**Two Strawsonian Strategies for Accounting for Morally Responsible Agency**

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***1. Introduction***

Not all agents are thought to be appropriately held responsible for what they do or for the attitudes that they have. Infants, people with severe forms of mental illness—we exempt certain agents, to varying degrees, from our responsibility practices. But what accounts for this? Why should we treat these agents differently than those whom we regard as responsible? What is it to be a morally responsible agent, and what is required for one to be appropriately accorded this status?[[1]](#footnote-1) Questions like these have a long philosophical history. And for good reason. From a moral point of view, having answers to these questions is crucial because they concern how we ought to treat each other. But understanding morally responsible agency is also crucial for understanding social and moral life more broadly, undergirded as it is by our responsibility practices.

In this paper, my aim isn’t to answer the foregoing questions, although what I have to say bears on some answers that theorists have given to them. Rather than account for morally responsible agency, I intend to discuss how we might go about accounting for it in the first place. Specifically, I aim to address one particularly widespread approach to accounting for morally responsible agency, an approach that derives from P.F. Strawson’s landmark (1962) essay, “Freedom and Resentment.” For Strawson, and for many theorists who have followed him, what it means to be morally responsible depends in some way on the nature of our practices of holding responsible. To account for morally responsible agency, then, one must first consider what goes into treating someone likea morally responsible agent. Call this the “Strawsonian strategy.” My aim is to put forth and motivate a distinctive way of developing this Strawsonian strategy, one that, I argue, is more promising than the predominant way that theorists have tended to develop it.

The predominant way that theorists have tended to develop the Strawsonian strategy has been in terms of the nature of the emotions and feelings that characterize our responsibility practices—the so-called “reactive attitudes,” like resentment, indignation, and gratitude. On this attitude-based Strawsonian strategy, one first characterizes the nature of these attitudes—what they respond to, for instance, or how they engage the person at whom they’re directed. One then uses this characterization to determine the capacities that are required for one to be an appropriate object of the reactive attitudes and, thus, a morally responsible agent.[[2]](#footnote-2) While there are certain virtues to this approach, I worry that the reactive attitudes are the wrong level at which to base a theory of morally responsible agency.

Instead of accounting for morally responsible agency in terms of the reactive attitudes themselves, I argue that we ought to account for such agency in terms of the concern underlying those attitudes, the concern that leaves us susceptible to them in the first place. On my “concern-based” Strawsonian strategy, in other words, to account for morally responsible agency, we first need to account for the nature of the concern around which our responsibility practices revolve.[[3]](#footnote-3) By accounting for morally responsible agency in terms of this concern we can capture what is compelling about the attitude-based Strawsonian strategy, while avoiding its problems. Further, I argue, the concern-based Strawsonian strategy puts us in a better position to understand the distinctive social and moral significance of being and being regarded as a morally responsible agent. In this sense, it puts us in a position to better understand what it meansto be such an agent.

***2. The Attitude-Based Strawsonian Strategy***

In “Freedom and Resentment,” Strawson famously characterized our practices of holding responsible in terms of the reactive attitudes, like resentment, indignation, gratitude, guilt, and so on. Many theorists, even those who distance themselves from other aspects of Strawson’s thought, have followed Strawson in characterizing our responsibility practices in terms of these attitudes. Strawson, though, introduced the reactive attitudes in order to make a larger point about responsibility. “Only by attending to this range of attitudes,” he writes, “can we 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” (Strawson 1962, 64). Strawson’s thought here suggests that what it means to be morally responsible depends in some way on our practices of holding responsible, particularly on the reactive attitudes that characterize those practices. This idea has inspired many theorists interested in moral responsibility.

Theorists have typically developed such Strawsonian accounts of moral responsibility by attending to the *nature* of the reactive attitudes. Gary Watson was perhaps the first person to develop the Strawsonian approach in this way. In his influential (1987) paper, “Responsibility and the Limits of Evil,” Watson argues that Strawson’s account of responsibility is incomplete. Specifically, Watson argues that Strawson fails to account for the conditions that morally responsible agency requires. Strawson, according to Watson, tells us what sorts of agents we don’t consider morally responsible—young children, for instance, or people with severe mental illness—but he doesn’t tell us *why* we exempt such agents from responsibility. Strawson doesn’t tell us “what kind of explanations exempt” or “how this works” (Watson 1987, 263).[[4]](#footnote-4)

To fill this lacuna in Strawson’s account, Watson suggests that we understand the reactive attitudes as “forms of communication, which make sense only on the assumption that the other can comprehend the message” (Watson 1987, 265). Building on Strawson’s suggestion that the reactive attitudes express a demand for goodwill or regard, that is, Watson proposes that the reactive attitudes aim at communicating a moral demand for reasonable regard. And such demanding, Watson explains, “presumes understanding on the part of the object of the demand” (264). Intelligibly communicating a demand to another person, in other words, requires that the other person be capable of understanding what is being demanded of them. If someone is incapable of comprehending the demand for reasonable regard that the reactive attitudes communicate, then, Watson holds, that person is an unintelligible object of that demand and, thus, an unintelligible object of the reactive attitudes. In such a case, the reactive attitudes “lose their point as forms of moral address” (265).

Many theorists have followed Watson, adopting some variation of this communication proposal. There are interesting differences between these theorists. What they share, however, is more important here. All agree that the reactive attitudes are forms of moral address, which communicate some kind of moral message, and they all argue that this puts certain constraints on what is required for someone to be a morally responsible agent.[[5]](#footnote-5) Watson and his followers thus all employ what I’m calling the “attitude-based Strawsonian strategy,” accounting for morally responsible agency in terms of the nature of the reactive attitudes.

R. Jay Wallace, in his influential book, *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments*, also employs this general strategy. Wallace’s account begins with the following thesis: “*S* is morally responsible (for action x) if and only if it would be appropriate to hold *s* morally responsible (for action x)” (Wallace 1994, 91). Because Wallace takes the reactive attitudes, by which he means only resentment, indignation, and guilt, to be tied up with sanctioning behavior, he suggests that we construe the sense of “appropriate” in the foregoing thesis as concerning “fairness.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Thus, for Wallace, someone is a morally responsible agent if and only if that person has the capacities that make it fair—reasonable—to respond to that person with the reactive attitudes.[[7]](#footnote-7) What capacities are these? According to Wallace, the reactive attitudes are essentially ways of holding people to moral obligations. And so, he argues, it is only fair, or reasonable, to respond to someone with the reactive attitudes if that person is capable of grasping and applying the moral reasons that underlie the obligations those attitudes hold that person to (see Wallace, 1994, chapter 6). Wallace, then, like Watson, ultimately accounts for morally responsible agency in terms of the nature of the reactive attitudes.

Finally, other theorists, like Michael McKenna (2012) and David Shoemaker (2015, 2017), have accounted for morally responsible agency in terms of the “fittingness” of reactive attitudes. This approach begins with an insight about emotions. Emotions are commonly thought to have a cognitive component, representing the world in some way, and they are said to be unfitting when they misrepresent the world. Fear, for example, is often taken to be a response to danger. If this is the case, the thought goes, when one fears something, one represents that thing as dangerous, and, so, if one fears something that isn’t in fact dangerous, one’s fear isn’t fitting; it misrepresents the world. Similarly, the foregoing theorists argue, the reactive attitudes are emotional responses to something, and they are thus only fitting when they are directed at whatever that is. To what, then, do the reactive attitudes respond? The predominant suggestion is “quality of will,” understood in terms of another’s regard. Thus, McKenna (2012), for instance, holds that the reactive attitudes represent someone as having acted with regard or disregard, and so he concludes that morally responsible agency requires the capacity for one’s actions to express such regard or disregard.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Strawsonian theorists have thus developed many different accounts of morally responsible agency. They’ve arrived at these accounts, though, through a common strategy. All account for morally responsible agency in terms of what the reactive attitudes are, taking the nature of the reactive attitudes to explain what capacities are required for such agency. For all of these theorists, that is, whether someone is a morally responsible agent depends on whether that person can be an appropriate object of the reactive attitudes, and whether that person can be an appropriate object of the reactive attitudes is a matter of some feature that those attitudes have, some way that they engage the person at whom they’re directed. Thus, Watson and his followers argue that the reactive attitudes communicate a moral message of some kind, and they therefore hold that morally responsible agency requires that one can be an intelligible object of such communication; Wallace argues that the reactive attitudes hold people to moral obligations, and so takes it that responsible agency requires one be able to grasp and apply the reasons underlying those obligations; and fittingness theorists, like McKenna, argue that the reactive attitudes construe someone as having acted with a particular quality of regard, and so hold that morally responsible agency requires one to be capable of acting with that quality of regard.

Why adopt this attitude-based approach? There are, I think, two clear reasons. First, the attitude-based Strawsonian strategy is naturalistic. It provides a way of accounting for the conditions on being morally responsible that appeals only to facts about human beings and the sorts of attitudes with which we’re prone to respond to each other. The attitude-based strategy thus demystifies moral responsibility in precisely the sort of way that Strawson advocated in “Freedom and Resentment.” Second, this strategy has a certain intuitive appeal. If we understand holding people responsible in terms of the reactive attitudes, then it seems natural to think that the propriety of holding someone responsible is a matter of the propriety of those attitudes. It seems natural to think, in other words, that we can understand what is required for morally responsible agency by reflecting upon the attitudes that go into treating someone *like* a morally responsible agent.

***3. Worries for the Attitude-Based Strawsonian Strategy***

While there has been plenty of discussion of the particular Strawsonian theories canvassed above, the strategy that those theories employ—the attitude-based Strawsonian strategy—hasn’t itself received much critical discussion. Where there has been discussion, it has largely concerned the more general Strawsonian commitments underlying the strategy. Some theorists, for instance, have questioned whether the reactive attitudes are essential to our responsibility practices; others the Strawsonian strategy of deriving an account of moral responsibility from the nature of those practices.[[9]](#footnote-9) These lines of critique, of course, have implications for the attitude-based Strawsonian strategy, but they ultimately concern underlying features of any Strawsonian approach. Here, then, I’d like to discuss the attitude-based Strawsonian strategy more directly. I’m sympathetic with the general Strawsonian approach to moral responsibility. I doubt, though, that the attitude-based Strawsonian strategy is the best way to develop it.

As a starting point, it is worth emphasizing that advocates of the attitude-based Strawsonian strategy generally attempt to account for morally responsible agency in terms of some feature that the reactive attitudes share, as a class. This task is complicated, though, by the great variety of possible reactive attitudes. Consider, for instance, the diversity of reactive attitudes to which Strawson adverts, in “Freedom and Resentment.” Strawson writes of resentment, indignation, guilt, gratitude, moral approbation, anger, shame, forgiveness, hurt feelings, “the sort of love which two adults can sometimes be said to feel reciprocally,” and even “such phenomena as feeling bound or obliged” (Strawson 1962, 48, 52, 57). Other theorists, influenced by Strawson, have suggested that we extend the class of reactive attitudes to include attitudes that Strawson doesn’t mention, such as contempt (Mason 2003) and trust (Helm 2014).

If we adopt such inclusive understandings of the reactive attitudes, then this puts certain pressures on the attitude-based Strawsonian strategy, at least if that strategy involves finding a feature that the reactive attitudes all share. In short, the wider the variety of possible reactive attitudes, the more difficult it is to specify a feature common to all of them, on which to base one’s account of morally responsible agency. Take, for example, Watson’s communication view. It is far from clear that all of the reactive attitudes that Strawson mentions are communicative, addressing a demand for some kind of response from their object. Forgiveness, for instance, isn’t obviously communicative in this way, and neither are hurt feelings, guilt, or the feeling of obligation. Still, even if all of the reactive attitudes are communicative, it remains unlikely that attitudes like love, forgiveness, and hurt feelings call for or demand the same kind of response as, say, resentment or gratitude.[[10]](#footnote-10) And this creates the possibility that some of these attitudes, which either aren’t communicative or communicate distinctive messages, implicate different agential capacities than others do.

Something similar can be said about the fittingness of these attitudes. Are all of the reactive attitudes that Strawson mentions even emotions, akin to fear? Forgiveness, reciprocal love, and the feeling of obligation don’t obviously fit this paradigm. And the reactive attitudes that do seem to fit this paradigm nevertheless aren’t obviously emotional responses to the same thing. What, for instance, distinguishes anger from resentment? I’m not sure there is consensus here. However, some theorists take resentment to be moralized in a way that anger isn’t. Wallace, for example, suggests that resentment responds to someone’s violating a moral obligation, whereas anger responds to someone’s merely violating some (perhaps non-moral) norm (Wallace 1994, 39). If this is right, then these reactive attitudes might implicate different agential capacities in their object. Likewise, compare hurt feelings to resentment. Both might be responses to how someone regards us, or perhaps to how someone regards something important to us; but this isn’t a particularly illuminating level of description. More commonly, as we’ve seen, resentment is taken to respond to someone’s action reflecting *disregard* for us (see, e.g., McKenna 2012; Shoemaker 2015). This, though, makes resentment seem different from hurt feelings. Hurt feelings don’t seem to respond to disregard *per se*. One’s feelings might be hurt by perfectly respectful rejection. And again, this leaves open the possibility that resentment implicates different agential capacities than hurt feelings.[[11]](#footnote-11)

To be clear, I don’t mean to defend any particular understanding of the foregoing attitudes. My point is only that adopting a wide class of reactive attitudes, like Strawson does, seems to put certain pressures on the attitude-based Strawsonian strategy, at least if that strategy involves finding a common feature among the reactive attitudes. These pressures haven’t gone unrecognized by Strawsonian theorists. Wallace, for instance, in developing his account of moral responsibility, explicitly addresses them. An “inclusive interpretation of the reactive attitudes,” Wallace writes, “frustrates any attempt to provide an informative account of what unifies this set of emotions as a class” (Wallace 1994, 11). In light of this problem, Wallace adopts a narrower interpretation, according to which only resentment, indignation, and guilt are reactive attitudes.[[12]](#footnote-12) These three attitudes, Wallace argues, are unified because they all essentially hold people to obligations. Wallace then goes on to account for morally responsible agency in terms of this feature of his restricted class of reactive attitudes.

While not every attitude-based theorist has been as explicit as Wallace with respect to the foregoing pressures, it seems they’ve nevertheless recognized the difficulties such a wide class of reactive attitudes poses. Indeed, most Strawsonian theorists operate, at least implicitly, with a narrow interpretation of the reactive attitudes. Watson, for example, develops his communication proposal in terms of the “negative” reactive attitudes.[[13]](#footnote-13) Likewise, McKenna explicitly follows Wallace, prioritizing resentment, indignation (or moral disapprobation), and guilt (McKenna 2012, 64-66). Even Shoemaker (2015), who admirably makes a point of incorporating positive reactive attitudes into his account, and who distinguishes three kinds of responsibility, still operates with a narrower class than Strawson’s, focusing only on three pairs of attitudes: anger and gratitude, disdain and admiration, and regret and pride.

One way for proponents of the attitude-based Strawsonian strategy to handle the foregoing difficulty, then, is to narrow the class of reactive attitudes. This makes it easier to specify a feature that the reactive attitudes all share, and this in turn makes it easier to develop an attitude-based account of moral responsibility.

I worry, though, that narrowing the class of reactive attitudes like this creates a new problem for the attitude-based Strawsonian strategy. Earlier, I mentioned that part of what is so intuitive and appealing about this strategy is the thought that we can understand what is required to be a morally responsible agent by reflecting on the nature of the attitudes that go into treating someone likea morally responsible agent. In narrowing the class of reactive attitudes, however, attitude-based theorists risk divorcing their account of morally responsible agency, and indeed their understanding of the reactive attitudes, from other important attitudes that are involved in regarding and treating someone as responsible. Why privilege resentment over gratitude? Indignation over moral approbation? Why neglect attitudes like hurt feelings and forgiveness? The feeling of obligation? Insofar as a morally responsible agent is one whom it is appropriate to treat as responsible for her conduct or attitudes, insofar as such an agent is a fitting participant in our responsibility practices, it seems worrisome to account for morally responsible agency in terms of only some of the ways we engage people (including ourselves) as responsible agents, in terms of only some of the attitudes that characterize our responsibility practices. Relatedly, we might worry that the decision to focus on some of these attitudes and not others reflects a prejudgment about responsibility, a prejudgment that doesn’t seem to accord with the spirit of the Strawsonian project, which understands responsibility in terms of these attitudes, not the other way around.[[14]](#footnote-14)

How, then, might the attitude-based Strawsonian strategy accommodate the wide class of reactive attitudes? One way is to allow for the possibility that there are different kinds of responsibility. Earlier, for example, I mentioned that Shoemaker (2015) distinguishes three types of responsibility. He does so in terms of features shared among subclasses of the reactive attitudes. Anger and gratitude, Shoemaker argues, are both responses to the quality of regard people show each other; disdain and admiration are both responses to the quality of people’s characters; and regret and pride are both responses to the quality of people’s judgment. And each pair of reactive attitudes, Shoemaker holds, corresponds to a distinctive kind of responsibility: accountability, attributability, and answerability, respectively. By distinguishing between different kinds of responsibility like this, the attitude-based theorist can alleviate some of the pressure put on their strategy by the wide variety of reactive attitudes.

Here, I don’t intend to weigh in on whether there are in fact different kinds of responsibility. It’s worth remarking, however, that this is a subject of some controversy (see, e.g., Smith 2012, 2015). It would thus be notable, and not necessarily desirable, if the attitude-based Strawsonian strategy had to distinguish different kinds of responsibility in order to remain viable.

More to the point, however, it is unclear that distinguishing between different kinds of responsibility resolves the problems posed by the great variety of possible reactive attitudes. As I mentioned above, even Shoemaker, who distinguishes between three kinds of responsibility, still works with a narrower class of reactive attitudes than Strawson. This is a reflection of the fact, I think, that the wide class of reactive attitudes isn’t easily accommodated by the attitude-based Strawsonian strategy, even if one distinguishes between different kinds of responsibility, or attempts to find shared features only among subclasses of the reactive attitudes. Indeed, in a recent paper on hurt feelings, Shoemaker has explicitly discussed the difficulties here. The aptness conditions of hurt feelings, given their distinctive nature, he argues, are very different from those conditions that Strawsonian theorists have typically identified, with their focus on narrow classes of reactive attitudes. This includes the conditions that Shoemaker identifies with accountability, attributability, and answerability. And thus, Shoemaker holds, trying to accommodate hurt feelings puts attitude-based Strawsonian theorists in a rather difficult spot (Shoemaker 2019, 146-149). I suspect we could say something similar about other possible reactive attitudes, like reciprocal love, feelings of obligation, and forgiveness, which, as I argued above, don’t obviously share the features of the reactive attitudes more commonly discussed by Strawsonian theorists.

Of course, I can’t here argue that it is impossible for attitude-based theorists to find a satisfying way to carve things up. Perhaps there are new kinds of responsibility to be posited, or perhaps there are different, more accommodating ways of understanding the old kinds. I’m skeptical, though. The reactive attitudes represent a motley group of emotions and feelings, which engage their objects in various ways. I suspect trying to group them according to their distinctive features simply isn’t the best way forward.[[15]](#footnote-15)

So far, I’ve been assuming that the attitude-based Strawsonian strategy must proceed by identifying a feature that the reactive attitudes share, as a class (or as subclasses). And indeed, most attitude-based theorists, even those who distinguish between different kinds of responsibility, seem to operate under this assumption. Still, we might wonder about whether the attitude-based strategy must proceed in this way. Why not account for morally responsible agency in terms of all of the essential features that the reactive attitudes have, regardless of whether they share those features with other reactive attitudes? Thus, for instance, gratitude might have feature A, and resentment might have feature B, and hurt feelings might have feature C—and perhaps features A, B, and C all provide requirements for morally responsible agency. Adopting such an aggregative approach would allow one to avoid the pressures put on the attitude-based strategy by the great variety of possible reactive attitudes.[[16]](#footnote-16)

I believe, though, that we should be hesitant to adopt this aggregative approach. While it avoids the pressures that the wide variety of possible reactive attitudes puts on the attitude-based Strawsonian strategy, it does so at a significant theoretical cost. It leaves us without any unified understanding of morally responsible agency. In this respect, it is explanatorily unsatisfying.[[17]](#footnote-17)

For instance, if the reactive attitudes have different features that implicate different capacities, then it is possible that an agent has some of these capacities but not others. And in this case, it is possible that an agent can be, in principle, an appropriate object of resentment, say, but not gratitude. Would such an agent be a morally responsible agent? In either case, the answer isn’t satisfying. If the agent isn’ta morally responsible agent, then this seems odd. After all, the agent can be, in principle, an appropriate object of resentment. If the agent *is* a morally responsible agent, though, it seems merely to be because this agent can sometimes be an appropriate object of *some* reactive attitude. But is this really why an agent counts as a morally responsible agent? This isn’t a very illuminating way to think about morally responsible agency; there’s no cohesion here, only a sort of checklist of reactive attitudes, their features, and the capacities they implicate.

Even in the best-case scenario, the aggregative variant of the attitude-based approach still seems worrisome. It could be, that is, that the individual features of the reactive attitudes implicate the same set of capacities. Thus, any agent who can be, in principle, an appropriate object of resentment might also happen to be capable of being an appropriate object of the other reactive attitudes, and any agent who cannot be an appropriate object of resentment might also happen to be incapable of being an appropriate object of the other reactive attitudes. Further, this correlation, between being an appropriate object of a particular reactive attitude and being an appropriate object of the other reactive attitudes, might hold for each reactive attitude. But in this case, we might wonder: whence the harmony? Why does a heterogeneous group of attitudes, with distinctive features, implicate the same capacities? This seems to be more than mere coincidence; it suggests that something deeper is going on. But the aggregative attitude-based approach doesn’t appear to be in a position to explain whatever that is.

I doubt, then, that we should adopt the aggregative variant of the attitude-based Strawsonian strategy. But the problems that it faces point us towards a larger worry for the attitude-based strategy itself. This larger worry arises from the fact that the various reactive attitudes can themselves have numerous features. Even if we can identify a shared feature among the reactive attitudes (or even a relevant subclass), then, it isn’t clear that the attitude-based Strawsonian strategy thereby avoids the problems facing the aggregative approach.

Say, for instance, that the reactive attitudes are all communicative, morally addressing their object with the same moral message or demand. Surely some of those attitudes might nevertheless have other essential features, which aren’t shared among all of the reactive attitudes. After all, even if the reactive attitudes belong to a singular class, they are still different attitudes with different characters; they must be distinguished somehow. If reactive attitudes have distinctive essential features, though, do these distinctive features have implications for morally responsible agency?

Perhaps they don’t. Perhaps only the features that are shared among all of the reactive attitudes (or the relevant subclass) are relevant for understanding morally responsible agency. But it isn’t entirely clear why this would be. A number of theorists, for example, have recently suggested that the blaming reactive attitudes, like resentment and indignation, protest—stand up against, challenge—morally offensive claims that are implicit in wrongdoing.[[18]](#footnote-18) Say that this is true, but add that all of the reactive attitudes, blaming and non-blaming alike, share a communicative feature. In this case, it isn’t obvious that the communicative feature, which is shared among all of the reactive attitudes, should be more relevant to understanding morally responsible agency than the blaming reactive attitudes’ protest feature. If what drives the attitude-based Strawsonian strategy is the idea that we can understand morally responsible agency by thinking about the way the reactive attitudes engage the person toward whom they’re directed, then it seems like all of the ways that that these attitudes engage individuals should be relevant for understanding morally responsible agency.

But if all of the features of the reactive attitudes are relevant to morally responsible agency, even those features that aren’t shared among the class of reactive attitudes as a whole, then the attitude-based Strawsonian strategy faces the same problems as the foregoing aggregative approach. Either the reactive attitudes’ different features implicate different agential capacities or they don’t. If they implicate different capacities, then, as we saw above, our account of morally responsible agency will lack meaningful unity and will thus be unsatisfying. If they implicate the same capacities, however, then this is curious. Why would a heterogeneous group of attitudes, with different features, which engage their objects in different ways, implicate the same agential capacities? This calls out for an explanation that the attitude-based Strawsonian strategy doesn’t seem able to provide.

***4. The Concern-Based Strawsonian Strategy: An Alternative***

The problem with the attitude-based Strawsonian strategy, I suspect, is that the reactive attitudes are a relatively superficial aspect of our responsibility practices. This isn’t to deny their significance for those practices—or, for that matter, for our lives, relationships, and communities. But I believe that these attitudes and their features are the wrong level at which to base a theory of morally responsible agency. The great variety of attitudes involved in our responsibility practices, along with the variety of features they might have, is testament to this. We’d do better, I believe, to focus on something more fundamental and less variable than the reactive attitudes themselves. I propose that we focus instead on the concern that leaves us susceptible to those attitudes in the first place.

Emotions and feelings don’t arise out of nowhere, after all. They come about because we’re invested in our world in particular ways (see, e.g., Helm 2001; Roberts 2003). I might feel worried for my friend, or disappointed by a choice she makes. I might feel sad to hear something fell through for her, or relieved to hear she got a job. I might feel happiness, frustration, or fear on her behalf. Such emotional turns come about because my friend matters to me; I care about her. If this person were someone I was indifferent about, I wouldn’t be prone to these kinds of emotions and feelings with respect to her.[[19]](#footnote-19) Similarly, our reactive attitudes don’t arise out of nowhere. They must be embedded in some sort of investment that we have in our world, some kind of concern about how people exercise their agency. This concern, of course, will be different from the kind that leaves one prone to, say, fear for one’s friend. Following Gary Watson (2014), then, I’ll call the relevant concern, the one that leaves us prone to the range of reactive emotions and feelings, the “basic concern.”[[20]](#footnote-20) To account for morally responsible agency, I believe, we must account for the nature of this particular concern. By focusing on the basic concern itself, rather than the nature of the emotions and feelings to which that concern leaves us prone, I think that we can better understand morally responsible agency, while avoiding the worries faced by the attitude-based Strawsonian strategy.

I’ll turn to the relative virtues of this “concern-based Strawsonian strategy” in the next two sections. First, let’s get a better sense of the strategy itself.

The distinction between the emotions and feelings to which we’re prone, on the one hand, and the concern that leaves us prone to them, on the other, is important to keep in mind, because it suggests a further distinction between two levels at which we can assess people’s emotions and feelings. The first level focuses on the particular emotion or feeling that one has in some circumstance. Thus, one might criticize my fear of flying by explaining that flying isn’t actually dangerous, or one might criticize my resentment as pointless when its object isn’t capable of responding to or understanding what it communicates. This first level of assessment contrasts with a second. The second level focuses on the concern that leaves one prone to certain emotions and feelings in the first place. For example, I might feel uneasy about my niece and nephew roughhousing near a vase in my living room. I might squirm when I see them begin to play. And my sister might criticize this reaction: “Oh, calm down. If they break that thing, they’d be doing you a favor. It’s ugly as hell.” Here, what is in dispute isn’t whether my worry or fear is in fact tracking a danger posed to the vase; what is in dispute is whether I should be concerned about the vase in the first place. Of course, my concern about the vase might have nothing to do with its beauty. Perhaps it is of sentimental value. But what’s relevant here is that if I were to explain this to my sister, I’d be explaining why I’m concerned about the vase, not why I perceive a threat to it. I’d be justifying my fear by justifying why the vase is an object worthy of the kind of concern that leaves me prone to fear for it. In this respect, I wouldn’t only be justifying the fear that my niece and nephew are eliciting at this particular moment; I’d also be justifying other kinds of emotions or feelings that I might have about the vase, such as the sense of relief that might attend my niece and nephew moving on to a new game.

We can distinguish, then, between two levels at which we can assess someone’s particular emotional response to something. We might assess the particular emotional response itself, on its own terms, so to speak, or we might assess the emotional response in terms of the concern underlying it, the concern that leaves one prone to respond that way in the first place.

The attitude-based Strawsonian strategy locates questions of morally responsible agency at the first level of assessment. It analyzes morally responsible agency, in other words, in terms of the nature of the reactive attitudes themselves, focusing on the reactive attitudes’ particular features and on the constraints that those features put on those attitudes’ propriety on any given occasion. The concern-based Strawsonian strategy that I’m proposing, on the other hand, locates questions of morally responsible agency at the second level of assessment. It analyzes morally responsible agency in terms of the nature of the concern that leaves us prone to respond to someone with the reactive attitudes in the first place. The idea is that our responsibility practices, and particularly the reactive attitudes undergirding them, are expressions of some particular form of concern, some particular way of being invested in what other people do or in the attitudes that they have. Whether someone is appropriately treated as a participant in our responsibility practices, then, whether someone is, in principle, an appropriate object of the reactive attitudes that characterize those practices, is a matter of whether it is appropriate to have this particular concern toward them. And so to account for morally responsible agency, on the concern-based strategy, we must first account for the nature of this concern, this way of being invested in people’s agency.

The difference between the two strategies, then, has to do with the explanation they pursue for why someone is or isn’t a morally responsible agent. The attitude-based Strawsonian strategy tries to understand morally responsible agency in terms of the nature of the reactive attitudes themselves. Thus, it tries to explain morally responsible agency by appealing to the way that those attitudes engage the person at whom they’re directed: the way those attitudes construe that person as having acted with some quality of will, the way that they morally address that person, the way that they hold that person to obligations, and so on. The concern-based strategy, on the other hand, explains morally responsible agency in terms of the basic concern, in terms of the way we’re invested in someone’s actions or attitudes, such that we’re prone to respond to them with the reactive emotions and feelings in the first place. The thought, then, is that when I resent someone who is suffering from severe psychosis for using slurs, what’s gone wrong doesn’t have to do with my resentment per se. The problem, the concern-based strategy proposes, is that I’m inappropriately invested in this person’s actions and attitudes. I shouldn’t be so concerned about how they exercise their agency. To have the basic concern toward this person is to relate to them improperly.

Of course, the concern-based Strawsonian strategy isn’t committed to the idea that the nature of the reactive attitudes is normatively irrelevant. We might still assess particular reactive attitudes’ propriety, given their distinctive features. If I resent someone, for example, it might still matter whether they showed disregard or violated some obligation. The point is simply that this kind of assessment comes later, after we’ve established whether that person is a morally responsible agent, an appropriate object of the basic concern. Take the foregoing example, where I believe the person suffering from psychosis is using slurs. If I resent this person, it might matter, for an assessment of my resentment itself, whether they were actually using slurs. But if it were clear that this person was suffering from a psychotic break, it seems like it would be odd for you to criticize my resentment on these kinds of grounds. The more salient issue is the way in which I’m invested in how this person acts. In a sense, I shouldn’t care if they use slurs, although the sense of caring here is limited to the basic concern.

The attitude-based and concern-based Strawsonian strategies thus both account for morally responsible agency by looking to our responsibility practices. They focus, though, on different aspects of those practices. Whereas the attitude-based strategy attempts to understand morally responsible agency in terms of the various emotions and feelings that characterize our responsibility practices, the concern-based strategy attempts to understand it in terms of the concern of which those emotions and feelings are an expression. The thought is that when we’re prone to respond to someone with reactive emotions and feelings, we’re in some way invested in that person’s actions or attitudes; we ascribe some special significance to how that person exercises their agency. If we can understand this way of being invested, this particular form of concern, the thought goes, then we can understand the significance that we ascribe to someone when we’re prone to respond to them with the reactive attitudes, and we can thus think about what kinds of capacities our concern presupposes that this person has. In this respect, we can understand what it means to be a morally responsible agent and what kinds of capacities such agency requires.[[21]](#footnote-21)

***5. Illustrating the Concern-Based Strawsonian Strategy as an Alternative***

We’re now in a position to see why the concern-based Strawsonian strategy can avoid the problems faced by its attitude-based counterpart. Those problems revolved around the great variety of possible reactive attitudes, along with the apparent variability between them. While the attitude-based Strawsonian strategy struggles in light of such variety and variability, the concern-based strategy can easily countenance it. Concerns, after all, can manifest in different ways. As we saw above, my concern for my friend might manifest in happiness, frustration, disappointment, sadness, relief, worry—a whole gamut of emotions and feelings, which revolve around my friend’s significance to me. Similarly, our basic concern can leave us prone to a variety of reactive attitudes. These reactive attitudes represent different ways of engaging with the significance that we ascribe to someone’s actions and attitudes when we have the basic concern towards them. This suggests that the reactive attitudes *should* be multifarious. Still, insofar as these attitudes reflect the same concern, they’ll reflect the nature of that concern. In this respect, the concern-based approach positions us to put the different features that the reactive attitudes might have into a larger context, providing a means for showing how these features, though distinctive, are nevertheless connected.

To illustrate the ideas here, it will help to have an account of the basic concern on the table. An obvious starting point for this is Strawson, who took our responsibility practices to revolve around a concern about the “quality of will” reflected in people’s actions. Strawson, that is, took us to care about whether people act with attitudes and intentions that reflect appropriate regard.[[22]](#footnote-22) I doubt, however, that Strawson’s account of the basic concern will do the trick. This is because Strawson focuses only on the object of the basic concern, not on the nature of that concern itself. Strawson, in other words, focuses on what the relevant concern is a concern *about.* This, though, is insufficient for understanding the basic concern, because we can care about the same thing in different ways.

For example, a sociologist might care about whether some person, who is a member of a group the sociologist is studying, treats others kindly. But the sociologist’s concern needn’t be the sort that leaves her prone to resentment or to feel gratitude. She might even be disappointed when the person acts kindly, perhaps because it undermines her hypothesis. Likewise, a parent might very well care about whether their child shows people good or ill will, proper regard. But this parent’s concern might not be the sort that leaves one prone to the reactive attitudes. It might, rather, simply be tied up with the parent’s project of raising a well-adjusted person. When the parent learns that their child hit one of her peers, for instance, the parent might not feel indignant; they might simply worry about their child or about how they’re raising her. Finally, a psychiatrist might care about her patient’s attitudes and intentions, including whether her patient shows good or ill will; however, she might care in a way that doesn’t leave her in any way susceptible to the reactive attitudes. The psychiatrist’s concern might merely be clinical; she might just want to diagnose her patient or to help her patient cope with things.[[23]](#footnote-23)

It is crucial, then, for the concern-based Strawsonian strategy to characterize not only what the basic concern is a concern about but also the way in which we care about that thing when we have the basic concern about it. This speaks to a major lacuna in extant theorizing about the moral psychology of responsibility. While many theorists have taken the reactive attitudes to revolve around the attitudes and intentions, the “quality of will,” with which people act, this hasn’t typically been characterized in terms of our being concerned about people’s quality of will. Consequently, theorists have tended to focus on the object of the basic concern—on the relevant “quality of will” to which the reactive attitudes respond—and not on the way that people’s quality of will matters to us when we have the basic concern, when we’re prone to respond to them with the reactive attitudes.[[24]](#footnote-24)

To illustrate the concern-based Strawsonian strategy, then, and particularly to show how it avoids the problems faced by its attitude-based counterpart, let me briefly adumbrate my preferred way of understanding the basic concern. To be clear, my aim in this paper isn’t to develop or defend any particular view of the basic concern or any particular concern-based theory of responsible agency. Here, then, I merely mean to gesture at one way that we might understand the basic concern, in an effort to elucidate how the concern-based strategy works.

The basic concern can be understood as constituting a particular way of relating to people. On my preferred view, when we have the basic concern toward someone, we take ourselves to stand with that person in relations that are premised upon sharing an understanding of what should matter. This isn’t to say that we take our relations with this person to be premised upon our having the *same* understanding of what should matter. The idea, rather, is that we ascribe a kind of authority to the other person’s evaluative outlook. Their perspective on what should matter can make a kind of claim on us; it can call into question, challenge, and affirm our perspective about such matters. I thus conceive of the basic concern as a concern about the evaluative outlook reflected in people’s actions and attitudes. And to have this concern, I believe, is to care about that person’s evaluative outlook as the evaluative outlook of a kind of normative interlocutor, someone with whom we negotiate the values at stake in our relations. The reactive attitudes can plausibly understood as expressions of this concern. They can be understood, that is, as engaging with the way in which someone’s evaluative outlook calls into question, challenges, or affirms our conception of what should matter within the context of our relations with that person.[[25]](#footnote-25)

There is no doubt plenty more to say about the foregoing account of the basic concern, but what I’ve said should be enough to shed light on the concern-based strategy and its virtues.

If the foregoing account of the basic concern is right, then this way of being concerned will be reflected in the reactive attitudes that characterize our responsibility practices. What would this look like? Consider, for example, the blaming reactive attitudes. As we’ve seen, some theorists take the blaming reactive attitudes to protest offensive claims that are implicit in wrongdoing, while others take those attitudes to communicate a moral message or demand. Both features of these attitudes can be understood in terms of the foregoing account of the basic concern. Begin with protest. When someone treats us with indifference or disregard, their attitude might challenge our perspective about our own moral standing, about the kinds of attitudes that are appropriate to have towards us. And this, on my view, is because we ascribe a kind of authority to the other person’s evaluative outlook. In disregarding us, the person’s action suggests that we don’t matter in the way that we think we should. Our resentment can be thought of as standing up against this claim, against the implicit suggestion that we ought to accept the propriety of the other person’s indifference or disregard (see Hieronymi 2001). Likewise, a number of theorists have suggested that the blaming reactive attitudes aim at getting the other person to recognize the wrongness of what they’ve done (see, e.g., Macnamara 2015a and Shoemaker 2015, 103-112). Such a communicative aim makes sense if our resentment is undergirded by the foregoing account of the basic concern. If we have such a concern, then it will matter to us that the other person recognizes the wrongness of what they’ve done. There will be some urgency to their rebuking their own wrongdoing, because we care about their attitudes as those of a kind of peer, a normative interlocutor.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Again, my aim here isn’t to defend the account of the basic concern that I’ve proffered. The point, rather, has to do with the relative virtues of the concern-based strategy over the attitude-based strategy. Say that the blaming reactive attitudes have both a protest and a communicative feature. We’ve already seen that such a plurality of features poses problems for the attitude-based Strawsonian strategy, particularly since these features aren’t obviously shared with other reactive attitudes. The problem is that the attitude-based strategy attempts to account for morally responsible agency in terms of the reactive attitudes’ features themselves; it takes morally responsible agency to be explained by those features. The concern-based Strawsonian strategy, on the other hand, can sidestep such issues precisely because it focuses on the more fundamental phenomenon: the concern that our reactive attitudes, including their features, presuppose. In this respect, the concern-based Strawsonian strategy can easily countenance the various features reactive attitudes might have.

It can also countenance variability between the reactive attitudes. While hurt feelings may not protest or communicate, at least not in the foregoing way, they might nevertheless be understood as being undergirded by the basic concern, as I’ve construed it here. This is because the basic concern leaves us importantly vulnerable to other people. Other people can call into question our conception of our relations with them; they can call into question our ideas about what should matter—how we, along with the things that are important to us, should fit into their worlds. And this can be alienating, socially disorienting. Hurt feelings seem tied up with this.[[27]](#footnote-27) Likewise, many theorists use the protest feature of resentment to make sense of forgiveness, which doesn’t itself protest, but which can be understood as a response to a past action’s ceasing to make a claim on us that merits protest (Hieronymi 2001). So, if the account of the basic concern I’ve suggested plausibly explains the protest feature of blame, then it can also help us understand forgiveness, despite the ways forgiveness is different from resentment.

The concern-based strategy thus allows us to countenance and respect the diverse character of the reactive attitudes. It also promises to provide an illuminating account of morally responsible agency.

On this strategy, recall, morally responsible agency is explained in terms of the particular form of concern that leaves us prone to respond to someone with the reactive attitudes. We’re now in a position to consider this strategy more concretely. Take, for example, the foregoing account of the basic concern. To have this concern is to care about someone’s evaluative outlook as the evaluative outlook of a normative interlocutor. When we have it, in other words, we ascribe a particular significance to that person’s outlook, an authority, such that their outlook can call into question, challenge, and affirm our own perspective about what should matter. This is, purportedly, what explains our proneness to the reactive attitudes; it is the concern around which our responsibility practices revolve. If this is right, then a morally responsible agent just is this kind of normative interlocutor, and morally responsible agency will thus require the capacities necessary to operate as such an interlocutor. This might mean that such agency requires, for instance, certain general evaluative and rational capacities, and perhaps the more substantive capacity to appreciate (or maybe come to appreciate) the particular values at stake in the context in which one’s responsibility is under question.

Again, my aim here isn’t to defend my preferred understanding of the basic concern, nor is it to defend the particular theory of morally responsible agency that it gives rise to. Indeed, we might imagine other accounts of the basic concern and other theories of morally responsible agency. Perhaps, for example, when we have the basic concern, we care about people’s actions and attitudes *qua* objects of social regulation. This might suggest a picture of our responsibility practices that looks consequentialist. And a morally responsible agent, if we accept this account of the basic concern, might be such an object of social regulation, someone whose actions and attitudes are capable of such regulation. Or perhaps the basic concern is a concern about people’s actions *qua* models of human possibility or excellence. This might suggest a picture of our responsibility practices that looks like Gary Watson’s suggestive “aretaic” face of responsibility (Watson 1996, 243). A responsible agent, on this picture, might be such a model, someone capable, perhaps, of authoring their actions in a certain way.[[28]](#footnote-28)

More, of course, would have to be said about these other possibilities. For my part, I prefer my normative interlocution account. I suspect it stands a better chance of capturing what’s most central to our responsibility practices. In any case, here I’ve simply meant to bring out what is distinctive about the concern-based Strawsonian strategy, not to defend any particular account of the basic concern or of morally responsible agency. Whereas the attitude-based strategy explains morally responsible agency in terms of the reactive attitudes and the distinctive features they have, the concern-based strategy focuses instead on the concern underlying those attitudes, the concern that leaves us susceptible to and that informs the nature of those attitudes in the first place. And this allows the concern-based Strawsonian strategy to avoid the problems faced by its attitude-based rival.

***6. Some Other Virtues***

The attitude-based Strawsonian strategy thus appears to face certain issues that the concern-based Strawsonian strategy avoids. This, though, isn’t the only reason to prefer the concern-based approach. Before concluding, I’d like to proffer two more reasons in its favor. First, the concern-based strategy shares the attitude-based strategy’s virtues. And second, it promises to tell us more about what it means to be a morally responsible agent.

Earlier, I drew attention to two virtues of the attitude-based Strawsonian strategy. The first concerned its naturalism; the second its intuitive appeal. The concern-based Strawsonian strategy shares both of these virtues.

Consider the attitude-based Strawsonian strategy’s naturalism. The attitude-based strategy demystifies responsibility in precisely the sort of way that Strawson advocated in “Freedom and Resentment,” providing a way to account for moral responsibility that appeals only to facts about human beings and the attitudes with which we’re prone to respond to each other. The concern-based Strawsonian strategy is similarly naturalistic. Reactive attitudes, as a range of emotions and feelings, must be underpinned by some kind of concern. In accounting for morally responsible agency in terms of this concern, then, the concern-based strategy appeals only to facts about humans and our social sentimental nature.[[29]](#footnote-29) It aims to unpack morally responsible agency, in other words, in terms of the feature of human sociality and psychology that explains our proneness to the reactive emotions and feelings in the first place.

The attitude-based strategy’s second virtue is its intuitive appeal. It seems natural to think that we can understand what is required to be a morally responsible agent by thinking about the attitudes that are involved in treating someone likea morally responsible agent. Of course, as we’ve seen, these attitudes might take various forms, and this complicates things. But we can extend this intuitive line of thought to avoid these complications. Rather than merely think about the nature of the attitudes that are involved in treating someone like a morally responsible agent, rather than merely think about *how* we treat morally responsible agents, we can think about *why* we’re prone to those sorts of attitudes, why we’re prone to treat morally responsible agents in thatway. This latter idea is precisely what motivates the concern-based Strawsonian strategy. In this sense, the concern-based Strawsonian strategy seems rooted in the same sort of intuitive line of thought as its attitude-based counterpart.

By sharing its virtues and avoiding its problems, the concern-based Strawsonian strategy seems more promising than the attitude-based strategy. However, there is still another reason to prefer the concern-based strategy.

Morally responsible agency marks a distinctive status; it carries with it a particular sort of social and moral significance. An account of such agency ought to tell us about the nature of this status, this significance. It ought to tell us, in other words, about what it *means* to be a morally responsible agent. This is crucial both for characterizing the mistake we make in holding someone responsible who isn’t a morally responsible agent and, relatedly, for understanding why certain capacities are required to be such an agent. The concern-based Strawsonian strategy, I’d like to suggest, better positions us to understand what it means to be a morally responsible agent than its attitude-based counterpart. In this respect, I believe it promises to give us a fuller account of morally responsible agency.

By focusing on the basic concern, rather than on the nature of the reactive attitudes, the concern-based Strawsonian strategy focuses on the phenomenon that more directly bears on the significance we ascribe to morally responsible agents. This isn’t to say that considering the nature of the reactive attitudes and the way they engage their objects doesn’t tell us anything about this significance. The point, rather, is that this is an indirect way to get at it. Consider, for instance, the communication view. Say that the reactive attitudes communicate some kind of moral message or demand. This surely reflects our ascribing significance to the other person. But how should we understand this significance? More can be said here. And to say more, we need to fit this communicative feature into a bigger picture.

The concern-based strategy already focuses on that bigger picture. This is because it goes beyond considering *how* we engage with morally responsible agents and focuses on *why* we engage with them in that way. Take, once more, my preferred account of the basic concern as an example. Earlier, I suggested that this account might illuminate the communicative feature of the blaming reactive attitudes. Those attitudes might aim at communicating the wrongness of what the other person did—they might aim at getting that person to appreciate the import of their actions—and our attitudes might have this communicative aim precisely because we see that person’s attitudes as mattering *for us,* as carrying a kind of practical authority. By fitting this communicative feature of resentment and indignation into a larger framework, it becomes easier to see the significance of being morally addressed through resentment and indignation. Such address, if my proposal is right, reflects our investment in someone as a fellow participant in social and moral life.

Because the basic concern more directly bears on the significance that we ascribe to morally responsible agents, it also promises to tell us more about the nature of the mistake we make when we hold someone responsible who isn’t a morally responsible agent. Imagine, for example, that I resent an infant for squealing in a coffee shop. What’s gone wrong? The attitude-based Strawsonian strategy, we’ve seen, would explain the mistake I’m making in terms of some feature of my resentment. Thus, Watson and communication theorists might hold that my resentment of this infant isn’t intelligible, because she isn’t an intelligible object of the moral demand or message that my resentment communicates; and Wallace might suggest that my resentment of the infant isn’t fair, because she isn’t capable of grasping or applying the reasons underlying the obligations my resentment holds her to; and fittingness theorists, like McKenna or Shoemaker, might suggest that my resentment isn’t fitting, because her action doesn’t express the disregard that my resentment takes it to be expressing. These explanations, though, don’t seem entirely satisfying. The problem with my resentment doesn’t simply seem to be with my resentment per se; it seems like it has to do with how I’m relating to this infant in the first place. I shouldn’t be prone to resent her, but neither should I be prone to have hurt feelings when she isn’t interested in me or to have gratitude toward her when she hands me her teddy bear.[[30]](#footnote-30) Being so prone means I’m comporting myself toward this infant inappropriately; I’m inappropriately invested in her attitudes and intentions. And this is precisely the sort of explanation the concern-based Strawsonian strategy gives.

The difference here between the attitude-based and concern-based strategies is interesting, because it doesn’t necessarily concern the capacities that the respective strategies identify as being required for morally responsible agency. That is, it might be that the infant isn’t a morally responsible agent because she, say, lacks the capacity to appreciate the significance of what she did. And the attitude-based and concern-based strategies might both identify this capacity as the relevant reason she isn’t appropriately resented. However, there is a further question here: why is this capacity the relevant one? What I’m suggesting now is that the concern-based approach is better positioned to address this latter question. And in this respect, it is poised to provide a fuller account of morally responsible agency than its attitude-based counterpart.

The concern-based Strawsonian strategy, then, not only can avoid the worries of its attitude-based counterpart; it also provides a naturalistic, intuitively appealing way of accounting for morally responsible agency, one that, I believe, promises to better illuminate what it *means* to be a morally responsible agent.

***7. Conclusion***

The attitude-based Strawsonian strategy has been, by far, the predominant approach that Strawsonian theorists have taken to accounting for morally responsible agency. In this paper, I hope to have articulated and motivated an alternative. More work, of course, remains to be done. To start, we need a full account of the basic concern. Still, I’m hopeful. Once we step back from the reactive attitudes and focus on the concern that leaves us susceptible to them, I believe we’ll have a better sense of what it means to be a morally responsible agent. Stepping away from the reactive attitudes might also give us a better view of the reactive attitudes themselves, allowing us to understand them as a class, while embracing, even illuminating, their diversity.

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1. By “moral” here, I simply mean to identify the sense of responsibility at stake in our ordinary social and moral practices. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, e.g., Watson 1987, 2011; Wallace 1994; Darwall 2006; Shoemaker 2007, 2015, 2017; McKenna 2012; Talbert 2012; and Macnamara 2015a, 2015b. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This strategy is a corollary of my concern-based construal of Strawson’s “reversal” thesis, his thesis that what it means to be morally responsible is determined by our practices of holding responsible. I develop this construal in Beglin 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It isn’t clear to me that Watson is entirely correct in his criticism of Strawson, but I’ll bracket this question, as it doesn’t ultimately bear on the project of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See, for instance, Darwall 2006; Shoemaker 2007; Watson 2011; and Macnamara 2015a and 2015b. Relatedly, some theorists, particularly Matthew Talbert (2012) and Angela Smith (2013), have developed an alternative to Watson’s communication proposal, which borrows from Watson’s basic idea. These theorists take blame, or resentment, to also, or primarily, protest morally offensive claims that are implicit in wrongdoing, and they argue that this feature of blame puts constraints on morally responsible agency. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The connection between the reactive attitudes and sanction is another notable theme in attitude-based theorizing. Watson, for instance, in his classic (1996) “Two Faces of Responsibility,” draws a connection between reactive attitudes, demands, and sanctions. This suggests a connection between the communication view and the notion of sanction, which I’ll have to leave unexplored here. e left that connection unexplored.he notion of sanctions in this paper, so I'between the communication view and the notion of sMany thanks to a reviewer for suggesting this point to me. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Wallace unpacks these points in his “methodological interlude” (see Wallace 1994, 84-109). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Shoemaker (2015) has roughly the same picture, but he complicates it by distinguishing between three kinds of responsibility, in terms of three kinds of “quality of will” to which subgroups of the reactive attitudes respond. Throughout the paper, I’ll focus on regard, to keep things simple. I discuss Shoemaker and the move towards distinguishing different kinds of responsibility below. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For recent discussions of this first line of critique, see Sher 2006, Scanlon 2008, and Wallace 2011. For recent discussions of the second line, see Todd 2016, Shoemaker 2017, and Beglin 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Could the reactive attitudes be helpfully thought of as communicating a relatively minimal message, perhaps about how it is appropriate to treat people? Many thanks to a reviewer for raising this possibility. My sense is that even such a minimal message isn’t obviously shared by the wide class of reactive attitudes. Consider, for instance, hurt feelings. As I mention below, hurt feelings don’t seem to always be a response to inappropriate behavior. Likewise, while gratitude is sometimes a response to supererogatory behavior, it isn’t obvious that it is only a response to behavior that goes beyond what is expected (see, e.g., Martin 2014). In this respect, it isn’t clear how central communicating something about how it is appropriate to treat people would be to reactive attitudes like hurt feelings and gratitude. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For a recent discussion of hurt feelings, and particularly of how they complicate the attitude-based Strawsonian strategy, see Shoemaker 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Wallace 1994, 25-33 and Wallace 2014, 121-122 for discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. “The *negative* reactive attitudes,” Watson writes, “express a moral demand, a demand for reasonable regard.” He continues: “Since the negativereactive attitudes involve this demand, they are not (as fully) appropriately directed to those who do not fully grasp the terms of this demand” (Watson 1987, 264; my emphasis). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Thanks to Agnieszka Jaworska for discussion about these points. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. While I won’t focus on the possibility that there are different kinds of responsibility in this paper, I suspect that if there are, then those kinds of responsibility are better understood in terms of different concerns underlying subclasses of the reactive attitudes, rather than in terms of the nature of those attitudes themselves. Interestingly, in his landmark essay, “Two Faces of Responsibility,” Gary Watson distinguishes between accountability and attributability, two kinds of responsibility, in terms of concerns that seem to drive them (see Watson 1996, 243). While his essay isn’t clearly written in a Strawsonian vein, this is telling and might complicate the picture of Watson’s thought I’ve presented here. Many thanks to a reviewer for pointing this out to me. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Shoemaker seems to suggest something like this in light of the problems hurt feelings pose for the attitude-based approach (cf. Shoemaker 2019, 147-148). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The point here applies if we distinguish different kinds of responsibility, too. Indeed, it isn’t clear on what grounds an aggregative version of the attitude-based Strawsonian strategy would even distinguish between different kinds of responsibility, in part because there is no unity for the aggregative approach. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See, e.g., Hieronymi 2001, Talbert 2012, and Smith 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Here, I’m influenced by theorists like Bennett Helm (2001) and Agnieszka Jaworska (2007). It’s worth noting, though, that in this paper I’m employing the terms “care” and “concern” in a broader sense than these theorists. Much of the literature on caring is interested in caring as a way of being oriented toward something’s well-being or success. I mean to use the term to capture, more generally, a sort of emotional stance of investment in something. So, for example, caring about someone, for theorists like Helm and Jaworska, is distinct from being attached to someone (see Wonderly 2016). For my purposes, by contrast, attachment can be said to be a form of caring or concern. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Watson suggests that we have a basic concern about how people regard one another and a basic demand that we be treated with regard and good will. As we’ve seen, Watson understands morally responsible agency in terms of the basic demand: “to be a responsible agent is to be someone whom it makes sense to subject to such a demand” (Watson 2014, 17). My thought, *pace* Watson, is that responsible agency is better understood in terms of the basic concern, which, Watson himself notes, seems to underlie the basic demand. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. In *Communities of Respect,* Bennett Helm extends his work on the nature of caring into the realm of morality and responsibility. It’s helpful to contrast his view with the strategy I’m advocating here. While forms of caring (“reverence” and “respect”) play an important role in Helm’s thought, he doesn’t take responsible agency to be explained by the nature of such caring, at least as I’m proposing. This is because he takes a kind of non-foundationalist, communitarian approach. For Helm, someone is a responsible agent just in case they are a member of a community and thereby bound by its norms, and someone is a member of a community “just in case other members of that community treat her as a member in their reactive responses” (Helm 2017, 145). I worry that this approach leads to a problematic form of relativism. Rather than focus on interpersonal patterns of reactive responsiveness, then, the concern-based approach I’m advocating simply focuses on the nature of the relevant concern itself, on the way in which one is invested in someone’s agency such that one is prone to the reactive attitudes. The thought is that once we understand the nature of the basic concern, we can assess whether it is appropriate to have that concern toward someone. And this question is separate from the question of whether we, as a community, have this concern toward that person, or are disposed to respond to that person with the reactive attitudes (see Beglin 2018 for discussion). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Strawson 1962, 48-49; 56-58. In light of Strawson’s emphasis on this concern, it seems plausible to interpret him as employing the concern-based strategy. I won’t pursue this thought here, though. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Here, I’m inspired by Jonathan Bennett’s well-known criticism of Strawson’s account of the participant attitude (Bennett 1980, 35). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. An important exception to this is Pamela Hieronymi (2019), who has recently suggested that responsibility theorists might do better to focus on the way “minds” matter to us when we hold people responsible, rather than on whether certain consequences are merited. I take this suggestion to fit well with the point I’m making here, and, more generally, with the concern-based Strawsonian strategy. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. I develop this view of the basic concern in my manuscript, “The Participant Attitude, the Basic Concern, and the Moral Psychological Foundations of Responsibility.” [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. There is a possible connection here, then, between communicative and regulative views of the blaming reactive attitudes (cf. McGeer 2012). See also Fricker 2016 for an account of blame that takes blame to be communicative in a way that fits well with the ideas here. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Admittedly, there is much more to be said here. I hope, though, that this at least gestures at the way in which some core paradigm of hurt feelings might be undergirded by the basic concern. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Many thanks to a reviewer for suggesting these examples of other accounts of the basic concern. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. I owe the phrase “social sentimental nature” to Watson 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. I might have gratitude *about* something she does, but this isn’t the same as feeling gratitude *toward* her *for* something (see Walker 1980-81). Only the latter seems to have the interpersonal quality of a reactive attitude. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)