima facie reason to doubt libertarian views.

The concern-based construal of the Strawsonian reversal tells us that the standards for moral responsibility derive from the basic concerns that our responsibility practices express. If determinism is relevant to moral responsibility, then, this is because our responsibility practices express a basic concern that makes it relevant. How likely is it, though, that our responsibility practices express such a basic concern? I think we might have reason to think it isn’t very likely. Here’s the idea: on the face of it, the types of basic concerns our responsibility practices express seem attuned to social and psychological facts, not the sort of facts on which determinism bears.

Consider, for example, Strawson’s view, from above. Strawson holds that our responsibility practices revolve around a basic concern about the quality of will with which people act. This, he argues, makes certain sorts of considerations relevant to moral responsibility: it becomes relevant whether what happened issued from that agent’s deliberation and reasoning; it becomes relevant whythat agent performed the action; and, finally, it becomes relevant whether that agent has certain evaluative and rational capacities, whether, for instance, the agent can appreciate the consequences of her actions. Determinism, though, doesn’t obviously bear on these sorts of considerations.

In fact, Strawson explicitly offers an argument for compatibilism like this in “Freedom and Resentment.”[[26]](#footnote-26) And it isn’t hard to see why the Strawsonian reversal puts Strawson in a position to make such an argument. The reversal privileges human psychology and sociality. It asks us to think about why we’re prone to the sorts of reactive responses to which we’re prone. What sorts of basic concerns does our resentment or indignation express? Our gratitude? Hurt feelings? Forgiveness? I find it difficult to imagine good answers to these questions that aren’t of the same ilk as Strawson’s, that aren’t simply attuned to social and psychological facts.

I don’t mean to suggest that this settles things—not by any means. There is plenty more for both Strawsonians and libertarians to say on these points. I’ve only meant to suggest that there might be a plausible case to be made that the concern-based construal of the Strawsonian reversal is substantively antilibertarian, favoring compatibilism. Todd claims “there is no clear path to compatibilism from the reversal.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Here, then, I only hope to have supplied such a path. I leave it for someone else to walk.

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2. P.F. Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48 (1962), 187-211. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Patrick Todd, “Strawson, Moral Responsibility, and the ‘Order of Explanation’: An Intervention,” *Ethics* 127 (Oct. 2016), 208-240. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For articulations of this dilemma, see ibid., 209, 222-223, and 236-238. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I don’t mean to suggest that Todd is idiosyncratic or unreasonable on this point. Indeed, as Todd points out in his introduction, and as he vindicates throughout his paper, many theorists suggest “the reversal is (or at least is meant to be) incompatible with... the views of libertarians.” Ibid., 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment,” 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Gary Watson, “Peter Strawson on Responsibility and Sociality,” in *Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility, Vol. 2: ‘Freedom and Resentment’ at 50*, eds. David Shoemaker and Neal Tognazzini (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 21-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. It’s possible some individuals aren’t psychologically structured like most other humans, and so some individuals might not share the sorts of concerns underlying our responsibility practices. Our practices, though, don’t reflect the individual; they reflect the group. Thus, Strawson is only committed to the claim that *most* people share the sorts of concerns our responsibility practices express. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Watson, “Peter Strawson,” 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Todd, “Strawson, Moral Responsibility, and the ‘Order of Explanation,’” 236-239. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 236. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for prompting me to go into more depth here. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment,” footnote 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Compare this to our “commitment to inductive belief-formation.” Strawson elsewhere describes this commitment as a commitment “to a general frame of belief and a general style (the inductive) of belief-formation” (P.F. Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 14). The idea here is that certain considerations will be relevant for human beings when it comes to forming (certain) beliefs about the observed world. Similarly, Strawson wants to say, human beings share a structure or frame of thought about responsibility, and thus certain sorts of considerations will be relevant for human beings when it comes to any community’s responsibility practices. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This also helps explain why Strawson privileges basic concerns over non-basic—culturally cultivated—social concerns. Our responsibility practices might reflect certain culturally relative concerns, but our basic concerns shape the general structure of those practices. They provide, as Watson puts it, a normative framework, within which our responsibility practices, including the non-basic concerns they might involve, must operate. In this respect, our non-basic, culturally relative concerns are answerable to our basic concerns in a way our basic concerns aren’t answerable to our non-basic concerns. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This isn’t to say that every responsibility practice necessarily expresses our basic social concerns. It seems possible for us to institute certain responsibility practices that fail to express the basic social concerns relevant to responsibility. Such practices, though, will be controversial. They’ll thus also be relatively fringe and non-paradigmatic. For instance, I might create a policy that penalizes my students for *any* absence from class. My policy might be motivated by a purely regulative concern: it will deter my students from making up excuses and skipping class. Because this policy penalizes students, though, holding them responsible, my students would surely bridle at it. And their discontent would make sense. Such a policy is contrary to our social sentimental nature; we don’t hold people responsible merely to regulate behavior. In this sense, responsibility practices that we institute and that fail to reflect our basic concerns will be alienating. They’ll therefore also likely be socially unstable and atypical; we might even distance them from the notion of responsibility. Interestingly, then, where responsibility practices fail to properly express our social sentimental nature, it seems our social sentimental nature will nevertheless be expressed in our reactions to those practices (cf. Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment,” 210-211). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for helping me appreciate this point and suggesting I incorporate it into the paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Thanks to two anonymous reviewers for encouraging me to address this worry. The rest of this section is indebted to their helpful feedback. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. There is a potential worry here: if the norms and values that guide a community can vary, doesn’t this mean that the capacities required to participate in that community’s social and moral life can vary? And if this is the case, doesn’t this mean that whether, say, a very young child or a severely mentally ill person is morally responsible can vary by community? Here, it is again important not to overstate the differences between human communities. See, for instance, P.F. Strawson, “Social Morality and Individual Ideal,” *Philosophy* 36 (Jan. 1961), 1-17. There, Strawson points out that any (human) moral system will be founded on the same sorts of interests: we are all vulnerable to injury and death, we all rely on people in various ways, and we all seem to want some say in how we’re treated. This will make certain sorts of obligations and virtues relevant to any human community; our social and moral life will be founded on the same sorts of general norms and values, and thus will implicate the same sorts of general capacities. Moreover, mature humans share roughly the same intellectual, social, and emotional capacities, and it would be utterly bizarre if some community’s social and moral life only required the capacities of an infant, say, when the adults around that infant are capable of so much more (see Pamela Hieronymi, “Reflection and Responsibility,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 42 (Winter 2014), 35, and especially Hieronymi’s manuscript, *Freedom, Resentment, and the Metaphysics of Morals*). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. One might doubt how central a concern about quality of will is to human responsibility practices. I don’t mean to suggest that the plausibility of the Strawsonian reversal depends on this as the complete gloss of our social sentimental nature. Even if this proposal is wrong or incomplete, one can still develop the reversal by elaborating an alternative or more complete account of the relevant basic concerns. For one example, consider David Shoemaker’s “tripartite” account of responsibility. Shoemaker distinguishes three senses of responsibility (which, it is worth mentioning, he argues are universal among humans). The first, accountability, revolves around how people regard each other; the second, attributability, revolves around the quality of people’s characters; and the third, answerability, revolves around the quality of people’s rational judgments (see David Shoemaker, *Responsibility from the Margins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015)). If Shoemaker is right, then perhaps our responsibility practices express three basic concerns: a concern with quality of regard (the concern Strawson emphasizes), a concern with quality of character, and a concern with quality of judgment. If so, these concerns would each put normative constraints on different aspects of our responsibility practices. My point, then, is only that it doesn’t seem implausible to suppose that there are some basic, human social concerns; I don’t mean to argue for a particular gloss of those concerns. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for prompting me to say more about this. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See, e.g., Pamela Hieronymi, “The Force and Fairness of Blame,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 18 (2004), 136; T.M. Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, Blame* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Michael McKenna, *Conversation and Responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Watson, “Peter Strawson,” 17-21; and Shoemaker, *Responsibility from the Margins.* [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment,” 198-199. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Cf., for instance, Sharon Street’s reflective, social insect example, from her “Coming to Terms with Contingency,” in *Constructivism in Practical Philosophy*, eds. James Lenman and Yonaten Shemmer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 53-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. For one prominent theorist who has recently challenged this non-contingent, rationalistic conception of morality from a metaethical standpoint that shares much with Strawson, see Sharon Street, especially her above-mentioned “Coming to Terms with Contingency.” [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment,” 192-199. For a helpful discussion of Strawson’s argument, see Michael McKenna, “Where Strawson and Frankfurt Meet,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 29 (2005), 163-181. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Todd, “Strawson, Moral Responsibility, and the ‘Order of Explanation,’” 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)