

The Moral Addressor Account of Moral Agency

Abstract

According to the practice-focused approach to moral agency, a participant stance towards an entity is warranted by the extent to which this entity qualifies as an apt *target* of ascriptions of moral responsibility, such as blame. Entities who are not eligible for such reactions are exempted from moral responsibility practices, and thus denied moral agency. I claim that many typically exempted cases may qualify as moral agents by being eligible for a distinct participant stance. When we participate in moral responsibility practices, we are not only participating as potential targets of moral reactions, but also as sources of such address, i.e. as *moral addressors*. By consequence, there are entities towards which we seem to have reason to adopt an *addressor participant stance*, regardless of their eligibility as moral addressees. This expanded theoretical room for moral agency may also be of normative import.

Keywords: moral responsibility, moral agency, the participant stance, moral practice, moral address

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1. Introduction

Young children, people with certain cognitive disabilities and conditions, nonhuman animals, and machines are typically denied moral agency. This denial is based on assumptions about what it means to be a moral agent. One such assumption is that the notion of moral agency designates entities who, in a general sense, qualify for ascriptions of moral responsibility (Talbert, 2019). Because young children, nonhuman animals, and many other entities, are taken to lack the capacities necessary for being morally responsible, they are denied moral agency (c.f. Tognazzini & Coates, 2018; Hew, 2014; Johnson, 2006; Parthemore & Whitby, 2013; Korsgaard, 2006, 2010; Ayala, 2010; Rowlands, 2012; Musschenga, 2015). A similar assumption can be found in the practice-focused approach to moral agency, which links this agency to a so-called participant stance toward the entity under consideration. A participant stance towards an entity is warranted by the extent to which this entity qualifies as a participant in a moral responsibility practice, and the usual way to deny it is to claim that this entity is not an apt *recipient* or *target* of ascriptions of moral responsibility, such as blame. Entities who are not eligible for such reactions are exempted from moral responsibility practices, and thus denied moral agency.

While this article adopts a practice-focused approach, I argue that this approach has so far construed participation in moral responsibility practices in an overly one-sided way, as it has overlooked important aspects of such participation. When we participate in these practices, we are not only participating as potential targets of moral address, but also as sources of such address, i.e. as *moral addressors*. Accordingly, even if an entity is not seen as a suitable target, or *addressee*, it may still be a moral addressor. In this paper, I will argue that being a moral addressor may ground a distinct form of participation in moral responsibility practices. In effect, an entity can be an *addressor participant* of moral responsibility practices, even if that entity fails to meet requirements for being an addressee participant. Such entities warrant the taking of an *addressor participant stance* toward them. This expanded theoretical room for moral agency may also serve to illuminate further, normative, reasons against exempting someone as a moral addressor.

My thesis in this paper is that being a moral addressor grounds one form of participation in moral responsibility practices. Entities who are exempted as moral addressees, may thus still

be considered moral agents in virtue of warranting the taking of an addressor participant stance toward them.

The basic structure of this thesis runs as follows:

- i. An entity is a participant of moral responsibility practices if it warrants the taking of a participant stance toward that entity.
- ii. Participation in moral responsibility practices involves, among other things, to participate as a moral addressor.
- iii. Some typically exempted entities participate in moral responsibility practices as moral addressors .
- iv. Some typically exempted entities therefore warrant the taking of an *addressor participant stance* toward them.

In the next section (2) I account for the practice-focused approach to moral agency, in which a moral agent is defined as a participant of moral responsibility practices. Later, I situate this approach within a communicative framework, where such participation is specified as engagement between a moral *addressor* and a moral *addressee*, within a “moral exchange”. After this (section 3), I provide two examples of interactions involving entities who are typically denied moral agency: young children and dogs. I argue that, despite their disputed eligibility

as moral *addressees*, some common reactions of these entities seem to fit a communicative conception of participation as moral *addressors* in moral responsibility practices. The participant stance should therefore be conceived of as involving two distinct stances: one that tracks eligibility for being a moral addressee, and one that tracks eligibility for being a moral addressor. I support these claims by turning to a functional understanding of moral address which states that moral address plays a certain uptake-evoking role (section 4). I argue that this theory implies distinct functions for moral address and moral response, and in turn, distinct eligibility requirements for the addressee and addressor participant stances. These distinct requirements support the taking of an addressor participant stance toward some entities, despite their disputed or uncertain eligibility as moral addressees. In the last section (5) I conclude the argument and point to some further questions raised by these discussions.

2. Background

Philosophers, and others, have engaged in various debates about the boundaries of moral agency and the possibility of non-paradigmatic moral agents. Is it possible for young children, or people with seemingly agency-undermining conditions or

disabilities to be moral agents (c.f. Wallace, 1996; Shoemaker, 2009, 2015; Kennett, 2002)? What about nonhuman animals (Korsgaard, 2006, 2010; Rowlands, 2012; Musschenga, 2015; Anonymous, 2020; Cova, 2013)? And would it ever be possible for artificial entities to be the kinds of beings that can act right or wrong, good or bad (Johnson, 2006; Tognazzini & Coates, 2018; Hew, 2014; Parthemore & Whitby, 2013; c.f. Anonymous, 2020)?

Despite the great variance in requirements and the entities considered, a common denominator for these discussions is that the key question is taken to be whether a certain entity qualifies for ascriptions of moral responsibility. Can, e.g., a young child or a dog ever be morally, as opposed to merely causally, responsible for their behavior? I believe that by assuming that moral agency is, first and foremost, a status or set of powers that makes one eligible for such ascriptions or assessments, these discussions have overlooked essential aspects of moral agency.

These aspects can be brought out by adopting a practice-focused approach to moral agency, in particular in its communicative variety. From this approach, moral agency is understood as the participation in certain social practices where moral attitudes

and judgments of moral responsibility are held, expressed, and undertaken. These social practices will hereafter be called *moral responsibility practices* (or MRPs) (Anonymous, 2020).

2.1 Strawson's Two Stances

All practice-focused approaches to moral agency and responsibility can be traced back to P.F. Strawson's famous essay *Freedom and Resentment* (1962/1982). Strawson rejects skepticism toward moral responsibility based on an incompatibilist denial of free will by claiming that we are naturally predisposed to, and unable to refrain from, the emotional responses fundamental to our practices of holding responsible. These *reactive attitudes*, like gratitude and resentment, are responses "to the quality of others' wills towards us" (1962/1982, p. 70). Our disposition to respond in this way toward others implies certain expectations or demands for "goodwill or regard" (1962/1982, p. 64).

Central to Strawson's account are the different perspectives we take on the world. The participant and objective attitudes or standpoints, differ with respect to the types of reactions we deem suitable to the actions of others. From the participant standpoint, we view others as apt objects of reactive attitudes. Taking this standpoint toward someone, therefore, means that

we take that person to be, in a general sense, morally responsible. However, taking an objective stance toward someone, indicates the opposite assumption, i.e. we view them to be an inapt target of reactive attitudes.

Normal adult humans are paradigms of morally responsible agents (or moral agents) and their actions are taken to express their quality of will towards others. But reactive attitudes can be modified or appeased in light of certain *excusing* or *exempting* conditions (Watson, 1987/2004). We might for example, say “He didn't mean to', 'He hadn't realized', 'He didn't know'; and (...) 'He couldn't help it', (...) 'He was pushed', 'He had to do it', 'It was the only way', 'They, left him no alternative', etc.” (Strawson, 1962/1982, p. 64). These expressions reflect excusing conditions, and indicate that the agent's action was not in fact due to ill will or lack of concern. They show that the agent is not an apt target of reactive attitudes for the particular injury, but do not provide reasons to question the agent's general eligibility for reactive attitudes.

Exempting conditions are reflected in expressions like “He's only a child', 'He's a hopeless schizophrenic', 'His mind has been systematically perverted', 'That's purely compulsive behaviour on his part'. Such pleas (...) invite us to suspend our ordinary

reactive attitudes towards the agent, either at the time of his action or all the time.” (Strawson, 1962/1982, p. 65). A case like this, “presents the agent as psychologically abnormal- or as morally undeveloped.” (Strawson, 1962/1982, p. 66). When we temporarily or indefinitely suspend our ordinary reactive attitudes in this way, we take an objective attitude or stance. An entity viewed from this perspective is, accordingly, not taken to be “a morally responsible agent” and therefore, not “a member of the moral community” (Strawson, 1962/1982, p. 73).

In this sense, the “reactive attitudes are sensitive not only to the quality of others' wills, but depend as well upon a background of beliefs about the *objects* of those attitudes [emphasis mine].” (Watson, 1987/2004, p. 80). When we adopt the objective stance, our ordinary practices are replaced by relating to the exempted entity “as an object of social policy; as a subject for what, in a wide range of sense, might be called treatment; as something certainly to be taken into account, perhaps precautionary account of; to be managed, handled, cured or trained; perhaps simply to be avoided.” (Strawson, 1962/1982, p. 66). Populations typically considered unsuited for reactive attitudes, and thus exempted in this manner, are e.g., very young children and adults with certain cognitive conditions or

disabilities. But also nonhuman entities, like other animals and machines (c.f. Talbert, 2019).

From a practice-focused approach, moral agency just is the participation in MRPs. And our ability and inclination to switch between the two stances is thought to reveal the eligibility requirements for moral agency. Whichever stance we take depends on “whether the agent is an appropriate “object of that kind of demand for goodwill or regard which is reflected in ordinary reactive attitudes” (p. 65). If so, he or she is seen as a responsible agent, as a potential term in moral relationships, as a member (albeit, perhaps, in less than good standing) of the moral community.” (Watson, 1987/2004, pp. 225-6).

It is, then, the (un)suitability of being the target of “moral demands”, expressed via reactive attitudes, which the participant or objective stances are thought to indicate. This sets the practice-focused approach to moral agency on par with more standard, capacity-focused, approaches. Moral agency, or participation in MRPs, is defined in terms of eligibility for ascriptions of moral responsibility. To be a moral agent is to be a suitable target or recipient of moral reactions and attitudes, such as blame.

2.2 A Communicative Approach

Shoemaker suggests that the “unease” typically felt in the face of non-paradigmatic or “marginal cases” of moral agents is due to the fact that “these agents seem worthy of some responsibility responses but not others, which suggests that they are responsible in some ways but not in others” (Shoemaker, 2015, p. 3). I believe that an overlooked but important additional cause of such unease, or ambivalence, is due to an overly restricted conception of moral participation. Defining moral agency in terms of being a suitable target or recipient of moral responsibility reactions or ascriptions appears to omit an essential aspect of such agency – namely, that of being the source or maker of such reactions or ascriptions. I will argue that by turning to this aspect of participation in MRPs, we find that many typically exempted or disputed cases, in fact, may qualify as moral agents in virtue of being *moral addressor participants*. Thus, exempting someone because they are deemed an unsuited recipient or target of, e.g., blame, does not necessarily give us reason to deny them moral agency altogether.

A further elaboration of the practice-focused approach will help clarify my point. According to this view, the requirements for

moral agency are proposed to be explicable by appeal to “moral address” (Watson, 1987/2004). Participation in MRPs, “requires the possibility of moral address, the capacity to be seen as a potential interlocutor in our interpersonal exchanges” (McKenna, 1998, p. 127; Watson, 1987/2004; Stern, 1974).¹ Strawson’s two stances are thus argued to be tracking the conditions necessary for moral address. The basis for this idea is the claim that (some of) our MRPs are expressive or communicative in nature (Watson 1987/2004; Wallace, 1994; McKenna, 2012; Macnamara, 2015; Shoemaker, 2007, 2015; Darwall, 2006; Fricker, 2016; Mason, 2019). To take the participant stance toward someone would therefore make “sense only on the assumption that the other can comprehend the message.” (Watson, 1987/2004, p. 230).

Participation in MRPs can thus be characterized as engaging in a certain type of communicative exchange, a so-called “moral responsibility exchange” (McKenna, 2012), or “reactive exchange” (McGeer, 2012, 2013). Such an exchange is, among other things, initiated on the assumption that the other party is

¹ Watson (1987/2004) introduced the term “moral address” following Stern’s (1974) assumption that when blaming another “we engage in dialogue” (p. 79). Also see McKenna (1998) for a discussion about Watson’s “appeal to the notion of moral address” in relation to Strawson’s theory (p. 126).

someone with whom it would be possible to engage in this particular type of interaction.

A moral exchange has the following generic form:²

1. First, there is a perceived transgression or injury.
2. This is followed by *moral address* toward the perceived transgressor by the affected or observing party. Such address may involve resentment, indignation, etc., and can be verbally expressed, e.g. in speech acts, but also through non-verbal means, like posture, facial expressions, and change in affiliation and/or distance.
3. The initial address is then typically followed by a *moral response* from the addressed party. Such response may involve guilt or remorse, asking for forgiveness, reparations, etc. (c.f. Warmke & McKenna, 2013; Mason, 2019) But it may also involve explanations, excuses, and/or even justifications.
4. The affected or observing party may then, e.g., forgive, let go, overcome, or maintain their initial attitude (c.f. Milam, 2019).

² For simplicity's sake, I will focus on blaming reactions/ascriptions of *negative* responsibility.

The following scenario illustrates a common type of moral exchange:

FOOD STAND

A person is standing in line to get lunch from a food stand. The area is crowded and noisy. Suddenly, someone forcefully steps on her foot while attempting to pass through the line. Irritated and in pain, the victim shouts “ouch” while directing an annoyed look at the perceived transgressor. He hears her, turns around with a surprised expression, and proceeds by shrugging his shoulders, lowering his head, gritting his teeth, and lifting his hand with the palm exposed. In response, the victim’s face relaxes and she turns her head back toward the food stand.

When we look at moral agency as the participation in certain communicative inter-relational practices it becomes obvious that an essential part of such agency is overlooked if reduced to questions about eligibility for being a moral addressee. A communicative exchange implies two parties, and thus two communicative positions. Shifting our gaze like this, allows us to see that moral agency, defined in terms of MRP participation, also involves the moral addressing of others. Acknowledging this addressor role gives us reason to consider eligibility

requirements for the addressing party in a moral exchange.

What does it take to participate as a moral addressor?

3. Participating as a Moral Addressor

What is required for participating as a moral addressor in MRPs? And what are the implications of these requirements?

Recent years have seen a growing interest in questions regarding facts about the addressing party. The idea here is that not everyone is, as one might say: “blamer-worthy” (Friedman, 2013, p. 272). For example, someone who is otherwise a moral addressor may, in some situations, lack the “jurisdiction”, “authorization” or “status” required to blame (c.f. Friedman, 2013; McGeer & Pettit, 2015; Tognazzini & Coates, 2018). In recent years, a few authors have also stressed the issue of unwarranted exemptions of moral addressor participants. For example, Carbonell (2019) argues that “[s]ocial factors can systematically exclude some moral agents from engaging in the kind of interpersonal address necessary for holding others responsible...” (p. 169; c.f. Mackenzie, 2018; Hutchison, 2018; Fricker, 2007).

However, these discussions primarily concern *particular instances*, in light of certain facts about the blaming party and/or situation, not the question whether someone is generally eligible as a moral addressor. The latter is a more fundamental and distinct issue, in a similar way to how we distinguish between questions about *general eligibility* for ascriptions of moral responsibility and particular blameworthiness. If being the source of moral address is a form of participation in MRPs, a practice-focused approach requires us to pay attention to the question of moral addressor eligibility when settling the issue whether an entity is a participant or not. Specifying moral addressor eligibility therefore has implications both for the theoretical *scope* of possible moral agents, as well as for our everyday practices.

Let us consider some examples involving entities with whom most of us interact from time to time, but who we typically disregard as moral agents in the addressee sense. In both cases, I use blaming as a placeholder for moral address:

NOUR

A four-year-old, Nour, is watching her parent bake a cake. She asks if she can lick the frosting off the beaters, and her parent promises to hand them over to her as soon as she is done mixing.

After finishing the cake, the parent, out of sheer habit, rinses the beaters in the sink. Nour sees this, and in response, her facial expression undergoes a familiar transformation. Her calm composure is replaced by a pouting mouth, furrowed brows, followed by angry cries at her parent.

MOLLY

A dog, Molly, is resting on the couch. A (human) friend is visiting and approaches to greet Molly. Molly really likes being stroked, but she does not like all kinds of physical contact. In particular, she despises being hugged. Upon realizing that the visitor is approaching her with his arm stretched out, Molly turns her head away and licks her snout. When he comes closer, her ears get pinned back and she shifts her weight away from him. But the visitor proceeds to hug Molly anyway. In response, Molly starts to growl. When the human does not stop hugging her, Molly nips him, and when he does not respond to this either, Molly finally retorts to biting him.

While a young child or a dog would typically not be regarded as suitable targets or recipients of many (or even *most*) ascriptions

of moral responsibility,³ they might still be moral agents in virtue of qualifying as moral addressors. Both Nour's and Molly's reactions appear to fit the conception of moral address as involving a certain expressive or communicative element. Nour seems to react to a perceived broken promise, and Molly to a perceived breach of physical boundaries.

In effect, the participant stance should be viewed as involving (at least) two distinct sub-stances; an *addressee* stance and an *addressor* stance. When we take the first stance towards someone, we view and treat them as being eligible for blame and similar reactive attitudes and ascriptions. When we take the second stance, we view and treat others as the kind of entities that can morally address us and others. In effect, we may have reasons to take an *addressor participant stance* towards (some) entities that we typically exempt as moral addressees.⁴

How can we determine if an entity is a moral addressor or not? Surely, not every reaction or expression qualifies as moral

³ Note, that I am not denying this possibility, but merely stating that my argument does not bear upon this question.

⁴ Another question that arises is whether some entities should be exempted as moral *addressors* while being recognized as moral addressees (i.e. the converse possibility to what I argue for). This possibility has been challenged by Russell (2004) and McKenna (2012), and defended by Haji (2003).

address? For example, consider a case where a person's headphones suddenly emit a very loud screeching noise. It is understandable for that person to (even aggressively) claw the headphones off their head. Most of us would probably also be understanding if the clawing was accompanied by some foul language. Even foul language seemingly *directed at* the headphones. But we would not take that to indicate that the person was expressing moral resentment toward the headphones.⁵

Similarly, if a dog or a young child expresses anger or frustration at something or someone, this may not be sufficient in order for us to conclude that they are morally addressing. Anger, frustration, and other emotions may dispose us to behave and interact in various ways toward objects. However, anger or frustration is not equivalent to agential, or moral, attitudes, such as resentment or indignation.⁶ In the next section, I will suggest requirements for addressor eligibility on the basis of a

⁵ Similarly, Mason (2019) claims that "[w]e can feel anger, annoyance, and irritation at all sorts of things, though, arguably, the way in which one is angry with a non-agent is different to the way in which one is angry with an agent." (p. 119).

⁶ Shoemaker (2015) expresses this point when claiming that "some creatures, such as babies and bears, clearly get angry too..." but that their anger "...is not plausibly construed as a responsibility response. Here the object of the anger in all such cases may merely be goal-frustration." (p. 90; c.f. Shoemaker, 2018).

functional theory of moral address. By characterizing these practices in terms of their functional role, I infer fittingness conditions for a distinct *addressor participant stance*. This functional understanding of MRPs thereby supports my main thesis that some entities typically exempted from MRP participation qualify as addressor participants, and warrant an addressor participant stance.

4. Moral Addressor Eligibility

According to a widely embraced theory, moral reactions can be distinguished from other kinds of reactions by their *function*. This functional account holds that moral address, such as blame, plays a regulative, transformative, calibrating, or fostering role (c.f. Vargas, 2013; Björnsson & Persson, 2012; 2013; Dill & Darwall, 2014; Fricker, 2016; Talbert, 2012; McKenna, 2012, 2013; Macnamara, 2011, 2015; Wallace, 2019; Bennett, 2012; Tsai, 2017, Mason, 2019; and Duff, 1986).⁷

⁷ Note that accounts like these, need not, and usually do not, imply the alleged function of blaming practices to play a significant (or any) part in the proximate motivations, responses, and judgments of moral participants (c.f. McGeer, 2013; Macnamara, 2015; Björnsson & Persson, 2013).

This functional theory goes well with the mentioned conception of moral address as paradigmatically expressed in other-directed communication. After all, “[m]any paradigmatic messages” have “the function of evoking uptake” (Macnamara, 2015, p. 564), and reactive attitudes and other forms of moral address are typically conceived of as “urging”, “requiring”, “demanding”, “inviting”, “call for” etc., a *response* in the recipient or target.⁸

Applying this functional account to MRPs helps us to distinguish *moral* address from other types of reactions to actions and events. In addition, understanding moral address in functional terms implies certain eligibility requirements for being a moral addressee. This is important for the case I am making. I argue that an entity may warrant a distinct participant stance as a moral addressor, regardless of its eligibility as a moral addressee. I support this claim by arguing that moral reactions and moral responses have distinct functional aims. Consequently, the position or role of addressor and addressee imply distinct eligibility requirements.

⁸ See footnote 11 in Macnamara (2015) for a very helpful overview of the so-called “response claim”.

In order to support the claim about the distinct function of moral response, we need to turn to the first step of a moral exchange, i.e., the initial reaction of moral address to a perceived transgression or harm (section 2.2). By applying a functional understanding of moral address, we can distinguish moral address from other reactions and infer eligibility requirements for whom to view as a moral addressee. I will utilize the same functional framework in order to infer the functional role of moral response, and its implications for moral addressor eligibility.

4.1 The Function of Moral Address

What is required for a reaction to count as moral address? And what does this imply for moral addressee eligibility? According to the functional account, the answer to these questions lies in the role and aim of moral reactions. Shoemaker (2015; 2018) suggests that “agential anger” or “blaming anger” can be distinguished from other types of anger by being characterized as a certain “sentimental syndrome”. This syndrome, he argues, consists of the following correlated signs and symptoms: 1. “feelings of heat and aggression”, 2. “thoughts about slights”, and 3. “action tendencies to revenge or retribution (communicated as such)” (Shoemaker, 2015, p. 90).

In a similar way, Macnamara (2015) argues that reactive attitudes differ from other emotions in virtue of having a certain representational content. When we feel resentment, for instance, we have an intentional state that represents someone as having wronged us in some way: “My resentment of you for betraying my confidences represents you as having injured or offended me.” (Macnamara, 2015, p. 557). Because reactive attitudes are associated with certain facial signatures and other expressive behaviors, they communicate that representational content to the receiver.⁹

Drawing on these accounts, we can characterize moral address (like blaming) as an emotion (e.g., resentment) comprising of, or associated with: a certain feeling or phenomenal state, a specific content and/or directedness,¹⁰ linked to certain “action

⁹ Also see Tangney et al., (2007) for a review on moral emotions, like “righteous anger”, and Haidt (2003) for a review about “other-condemning” emotions (like anger, contempt, and disgust), and their suggested elicitors and actions tendencies.

¹⁰ There are of course many differing views and theories about emotions and their content. For example, there is disagreement about the components of emotions or emotion episodes and their correlations, as well as disagreement about what type of content (if any) emotions have (c.f. Prinz, 2004; Scarantino, 2016; Boghossian, 1995; Scarantino & de Sousa, 2021; Shargel & Prinz, 2018). Despite this, there is broad consensus that “[e]motion episodes involve, at least in prototypical cases, a set of evaluative, physiological, phenomenological, expressive, behavioral, and mental components that are diagnostic of emotions and are to some degree correlated with one another”, and that “[e]motions have intentionality or the ability to represent” (Scarantino & de Sousa, 2021, section 11- point 3).

tendencies". The addressee participant stance, then, just is the stance from which a moral addressor is disposed to react toward perceived transgressions with certain emotions associated with certain expressive behaviors. A function of this moral address is to evoke uptake of its content in terms of the right sort of responses (with the aim of re-calibration, adjustment or reform). The general suitability of the addressee participant stance, therefore, depends on whether uptake of this latter kind is possible (and probable).

Based on this, Nour's and Molly's reactions seem to qualify as *moral* address. Four-year-old children, dogs, and many other typically exempted entities, obviously, feel and express emotions, some of which involve "heat and aggression". Similarly, seeing that these emotions are elicited upon apparent transgressions, their expression seems to imply certain types of contents, like representations of having been "injured or offended" (Macnamara, 2015, p.557), and/or certain evaluations, like taking an action and/or agent to be "angersome" (Shoemaker, 2018, p. 76), and/or certain types of non-representational contents, like presenting an agent and/or her action as something to "distance oneself from" (Bennett, 2012, p. 76; c.f. Shargel & Prinz, 2018).

When Nour sees her parent wash the beaters clean, and thinks she broke her promise, her anger can e.g. be said to represent her parent as having wronged her.¹¹ Similarly, when Molly is hugged against her expressed will, she probably feels violated. Her anger can, e.g., be said to represent the guest as displaying ill will.¹² Furthermore, the moral address of many entities typically exempted as moral addressees is associated with certain expressions and action tendencies, such as facial expressions, vocalizations, and other behaviors which, in a similar sense to those of typical adult humans, appear to be functionally aimed at evoking uptake of their content.

4.2 Moral Addressee Eligibility

So, what function counts as the right type of uptake to warrant an addressee participant stance? One type of functional understanding of MRPs can be found in Smart's (1961) moral influence account. According to this theory, an entity is taken to be eligible as a moral addressee by being "an agent who can be

¹¹ Young children appear to expect, recognize and engage in reconciliatory strategies (c.f. Westlund et al., 2008; Fujisawa et al., 2005; Butovskaya et al., 2000).

¹² Many nonhuman animals are adapted and socialized to recognize and engage in various types of normative exchanges, like reconciliatory behaviors (Baan et al., 2014; Cordoni & Palagi, 2008; Cools et al., 2007; c.f. Aureli et al., 2002). Dogs have also been shown to make use of such behaviors also in dog-human dyads (Cavalli et al., 2016).

influenced by praise and blame” (Jefferson, 2019, p. 556; Arneson, 2003). But merely requiring “compliance with moral demands without concern for the inner states of the creature” has been criticized for setting the bar too low (Jefferson, 2019, p. 558).¹³ All organisms, as well as many artificial entities, adjust or recalibrate their behavior in response to certain input. If the target mechanism is not specified further, mere influenceability to blame and praise seems to undermine the distinction between moral reactions and responses, and other interactions, like coercion, dressage, or manipulation.¹⁴

A development of the original moral influence account, however, defines the functional role of moral address in a way that maintains the relevance of moral attitudes, concepts, and practices. According to this notion, moral address attains its functional goal, by eliciting a more specific, qualified type of uptake in the recipient. This qualified uptake has been defined in slightly different ways. For example, that the addressee is brought to understand the underlying moral reasons of the address and responds “constructively on the basis of such reasons” (Wallace, 1996, p. 175), and/or by internalizing moral

¹³ See Jefferson (2019) for a discussion about criticism against Smart’s (1961) moral influence account.

¹⁴ In other words, the objective stance would seem to suffice to account for our (seemingly) moral, reactions and responses.

norms (Vargas, 2013) or the alleged wrongness (Dill & Darwall, 2014), and/or by being sensitized to new moral considerations (McGeer, 2012; 2015), and/or by being brought “...to remorse for what they have done, so that they come to be appropriately moved by new, shared reasons...” (Fricker, 2016, p. 176), and/or by eliciting “contrition and reform on the part of the blamed” (Talbert, 2012, p. 108), and/or by being made “to recognize his guilt and repent what he has done” (Duff, 1986, p. 70).

The common idea here, is that addressee eligibility requires the capacity to respond *in the right way* to moral address. The general suitability of the addressee participant stance depends on whether the perceived transgressor has the capacity to recognize the message of a moral reaction, and be subsequently inclined to adjust or re-calibrate her behavior.¹⁵ When such an entity is morally addressed, her motivational mechanism is not merely being moved, it is being moved in response to the specific type of message expressed by such address (McGeer & Pettit, 2015; Darwall, 2006; Vargas, 2013). In other words, being attuned to moral reactions, recognizing their content, and being

¹⁵ Of course, recognizing moral address is compatible with disputing the particular content expressed in such address.

capable and inclined to respond to that content, makes one eligible as a moral addressee. The suitability of directing moral address, like blame, towards someone, thus depends on, and tracks, whether the intended target is eligible in this sense.¹⁶ If she is, an addressee participant stance towards this entity is fitting and warranted.

For example, if I tell a dog not to jump up on me, and she does so anyway, blame would only be fitting if she is capable of the specific type of uptake mentioned. Dogs, young children, and many other typically addressee exempted entities, are certainly influenceable. Dogs can be trained to refrain from jumping up on people. However, a dog may nevertheless be unable to meet the specific uptake-constraints of many particular forms and instances of human moral address. She might for example not be capable of recognizing and thus morally internalize a human's demand for bodily integrity, and thus not be blameworthy for such transgressions. Or, she might understand the reaction *as* blame, but not be able to comprehend what state or object it targets. Or, she might recognize both the formal and

¹⁶ For example, see Björnsson & Persson (2013), who argue that "our concept of responsibility plays the role it plays because it tracks conditions under which it works to hold someone responsible for something." (p. 615).

particular object of the moral address in question, but not be able to respond in a fitting manner because of other reasons. For example, because she cannot be sufficiently motivated or because she is unable to inhibit this particular behavior.¹⁷

My claim is that failure to meet requirements for moral addressee eligibility, does not necessarily disqualify an entity from being a moral addressor. It may be the case that young children, dogs, and other entities typically exempted as moral addressees, fail to meet uptake-constraints for most (or all) potential instances of moral address.¹⁸ Despite this fact, Nour's and Molly's reactions appear to fit the functional conception of moral address as intrinsically communicative by being aimed at eliciting "uptake of the message by a recipient" (Macnamara, 2015, p. 553). Molly initially communicated that she did not want to be hugged, and when her boundaries were transgressed, she morally addressed the visitor in reaction to

¹⁷ See Talbert (2019) for an overview of moral responsibility conditions relating to *control* and *knowledge*. Also, see Björnsson & Perrson (2013) for a helpful discussion about "the Response Condition".

¹⁸ It may be the case that some entities are asymmetrical MRP participants *in relation to* typical adult humans. For example, dogs may be addressee participants only to a very limited extent when compared to most humans, but symmetrical when compared to conspecifics. And children may be asymmetrical moral agents compared to adults for many years to come, while qualifying as moral addressors from an early age.

that transgression. Similarly, Nour reacted to a perceived broken promise. We may, for example, say that Molly or Nour “is angry with you”, that she “feels betrayed” or “unfairly treated”. Or that she “is asking” or “demanding” that you respect her wish. Or we may believe that her reaction “calls for”, “urges”, etc. for a certain response.

However, if some entities’ reactions qualify as moral address, why does this provide reason to take a distinct participant stance toward them? Moral addressor eligibility, just like moral addressee eligibility, implies being eligible for *something*. In order to finalize the supporting argument for the addressor participant stance, and its relevance for entities typically exempted from moral agency, I will now proceed to clarify what this particular eligibility consists in. I will therefore turn toward the next step in a moral exchange. What is the function of moral response? And what does this function imply with regard to moral addressor eligibility?

4.3 Moral Addressor Eligibility

While the general suitability of the addressee participant stance depends on the functional aim of moral address, I argue that the suitability of the addressor participant stance depends on the functional aim of *moral response*. In order to determine moral

addressor eligibility, we therefore need to move beyond the moral address step of a moral exchange, and acknowledge the distinct function or role of *moral response*.

Let us re-cap: a moral exchange is initiated upon a perceived transgression, followed by moral address in reaction to that transgression. The functional aim of moral address is to *evoke* uptake of the content of, say, a blaming reaction. So, the fittingness of blame, in a fundamental sense, depends on whether the addressee is capable of uptake of the right kind. If she meets the uptake-constraint, she is moral addressee eligible. As such, it would be suitable to take an addressee participant stance towards her.

The next step of a moral exchange consists of moral response in reaction to moral address, typically expressed via an apology, an explanation, or an excuse, etc. I argue that moral response has the functional aim of *expressing, indicating, or signaling* uptake. In other words, moral response is the salient or expressive aspect of uptake. It communicates that one has recognized the addressor's reaction *as* moral address. And similar to moral address, moral response can take various forms and convey various uptake-associated messages. For instance, one can express uptake by hanging one's head and avoiding eye contact,

thus communicating uptake in the form of guilt and/or shame. Or by starting to explain, excuse or even justify one's behavior, or by begging for forgiveness, or by attempting to compensate the addressor with a gift or a favor.

So, some moral responses, like remorse, express uptake by acknowledging the message conveyed by the preceding (or anticipated, imagined) moral address. Others, like excuses or justifications, also express uptake because they indicate that one has recognized the reaction as moral address, despite denying or disputing (part of) the content conveyed. Non-linguistic behaviors, like facial expressions, posture and distance, together with paralinguistic features, like tone and volume of voice, are significant communicators of uptake. The food-stand scenario (section 2.2) shows how such behaviors many times are the primary expressions of uptake even for typical adult humans.

The common denominator of all of the types and forms of moral response mentioned is that their function is to communicate uptake, i.e. the state of recognizing the other party's reaction as moral address (but not necessarily that one agrees with the perceived content). Apart from this, and similar to moral address, the various action tendencies of moral response

convey various contents, and can be attributed further particular functions (c.f. Schmader & Lickel, 2006).¹⁹ Explicit or implicit forms of asking for forgiveness, may for instance have further functional aims, such as reconciliation (Roberts, 1995; c.f. Hughes & Warmke, 2017). And expressing guilt, even when such expression is accompanied by a verbal excuse or justification, may have appeasing functions because it “conveys a positive message of concern” (Baumeister et al., 1994, p. 260).²⁰

Thus, moral response has the common function of communicating uptake, and it therefore has its own general suitability requirements. The particular fittingness of a specific instance of moral response depends on the particular content and validity of the preceding moral address (i.e. whether one has wronged the other, the type and graveness of the transgression, etc.) as well as other factors. The general suitability of moral response, however, depends on whether it would make sense to respond in such a manner to an entity.

¹⁹ For example, see Haidt (2003) for a suggestion about the nature of “self-conscious emotions” (like shame, embarrassment and guilt), their elicitors, and action tendencies.

²⁰ Expressions of shame or embarrassment have been suggested to reduce conflict, and increase cooperation (c.f. Keltner et al., 1997; Keltner & Buswell, 1997).

Moral response is appropriate, in a fundamental way, only if the perceived (actual or prospective) addressor is able (and inclined) to recognize moral response in the first place.

The addressor participant stance, then, is the perspective from which we are disposed to morally respond to someone. Moral addressors are eligible as such in virtue of being appropriate recipients of moral response. Given the functional aim of moral response as expressing uptake, there are some forms of moral response that, at least, some typically addressee exempted entities would recognize as such and which they even seem to expect.²¹

One can express uptake of Molly's moral address by, for instance, quickly backing away, lowering one's head, and talking to her in a gentle voice. And of course, by respecting her physical boundaries in the future. This, as opposed to, e.g., scolding her or physically punishing her for being "disobedient", "unreliable" and/or "dangerous". Similarly, even if a young child is judged unfit for many (if not most) forms of moral address, it still seems to make sense to morally respond to *her* moral address. Nour's parent could, for example, try to explain that she didn't mean to rinse the beaters, say that she is sorry she forgot, and, try to offer

²¹ See footnotes 14 and 15.

Nour a fruit instead. This, as opposed to, e.g., sending Nour to her room for being “naughty”, ignoring her, or simply laughing her off as “silly”.

I, therefore, argue that young children and dogs, and many other entities whose moral agency is disputed or denied, are moral addressors and suitable recipients of moral response. What this means, ultimately, is that it makes sense to provide explanations, excuses, justifications, reparations, amends, etc. to them.²² We, therefore, have reason to take the addressor participant stance towards them.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that moral address and moral response have distinct functional roles. These functions, in turn, give rise to distinct eligibility requirements. While a function of moral address is to evoke qualified uptake of its content, the aim of moral response is to communicate uptake. By consequence, there are some examples of entities towards which we seem to have reason to adopt a distinct *addressor participant stance*,

²² And by “make sense” I am here strictly referring to the communicative function and value of other-directed moral response. There may of course be other reasons for expressing these kinds of responses.

regardless of their eligibility as moral addressees. These beings could then meet the condition of the practice-focused approach to moral agency of participating in MRPs.

Needless to say, the case for an addressor participant stance raises additional questions in need of further discussion. For instance, questions regarding the particular suitability and fittingness of moral response, i.e. when and how one should take an addressor participant stance, and on what grounds. The suggested distinction between addressor and addressee eligibility might also highlight further, *normative*, reasons for re-assessing our current participatory and exempting practices. If large populations of moral addressor participants are habitually exempted, “claimant injustice” (Carbonell, 2019) may extend well beyond practices involving the exemption of paradigmatic moral agents.²³ Similarly, recent suggestions about the “agency cultivating” (Vargas, 2013, 2018) or “scaffolding” (McGeer, 2015; McGeer & Pettitt, 2015) potential of MRPs, seem to prompt us to investigate possible effects of our exempting practices on the *exempting* party.

²³ This is not to say that pragmatic reasons are never warranted or justified.

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