**Strawson’s Account of Morality and Its Implications for Central Themes in ‘Freedom and Resentment’**

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1. **Introduction**

In his intellectual autobiography, P. F. Strawson writes that two papers ‘effectively embody all I have thought or have to say’ in ethics (Strawson 2008a: xxvii). These papers, written about the same time, are ‘Social Morality and Individual Ideal’ (1961, henceforth SMII) (Strawson 2008c) and ‘Freedom and Resentment’ (1962, henceforth FR) (Strawson 2008b). The latter became one of the most influential papers of 20th century analytic philosophy and the single most influential paper in contemporary discussions of moral responsibility (Shoemaker 2020). The former’s influence has been very limited. This is unfortunate for at least two reasons. First, it constitutes an underappreciated contribution to debates about the nature of morality. Second, Strawson’s widely known account of moral responsibility in FR is inextricably bound up with his barely known account of morality in SMII. Our aim in this paper is to establish the second point.

Recently, some authors have been reading FR in the context of Strawson’s other works (Alvarez 2021; Campbell 2017; Coates 2017; De Mesel 2018; De Mesel 2022a; De Mesel 2022b; De Mesel and Heyndels 2019; Heyndels 2019; Hieronymi 2020). However, the particular importance of SMII for understanding FR has been overlooked. This holds, in particular, for SMII’s crucial distinction between ethics and morality (section 2). Reading FR through the lens of this distinction has at least three far-reaching implications for the interpretation of FR.

First, it gives content to Strawson’s famous distinction between personal and moral reactive attitudes in FR (section 3). The distinction between ethics and morality explains why the distinction between personal and moral reactive attitudes is not merely a formal distinction between perspectives, but a substantial one between kinds of demand, and why self-reactive attitudes are non-moral in some cases and moral in others (section 4).

Second, the ethics-morality distinction sheds light on the scope of moral responsibility in FR (section 5). It has often been thought that, according to Strawson, moral responsibility has to be explained in terms of the class of reactive attitudes as a whole, including the personal, moral and self-reactive attitudes. Against such ‘orthodox’ readings, Sars (2022) has recently argued that, for Strawson, moral responsibility has to be explained exclusively in terms of the *moral* reactive attitudes. We agree with him on that point, but Sars’s understanding of ‘moral’ is unnecessarily restrictive and fails to make sense of the idea that relationship-based obligations can be moral, as Strawson suggests. We intend to show that the scope of morality and moral responsibility, on Strawson’s view, is narrower than orthodox readers think and broader than Sars allows for.

Third, Strawson’s discussion of morality in SMII makes clear that he was not insensitive to issues of power, as several critics have claimed (section 6). On the contrary, Strawson explicitly links the idea of a socially sanctioned demand, which he takes to be *the* fundamental idea of morality, to the idea of power. The link between morality and power helps to make clear that Strawson allows for criticism of our responsibility practices.

1. **Ethics and morality**

We start with Strawson’s distinction between ethics and morality in SMII. At the beginning of that paper, Strawson observes that people make for themselves pictures of ideal forms of life. Examples of such pictures, which may form ‘the core and substance of a personal ideal’ (30), include

The ideas of self-obliterating devotion to duty or the service of others; of personal honour and magnanimity; of asceticism, contemplation, retreat; of action, dominance and power; of the cultivation of ‘an exquisite sense of the luxurious’; of simple human solidarity and cooperative endeavour; of a refined complexity of social existence; of a constantly maintained and renewed sense of affinity with natural things … (29-30)

Strawson situates his talk about personal ideals within the region of the ethical,because it concerns ‘evaluations such as *can* govern choices and decisions which are of the greatest importance to men’ (31). The region of the ethical is characterized as ‘a region of diverse, certainly incompatible and possibly practically conflicting ideal images or pictures of a human life, or of human life’ (33).

Strawson then asks how the region of the ethical compares to the sphere of morality. He appeals to a widely accepted account of the latter ‘in terms of the idea of rules or principles governing human behaviour which apply universally within a community or class’ (33). How do ‘diversity of ideal and community of rule’ (33), that is, ethics and morality, relate to each other?

One way of trying to harmonize the ideas would be as follows. This way is extremely crude and inadequate, but it may serve as a starting point. It is obvious that many, if not all, of the ideal images of which I spoke demand for their realization the existence of some form of social organization. (33)

To a first approximation, ethics requires social organization and the latter presupposes some kind of morality:

Now it is a condition of the existence of any form of social organization, of any human community, that certain expectations of behaviour on the part of its members should be pretty regularly fulfilled: that some duties, one might say, should be performed, some obligations acknowledged, some rules observed. We might begin by locating the sphere of morality here. It is the sphere of the observance of rules, such that the existence of some such set of rules is a condition of the existence of a society. This *is a minimal interpretation of morality*. (33-4; our italics)

Strawson admits that the minimal conception of morality is not an adequate conception in the sense that it is not *our* conception. An adequate conception must account for the idea that morality is in some sense *universal*. The minimal conception cannot do that, because different societies are held together by ‘rules which are very different from each other’, and the rules which hold a single society together often ‘make very different demands on different classes or groups within the society’ (34-5). The rules giving cohesiveness to a society may have a ‘limited and sectional’ character. If true morality must be universal, and the minimal conception of morality leads us to think of morality as limited and sectional, then the minimal conception cannot be an adequate one.

Yet Strawson sees considerable merit in the minimal conception as a ‘useful analytical idea’ (34), that is, a good starting point for thinking about morality. The minimal idea serves as a model, an idealized object of comparison with which we can compare our conception of morality to bring out instructive similarities and differences.

Strawson clarifies his minimal interpretation of morality as follows:

The fundamental idea is that of a socially sanctioned demand made on an individual in virtue merely of his membership of the society in question, or in virtue of a particular position which he occupies within it or a particular relation in which he stands to other members of it. I spoke of rules in this connection; and the rules I meant would simply be the generalized statements of demands of this type. The formula I employ for the fundamental idea is deliberately flexible, the notions of society and of social sanctioning deliberately vague. This flexibility is necessary to do justice to the complexities of social organization and social relationships. (36)

One of the merits which Strawson claims for his approach to morality *via* the minimal conception is that it makes room for concepts which tend to be neglected in moral philosophy, such as the code of honour of a military caste, bourgeois morality and working-class morality. Such moral codes of specific groups ‘fit more easily into an account of morality which sees it as essentially, or at any rate fundamentally, a function of social groupings than they do into the more apparently individualistic approaches which are generally current’ (37).

Strawson regards our actual conception of morality ‘as resting upon and presupposing’ the minimal one (36). The minimal conception is not our ordinary conception because not *any* socially sanctioned demand can plausibly be thought of as a moral demand. Two additional conditions must be satisfied. First, ‘a demand made on an individual is to be regarded as a moral demand only if it belongs to a system of demands which includes demands made on others in his interest’ (40). There might be a system of socially sanctioned demands in which I have no interest at all. In fulfilling these demands, ‘I may indeed, in one sense, be doing what I am obliged to do; but scarcely what I am *morally* obliged to do’ (39). In a system of *moral* demands, demands made on the individual in the interest of others must be balanced to some extent by demands made on others in the interest of the individual. Second, social demands are moral demands only if ‘the *generality* of those subject to [them] … genuinely recognize some obligations under the system of demands’ (40). Taken together, the conditions of interest and acknowledgment of obligation yield the ‘characteristically moral’ idea of ‘*reciprocal* acknowledgement of rights and duties’ (39).

The element of reciprocity, which is absent in the minimal conception of morality but central to the ordinary notion, helps to explain why many people believe that moral rules must in some sense be universal, because ‘*one* way in which a demand made on one individual in the interest of others can be balanced by a demand made on others in his interest is through the operation of a general rule or principle having application to all alike’ (41). But, Strawson adds,

… it does not follow from this that *all* moral claims have, or are seen by those who acknowledge them as having, the character of applications of universal principles holding for all men. There is no reason why a system of moral demands characteristic of one community should, or even could, be found in every other. Here are two reasons why it is misleading to say that moral behaviour is what is demanded of men as men. It might, in some cases, be essentially what is demanded of Spartans by other Spartans, or of a king by his subjects. What is universally demanded of the members of a moral community is something like the abstract virtue of justice: a man should not insist on a particular claim while refusing to acknowledge any reciprocal claim. But from this formally universal feature of morality no consequences follow as to the universality of application of the particular rules in the observance of which, in particular situations and societies, justice consists. (41)

Strawson has enriched the minimal conception of morality with the notions of interest and acknowledgment of obligation, which together yield the element of reciprocity crucial to our ordinary conception. The conception he has now arrived at is ‘recognizably a concept of social morality’ (44), a conception which he takes to at least approach our ordinary conception of morality.

It is important to recognize that, for Strawson, the concept of social morality allows for a diversity of possible systems of moral demands. Yet there are limits to this diversity, because ‘certain human interests are so fundamental and so general that they must be universally acknowledged in some form and to some degree in any conceivable moral community’ (42). These interests include interests in being helped when we are in need, in not being harmed, and in not being deceived. They are interests of which one might say: ‘a system could scarcely command *sufficient* interest in those subject to its demands … unless it secured to them *this* interest’ (42). Thus, Strawson suspects that almost any conceivable moral system will include ‘the abstract virtue of justice, some form of obligation to mutual aid and to mutual abstention from injury and, in some form and in some degree, the virtue of honesty’ (42). That any system will include the abstract virtue of justice seems to be a conceptual fact, implied by the conceptual connection between the idea of morality and the idea of reciprocity. That any system will include some form of obligation to mutual aid, mutual abstention from injury and the virtue of honesty seems to follow from general facts about human nature.

Strawson considers some possible objections to his conception of social morality. The first is that it does not allow for the possibility of moral criticism of the morality of a society, both from within and from without. The second objection is that people may recognize moral obligations to each other ‘although there is no common society of which they are members and there is no concept of a “social” relationship which can be at all plausibly represented as applying to their situation’ (43).

Strawson holds that both objections can be answered by highlighting certain elements in his conception of social morality. First, he reminds us that moral criticism ‘characteristically proceeds by appeal to, and interpretation of, such general moral ideas as those of justice, integrity and humanity’ (44). It characteristically appeals to universal ideas that are present in any conceivable moral system, on the basis of which ‘existing institutions, systems of demand and claim, are criticized as unjust, inhumane or corrupt’ (44). This shows that his social conception of morality, which emphasizes the role of these ideas in both allowing for diversity and setting limits to it, ‘so far from excluding the idea of moral criticism … makes fully intelligible the nature and possibility of such criticism’ (44).

Second, ‘just as a social morality contains the seeds of moral criticism, so the two together contain the seeds of a morality transcending standard social relationships’ (44). Once we have the seeds of criticism, we have the seeds of a type of criticism that is ‘generalizing and anti-parochial’, pushing in the direction of a morality transcending standard social relationships. Strawson remarks: ‘Some moralists would maintain that a true concept of morality emerges only at the limit of this generalizing process. This is a judgement in which, as it seems to me, the sense of reality has been quite subordinated to zeal’ (45). His own conception of social morality captures both the idea of local moralities (moral codes of specific groups) *and* the idea of a universal morality.

Near the end of his article, Strawson comes back to the relation between ethics and morality. In general, he says, ‘the pursuit of an ideal form of life quite pragmatically requires membership of a moral community or moral communities’ (45). He notes that there are many possibilities of ‘collision, absorption and interplay’ between ethics and morality. What one acknowledges as one’s moral obligation may conflict with one’s personal ideals, but it may also be that the interests of morality are dominant in one’s picture of the ideal life (46).

1. **Personal and moral reactive attitudes**

We believe that the distinction between ethics and morality, as set out in SMII, underlies Strawson’s distinction between personal, moral, and self-reactive attitudes in FR. Personal reactive attitudes, of which resentment is Strawson’s main example, are ‘reactions to the quality of others’ wills towards us, as manifested in their behaviour: to their good will or ill will or indifference or lack of concern’ (FR 15). These attitudes have ‘sympathetic or vicarious or impersonal or disinterested or generalized analogues’:

They are reactions to the qualities of others’ wills, not towards ourselves, but towards others … What we have here is, as it were, resentment on behalf of another, where one’s own interest and dignity are not involved; and it is this impersonal or vicarious character of the attitude, added to its others, which entitle it to the qualification ‘moral’. Both my description of, and my name for, these attitudes are, in one important respect, a little misleading. It is not that these attitudes are essentially vicarious – one can feel indignation on one’s own account – but that they are essentially capable of being vicarious. (FR 15)

Strawson’s main example of a moral reactive attitude is indignation. While personal reactive attitudes are associated with ‘demands on others for oneself’ and moral ones with ‘demands on others for others’, self-reactive attitudes are associated with ‘demands on oneself for others’ (FR 16). Strawson’s main example of a self-reactive attitude is guilt.

The distinction between personal, moral, and self-reactive attitudes has often been thought to be purely formal, merely a matter of perspective. Thus, Pamela Hieronymi writes:

In general, then, a reactive attitude is *x*’s reaction to *x*’s perception of or beliefs about the quality of *y*’s will toward *z.* In the impersonal reactive attitudes, *x, y,* and *z* are different persons. In the case of the personal reactive attitudes, the same person stands in for *x* and *z.* In the case of self-directed reactive attitudes, the same person stands in for *x* and *y.* (Hieronymi 2020: 8)

This ‘perspectival’ interpretation of the distinction between personal, moral and self-reactive attitudes has recently been challenged by Nicholas Sars (2022) and Rosalind Chaplin (2023).[[1]](#footnote-1) Both highlight Strawson’s remark that ‘one can feel indignation on one’s own account’. This seems to imply that there are moral reactive attitudes in which *x* and *z* are the same person, but the perspectival reading does not allow for this possibility. According to this reading, if *x* and *z* are the same person, we are in the domain of personal and not of moral reactive attitudes. Thus, the perspectival reading cannot make sense of the difference between resentment and indignation on one’s own account. Strawson clearly suggests that there *is* such a difference: as a moral attitude, indignation is ‘essentially capable of being vicarious’, while resentment is not. But what does this mean?

We submit that the difference between personal and moral reactive attitudes, between resentment and indignation, is not merely formal, but a function of the *kind of demand* involved. (We will come back to the self-reactive attitudes in the next section.) Strawson writes that both types of attitude, ‘involve, or express, a certain sort of demand for inter-personal regard’ (FR 17). The personal attitudes reflect a ‘personal demand’ (FR 18), a demand from the point of view of one ‘whose interest was directly involved’ (FR 16); the moral attitudes reflect a ‘generalized’ (FR 18) or ‘moral demand’ (FR 23), a demand from the point of view of one ‘whose interest was not directly involved’ (FR 16). Indignation may typically involve a demand on others for others, but what makes indignation on one’s own account possible and different from resentment is that indignation reflects a moral demand and resentment a personal one.

Yet the distinction between the personal and the moral remains rather vague in FR, and we believe that SMII helps to deepen it. There are clear terminological overlaps between the two papers. The region of the ethical in SMII is the region of *personal* ideals, which suggests a connection to the personal reactive attitudes.[[2]](#footnote-2) The region of the moral is a region of *generalized* demands (see section 2), which suggests a connection to the generalized or moral demands reflected in the moral reactive attitudes. Moral demands are characterized in SMII as *socially sanctioned demands,* ‘made on an individual in virtue merely of his membership of the society in question, or in virtue of a particular position which he occupies within it or a particular relation in which he stands to other members of it’ (SMII 36). Moral demands must be part of a system in which an individual subject to the demand has some interest and under which (s)he recognizes some obligations. They are essentially connected to the ideas of rules, duties and obligations.

When I resent you, I am reacting *as an individual.* I react from the point of view of my personal interests and ideals, and I need not perceive the demand reflected in my attitude as a socially sanctioned one. I might expect or demand that you love me and resent you when you do not. I might demand that you obey me and resent you when you do not. There does not have to be a system of demands here in which demands made on others in the interest of the individual are balanced to some extent by demands made on the individual in the interest of others. There is no need for recognition by the resenting party of any obligation under such a system, no explicit or implicit reference to rules or community, and no commitment to reciprocity.

The demand reflected in indignation is different. When I am indignant at you, I am reacting *as a member of a social group.* The group may be thought of ‘as a definite social group [‘as student or teacher or parent or soldier’, SMII 37] or the human species as a whole or even the entire class of rational beings’ (SMII 33). My personal interests or ideals are not essentially involved. This makes indignation ‘essentially capable of being vicarious’: the demand reflected in my indignation is socially sanctioned, so others in the group can be expected to share it with me; if they share the demand, they can normally express it towards you, just like I did, through the reactive attitude of indignation. I perceive the demand as part of a system of demands under which I recognize some obligations and expect others to recognize some obligations as well. There are several complications here, which we cannot discuss in depth. It does not seem necessary, for instance (though it will be the case in paradigmatic instances), that you and I belong to the same social group, to the ‘we’ reflected in my attitude. It is essential that, when I am indignant, I react as a member of a social group. If you are not a member of that group, you might not understand my indignation or not recognize the demand reflected in it, but my reaction might still count as indignation.

If this is along the right lines, the difference between resentment and indignation is not primarily the difference between my reaction to your stepping on my hand and my reaction to your stepping on his or her hand, not the difference between ‘two parties involved’ (me-you) and ‘three parties involved’ (me-you-(s)he). The difference is a difference in the kind of demand that is involved. Personal reactive attitudes reflect personal demands, they refer (implicitly or explicitly) to personal interests or ideals. Moral reactive attitudes reflect moral or generalized demands, they refer (implicitly or explicitly) to social rules.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Personal and moral demands can be related in many different ways (‘The possibilities of collision, absorption and interplay are many’, SMII 45). Sometimes they come apart. Suppose that I have the personal ideal ‘of a refined complexity of social existence’ (SMII 29). I might then personally demand that, say, you open the door for me when we go to a restaurant because I am older than you are, even if this demand is not socially sanctioned by any group to which I belong. If you do not open the door, my negative emotional reaction will count as resentment and not as indignation, because it reflects a personal and not a moral demand. My attitude refers to a personal ideal, not to a social rule.

In many cases, though, personal and moral demands coincide. If you refuse to help me when I am in need, I might demand that you do so, implicitly or explicitly referring both to my own interests (reacting as an offended individual) *and* to social rules (reacting as a group member). Resentment and indignation might then be mixed, and different ways of verbally expressing my reaction could capture essential parts of the mixture (‘Don’t do that to me’ comes closer to expressing the resentment part, whereas ‘We don’t do that to others’ is closer to indignation). It might also be *indeterminate* whether my attitude reflects personal and/or moral demands: my reaction might reflect an *unspecified* demand for help, neither specifically personal nor moral. In these cases, it will be indeterminate whether I am expressing resentment and/or indignation.

The perspectival interpretation of the distinction between personal and moral reactive attitudes implies that the distinction is always clear-cut: if *x, y*, and *z* are different persons, we have a moral attitude; if the same person stands in for *x* and *z,* we have a personal attitude. The possibility of mixed and indeterminate attitudes seems excluded here, because *x* and *z* cannot be both different and the same persons. By contrast, the complex interplay between ethics and morality and, correspondingly, of personal and moral demands implies that the difference between personal and moral reactive attitudes will often *not* be clear-cut. And this, we take it, is exactly as it should be, given Strawson’s aim to stay close to the ‘facts as we know them’ (FR 24).

If the difference between personal and moral reactive attitudes is a function of the kind of demand involved, then why does Strawson associate resentment with a reaction to the qualities of others’ wills towards *ourselves,* and indignation with a reaction to the qualities of others’ wills towards *others*? Because if someone offends me, I will *typically* but not necessarily react primarily *as an offended individual,* that is, as someone whose personal interests are involved, and feel resentment. It is *possible,* though, that I will react *as a group member* and feel indignation on my own account. If someone offends a third party, I will *typically* but not necessarily react primarily *as a group member*. It is *possible,* though, that I will react as someone whose personal interests are involved. If you step on my child’s hand, for instance, I may feel that my personal interests are involved and react with resentment (‘Don’t treat my child like that’) rather than indignation (‘We don’t treat children like that’).[[4]](#footnote-4) Thus, it is *typical* to react to one’s own mistreatment as an offended individual and to the mistreatment of others as a member of a social group, which explains why Strawson associates resentment with a reaction to the qualities of others’ wills towards ourselves and indignation with a reaction to the qualities of others’ will towards others. Still, it is *possible* to react to the mistreatment of others as an offended individual and to one’s own mistreatment as a member of a social group, which explains why Strawson leaves open the possibility of indignation on one’s own account.

1. **Kinds of demand and self-reactive attitudes**

That the difference between resentment and indignation is not merely formal, but a function of the kind of demand involved, has been recognized by Sars and Chaplin. But the way in which they fill out the idea of a moral demand conflicts with Strawson’s understanding of it in SMII. First, Sars writes that ‘when one is indignant toward another as a result of an injury to one’s self, one is reacting from the perspective of a person as such’ (Sars 2022: 6). The challenge reflected in indignation is something like ‘How can you (qua person) have treated a person like that?’ (Sars 2022: 6). This *is,* for sure, a moral challenge, but it seems to presuppose what Strawson explicitly denies, namely that true morality emerges only at the limit of a generalizing process. As Strawson sees it, moral reactive attitudes are reactions from the perspective of members of a social group, not necessarily reactions from the perspective of persons as such. This point is important for Strawson because, as we have seen, he explicitly wants to make room for concepts such as ‘bourgeois morality’ and ‘working-class morality’, and for a diversity of systems of moral demands. If a moral reaction is a reaction from the perspective of a person as such, as Sars claims, there is no room for moral codes of specific groups, and no diversity of systems of moral demands.

Second, Sars holds (mistakenly, in our view) that, according to Strawson, the moral reactive attitudes are reactions from the perspective of persons as such, and (correctly, in our view) that the personal reactive attitudes essentially involve one’s personal interests. The problem with this combination of views is that it does not seem to leave room for Strawson’s ‘fundamental idea’ ‘of a socially sanctioned demand made on an individual in virtue merely of his membership of the society in question, or in virtue of a particular position which he occupies within it or a particular relation in which he stands to other members of it’ (SMII 36). Sars mentions relationship-based demands and expectations, and he rightly notes that these are often idiosyncratic, dependent on the specificities of particular relationships (Sars 2022: 6, 11), which he takes to imply that they can only be reflected in personal and not in moral reactive attitudes.

Strawson’s view is different, though. A position in a society or in a family gives rise to moral demands, and so does membership of a profession (SMII 36). Strawson even speaks of ‘the internal morality of an intimate personal relationship’ (SMII 36). What licenses talk of the morality of a relationship, a profession, a family or another group within society (e.g. ‘bourgeois morality’) is that relationships and groups allow for the possibility of reacting *as a term in the relationship, as a member of the group.* Within an intimate relationship, as within society at large, one can react as an individual, referring implicitly or explicitly to one’s personal interests or ideals, and/or as a group member, referring to common rules, socially sanctioned demands, expectations and reciprocal obligations.

Like Sars, Chaplin (2023) regards the difference between personal and moral reactive attitudes as a function of the demand reflected in them, rather than as a merely formal difference. She holds that personal reactive attitudes involve partial demands, while moral reactive attitudes involve impartial demands. Partial demands reflect ‘differential concern’ for some people over others (Chaplin 2023: 25), moral demands are the same for everyone. If I am your best friend, you might demand that I comfort you when you feel sad, but the demand is partial, because not everyone is subject to it.

Chaplin’s partial-impartial contrast is not equivalent to Strawson’s personal-moral contrast. Socially sanctioned demands need not be impartial (recall Strawson’s claim that moral behaviour may be what is demanded of a king by his subjects, which may be very different from what is demanded of his subjects by the king), and personal demands may be impartial (impartiality might form the core of a personal ideal, such as the ideal of ‘self-obliterating devotion to duty or to the service of others’, SMII 29). A related problem is that Chaplin, like Sars, attributes to Strawson the view that relationship-based obligations are personal. In contrast to Sars, she regards this as an implausible view, because the obligations of our close relationships may be moral, and she advocates a departure from Strawson on this point. At least from FR, that is, because Chaplin (2023: 23) mentions in a footnote that SMII may be ‘friendly toward the idea of some role for partiality in morality’. As we have seen, that is true, but there is no need to see a tension with FR here. The tension is caused by Chaplin’s identification of Strawson’s notion of a generalized demand in FR with the notion of an impartial demand which cannot be relationship-based. If ‘generalized demand’ is understood as ‘socially sanctioned demand’, however, nothing prevents generalized demands from being relationship-based, the obligations of our close relationships can be moral, and the tension disappears.

To sum up, then, we agree with Sars and Chaplin that the difference between personal and moral reactive attitudes is a function of the kind of demand that these classes of attitudes reflect. We disagree, however, with the way in which Sars and Chaplin characterize the demands in question, and with their claim that, according to Strawson, relationship-based demands cannot be moral.

Let us now briefly look at the self-reactive attitudes. How does our distinction between reacting as an individual and reacting as a member of a social group relate to a self-reactive attitude such as guilt? The perspectival interpretation characterizes guilt as a reaction to my own attitude towards another person. We agree that, at least paradigmatically (leaving aside the complicated issue of vicarious guilt), guilt can indeed be distinguished from resentment and indignation in virtue of its being a reaction to one’s *own* attitude. Importantly, though, we believe that guilt can be moral or non-moral, depending on the kind of demand reflected in it. That guilt can be either moral or non-moral is suggested by Strawson when he writes that guilt can be ‘qualified as “moral”’ (FR 23). I may feel guilty for not living up to a personal demand or for not respecting a socially sanctioned demand. (Like resentment and indignation, moral and non-moral guilt may be mixed, or it may be indeterminate whether guilt is moral and/or non-moral.) Sars (2019) recognizes that guilt may be moral or non-moral, but, as we have seen, he attributes to Strawson a conception of morality that Strawson rejects. Chaplin (2023) works with a bipartite distinction between reactive attitudes reflecting a partial concern and reactive attitudes reflecting an impartial concern, and she locates the self-reactive attitudes in the first class. Thus, she does justice to the fact that we can feel guilty for not living up to partial demands, but she fails to do justice to the fact that we can also feel guilty for not respecting impartial demands.

To conclude, we propose that two variables are indispensable for classifying the reactive attitudes. First, some reactive attitudes (the personal and moral ones) are essentially reactions to another’s attitude, others (the self-reactive ones) are essentially reactions to our own attitude. Second, some reactive attitudes (the personal and non-moral self-reactive ones) reflect a personal demand, others (the moral and moral self-reactive ones) reflect a socially sanctioned demand. The figure below summarizes our findings.[[5]](#footnote-5)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | **Reaction to** | |
| **Another’s attitude** | **One’s own attitude** |
| **Reflection of** | **Personal demands** | resentment | non-moral guilt |
| **Socially sanctioned demands** | indignation | moral guilt |

Strawson’s account, as we have presented it here, can of course be criticized, and there is room for development in several respects, but our main aim has been to *present* Strawson’s view, not to evaluate or develop it. We have tried to show that a reading of FR in the light of SMII elucidates Strawson’s distinction between personal and moral reactive attitudes, yielding an interpretation that differs both from common perspectival interpretations and from recent interpretations by Sars and Chaplin.

1. **Morality and moral responsibility**

Strawson’s distinction between ethics and morality has important consequences for our understanding of the distinction between personal and moral reactive attitudes in FR. A correct understanding of the latter distinction is important in itself, but it also has wider implications for the interpretation of Strawson’s account of moral responsibility in FR.

Sars (2022) has recently highlighted the underappreciated argumentative structure of FR. In sections 1 and 2, Strawson introduces the debate between ‘optimists’ and ‘pessimists’. Pessimists hold that, if the thesis of determinism is true, ‘then the concepts of moral obligation and responsibility really have no application, and the practices of punishing and blaming, of expressing moral condemnation and approval, are really unjustified’ (FR 1). By contrast, optimists hold that these concepts and practices are not unjustified if determinism is true. Strawson’s lecture is intended ‘as a move towards reconciliation’ (FR 2) between optimists and pessimists.

Sars points out that Strawson’s discussion of the personal reactive attitudes in sections 3 and 4 of FR does *not* directly concern the concepts (of moral obligation and moral responsibility) and practices (of punishing and blaming, of expressing moral condemnation and approval) that are central to the debate between optimists and pessimists. As Strawson himself writes,

… it is not of these practices and attitudes that I propose, at first, to speak … I want to speak, at least at first, of something else: of the non-detached attitudes and reactions of people directly involved in transactions with each other; of the attitudes and reactions of offended parties and beneficiaries; of such things as gratitude, resentment, forgiveness, love, and hurt feelings. Perhaps something like the issue between optimists and pessimists arises in this neighbouring field too; and since this field is less crowded with disputants, the issue might here be easier to settle; and if it is settled here, then it might become easier to settle it in the disputant-crowded field. (FR 5)

This is a crucial passage from a structural point of view. Although the issue between optimists and pessimists is felt to be particularly important when it comes to punishment, moral condemnation and approval, these are *not* the practices and attitudes of which Strawson will speak in sections 3 and 4. He will speak of *something else,* of *non-detached* attitudes and reactions of a *neighbouring field* in which *something like* the issue between optimists and pessimists arises. And he hopes that his discussion of the neighbouring field will make it easier to discuss the concepts and attitudes with which he is centrally concerned, to which he returns in sections 5 and 6.

Sars believes, correctly in our view, that his points about the argumentative structure of FR undermine an influential orthodoxy in Strawsonian scholarship, according to which moral responsibility has to be understood in terms of the class of reactive attitudes as a whole. Wallace (2014: 119), for instance, ascribes to Strawson the view ‘that moral responsibility should be understood in terms of the reactive attitudes’, and Fischer (2014: 95-6) holds that, according to Strawson, ‘to be morally responsible is to be the target of the reactive attitudes’.[[6]](#footnote-6) But Strawson’s view is much more specific, namely that moral responsibility should be understood in terms of the *moral* reactive attitudes (including the moral variants of the self-reactive attitudes, such as moral guilt).

If this is right, the distinction between moral and personal reactive attitudes becomes crucially important for our understanding of moral responsibility, since the former but not the latter will figure centrally in its explanation.[[7]](#footnote-7) As we have seen, Sars works with a narrow understanding of ‘moral’, seeing the moral reactive attitudes as reactions from the perspective of persons as such, and moral demands as demands placed upon persons as such. From a Strawsonian standpoint, this is unnecessarily narrow. We can be morally responsible for flouting socially sanctioned demands made on us in virtue of our membership of a society, a particular position in it or a particular relation in which we stand to other members. The socially sanctioned demands made on someone *as a professor* may be different from and more specific than the demands made on her *as a person as such,* but why believe that we can only be morally responsible for (not) respecting the latter? Strawson’s use of ‘moral’, and the conception of moral responsibility that comes with it, is much broader than Sars’.

On the other hand, the scope of moral responsibility within Strawson’s framework is narrower than orthodox readers take it to be.[[8]](#footnote-8) I may resent you for not loving me, but my resentment is not a way of holding you morally responsible. In FR, Strawson uses the qualifier ‘moral’ consciously, conscientiously and consistently in sections 1-2 and 5-6, in discussions about moral responsibility, the moral reactive attitudes, punishment and blame. By contrast, he does not use ‘moral’ at all in sections 3-4, in discussions about the personal reactive attitudes. Compare, in this respect, a passage from section 4 with an analogous passage from section 5. Strawson writes in section 4 that excuses, making us suspend the personal reactive attitudes,

… do not invite us to see the *agent* as other than a fully responsible agent.They invite us to see the *injury* as one for which he was not fully, or at all, responsible.The offering of such pleas by the agent and their acceptance by the sufferer is something in no way opposed to, or outside the context of, ordinary inter-personal relationships… (FR 8)

In section 5, Strawson discusses considerations that make us suspend the moral instead of the personal reactive attitudes, and writes:

… we may express the facts with a new emphasis. We may say, stressing the moral, the generalized aspect of the demand, considerations of this group have no tendency to make us see the agent as other than a morally responsible agent; they simply make us see the injury as one for which he was not morally responsible. The offering and acceptance of such exculpatory please as are here in question in no way detracts in our eyes from the agent’s status as a term of moral relationships. (FR 17)

These passages are very similar, but the differences are instructive. While section 4 has ‘responsible’ and ‘ordinary inter-personal relationships’, section 5 has ‘*morally* responsible’ and ‘*moral* relationships’ (our italics). You are in some sense responsible for not loving me, but you are not morally responsible, because there are no reciprocal, socially sanctioned demands or obligations here. Similarly, I can hold myself responsible and feel guilty for failing to live up to a personal ideal, but this responsibility and its attendant guilt are not moral.

Strawson’s limited use of ‘moral’ notwithstanding, many commentators have interpreted the whole class of reactive attitudes in moral terms.[[9]](#footnote-9) As a consequence, Strawson has been accused of reducing the sphere of interpersonal relationships to the sphere of morality and moral responsibility. According to Carlsson (2018), he focuses narrowly on moral wrongdoing and neglects the possibility of reactive attitudes that fall outside the scope of morality. ‘There is resentment that does not express moral blame’, she writes, and this is meant as a criticism of Strawson (Carlsson 2018: 1171). Her central example is that of unrequited love, more specifically the ‘tragic injury’ of a woman (Scarlett O’Hara in *Gone With the Wind*) by a man. The nonresponsive beloved has no obligation to love the lover but bears some kind of responsibility to her. The lover’s fate is not the result of a natural catastrophe. The beloved is responsible for what he does to the lover, his agency is involved, his actions disclose who he is, and he may feel guilty. He is not *morally* responsible, though, because there is no presumption that he could have done otherwise and no room for the thought that he deserves blame. The lover’s resentment, Carlsson (2018: 1180) writes, ‘does not have as its content something universal and principled but refers only to a private experience of pain or disappointment’, which makes it ‘an inherently less social … emotion than indignation’. The beloved’s responsibility is neither merely causal nor moral, and Carlsson suggests that there is no room for it within Strawson’s framework. His narrowing of ethics to morality ‘follows the same trajectory as the narrowing of ethics to morality with which Williams faulted contemporary philosophy’, he is guilty of ‘moral totalitarianism’ (Carlsson 2018: 1188).

Carlsson’s article is an insightful contribution to the literature on reactive attitudes. But Strawson is an ally of hers rather than an opponent, because he *does* make room for the distinction between ethics and morality, for a kind of responsibility that is neither merely causal nor moral, for reactive attitudes that fall outside the scope of morality, for non-moral guilt, and for the difference between personally and socially grounded reactive attitudes. Our reading of FR through the lens of SMII should help to counter the tendency to interpret FR in exclusively moral terms.

1. **Power and criticism**

It is sometimes claimed that Strawson was insensitive to issues of power and oppression in society. According to Hutchison, Mackenzie and Oshana (2018: 1-2), the lack of attention to oppression, structural injustice and hierarchies of power in the literature on moral responsibility is ‘no doubt due to the way the recent literature has emerged from … the compatibilism of P. F. Strawson’. Ciurria (2023: 35) holds that Strawson ‘conceals the reality of oppression and inhibits the cultivation of solutions to social injustice’. Because he ignores power relations, especially where they give rise to social oppression, Strawson thinks that our moral responsibility practices are basically in good order. He does not see that they must be criticized and reformed rather than accepted.

Did Strawson really ignore power relations and social oppression? Reading FR in the light of SMII shows that he did not. As we have seen, Strawson thinks of morality in terms of socially sanctioned demands. ‘Sanction’, Strawson notes, is related to ‘permission’, ‘approval’, ‘power’ and ‘penalty’ (SMII 38): ‘A socially sanctioned demand is doubtless a demand made with the permission and approval of a society; and backed, in some form and degree, with its power.’ Thus, the idea of power is at the very heart of Strawson’s conception of morality. The demands reflected in moral reactive attitudes and practices of holding people morally responsible should be understood as demands backed by the power of a group or society. And where there is power, it can be misused. There are often ‘different, and perhaps widely different, moral environments’ inside a single society (SMII 46), and different groups will differ in power, which may cause imbalances of power, structural injustice, and social oppression.

So Strawson does not ignore power relations and the possibility of oppression. Yet it is worth asking why Ciurria, who claims that he ignores these issues, believes that Strawson *should have* taken them into account. There seem to be two main reasons. First, Ciurria (2023: 36) writes that Strawson’s theory ‘ignores, and thereby legitimizes, systems of oppression’. We resist the inference from ‘ignores’ to ‘legitimizes’, but we may well ask whether Strawson does not somehow legitimize oppression, even though he does not ignore it. He writes, for example, that ‘when the master recognizes moral obligations to his slave, … the slave is not merely subject to the demands of his master, but may recognize a moral obligation to fulfill them’ (SMII 39). If he holds that slaves may have moral obligations to their masters, is he then not legitimizing oppression? Our answer is no. Strawson is concerned to point out in this passage that, where power is unevenly distributed, demands may still count as moral if they are socially sanctioned, if those subject to them have some interest in the system of demands and if they recognize some obligations under the system. There is a diversity of often incompatible systems of moral demands (bourgeois morality, working-class morality, etc.), and the mere fact of being a moral demand does not make the demand *justified* or *legitimate.* Strawson’s understanding of morality is *descriptive* (a set of demands that *is* endorsed), not *normative* (a set of demands that *should* be endorsed).[[10]](#footnote-10) A failure to see this might lead one to think that he legitimizes oppression, but he only describes it.

Second, according to Ciurria, Strawson should have taken power relations and social oppression into account because not doing so makes it difficult to see that there is something deeply wrong with our moral responsibility practices and that they must be criticized. An adequate account of the reactive attitudes should not focus, as Strawson does, ‘on the criteria that these attitudes ideally should track but must expose and critique the stereotypes and prejudices that they really do track’ (Ciurria 2023: 37). What does that mean? We have seen that Strawson describes the reactive attitudes as reactions to quality of will (section 3). This is, according to Ciurria, what the reactive attitudes *should* track: resentment and indignation are appropriate only if they are reactions to ill will (or indifference or lack of concern). But ill will is often not what resentment and indignation *do* track: we often react with resentment and indignation to the actions of oppressed people, even when these actions do not manifest ill will. Ciurria (2023: 40) adduces that we ‘treat oppressed groups as if they were culpable evildoers and enemies, apt for resentment and indignation’. Under the influence of stereotypes and prejudices, our reactive attitudes often misfire, sometimes in systematic ways. There is something deeply wrong with our moral responsibility practices, but Strawson makes it difficult to see this.

In our view, Strawson does *not* fail to recognize that reactive attitudes often misfire. Although issues of power are less explicitly present in FR than in SMII, Strawson is very conscious of the fact that the reactive attitudes often do not track what that they should track. He describes the realm of reactive attitudes as ‘a prime realm of self-deception, of the ambiguous and the shady, of guilt-transference, unconscious sadism and the rest’ (FR 26), and he does not want to deny ‘the possibility and desirability of redirection and modification’ (FR 27). Strawson does not think that our responsibility practices are in order as they are, he explicitly admits that ‘we may have good reason for dropping or modifying those practices’ (FR 27). Our practices may well be in need of criticism.

We believe that Strawson not only recognizes that our responsibility practices may be in need of criticism, but also that his account provides some crucial tools for criticizing them — *pace* Ciurria (2023: 40), who holds that Strawson’s account ‘inhibits the development of the tools needed to understand and address social injustice’. Recall Strawson’s claim that his conception of morality not only *allows for* the idea of moral criticism, but makes the nature and possibility of such criticism intelligible. This is because moral criticism characteristically appeals to general moral ideas such as those of justice, integrity, and humanity, which are present in any conceivable moral system. When we think about criticizing moral responsibility practices, we should ask to which ideas such criticism characteristically appeals, and whether these ideas are present in Strawson’s account.

Ciurria remarks that we often ‘treat oppressed groups as if they were culpable evildoers and enemies, apt for resentment and indignation’ (Ciurria 2023: 40). How could we criticize this situation? We might say, for instance, that this kind of treatment is inappropriate because it is unjust or inhumane to hold people morally responsible if there is nothing wrong with their quality of will. We appeal to general moral ideas, and we point out that there is a gap between what the reactive attitudes *should* track (quality of will) and what they *do* track in these cases under the influence of prejudices and stereotypes. But this is precisely to *use* the tools that Strawson provides. Appealing to the criteria that the reactive attitudes *should* track seems very useful, if not necessary, for pointing out problems with our responsibility practices as they are: what is wrong in the case described by Ciurria is that our reactive attitudes do not track what they should track. By contrast, it is unclear where the tools for criticism can be found in Ciurria’s conception of an adequate account of the reactive attitudes, which should *not* focus on the criteria that these attitudes should track but only on what they do track. How are we supposed to criticize our practices if we cannot point out that there is a gap between what they do track and what they should track?

We conclude that Strawson was not insensitive to issues of power: the idea of power is at the heart of his conception of morality. He does not legitimize oppression; the impression that he does might be caused by mistaking his descriptive characterization of morality for a normative one. Strawson’s account of our moral responsibility practices in FR explicitly allows for the possibility of criticism, and his account of morality in SMII highlights some of the ideas to which such criticism characteristically appeals.

1. **Conclusion**

We have argued that Strawson’s widely known account of moral responsibility in FR is inextricably bound up with his barely known account of morality in SMII. The ethics-morality distinction (section 2) underlies Strawson’s distinction between personal and moral reactive attitudes (sections 3 and 4) and sheds light on the scope of moral responsibility (section 5). The explicit connection between morality and power shows that Strawson was not insensitive to issues of power and open to the possibility of moral criticism (section 6). Our main concern has been to present Strawson’s view, not to evaluate it. We hope to have established that interpreters of FR and responsibility scholars have much to gain from reading FR in the light of SMII.[[11]](#footnote-11)

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1. See these papers for references to perspectival readings and for arguments that Strawson’s distinction is *not* perspectival. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Strawson’s allusions to the literature of the maxim in his discussion of ethics in SMII (32), and to that same literature (more specifically to its main author, La Rochefoucauld) in his discussion of the personal reactive attitudes in FR (5), are also suggestive of this connection. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this way of formulating the distinction. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Strawson’s examples of personal interests and ideals show that these need not reflect concern for the *self* rather than concern for others. If you step on my child’s hand, my resentment may reflect concern for my child rather than self-concern. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. We have been focusing on Strawson’s central examples of resentment, indignation, and guilt. Strawson provides more examples of reactive attitudes, but discussion of these examples is beyond the scope of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For more examples of orthodox readings, see Sars (2022). For examples not mentioned by Sars, see Alvarez (2021: 196), Pereboom (2014: 72), Russell (2017: 47). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Not only our understanding of moral responsibility will be impacted by the distinction between moral and personal reactive attitudes, the same seems to hold for blame. Strawson clearly regards blame as specifically moral. The practice of blaming is one of the practices with which he claims to be centrally concerned, and it figures only in sections 1-2 and 5-6, not in 3-4. Strawson does not hold, in our view, that blame can be explained in terms of the negative personal reactive attitudes (such as resentment) or in terms of the class of negative reactive attitudes as a whole (including resentment). Those who attribute this view to Strawson, writing indiscriminately about personal and moral reactive attitudes in relation to blame, include Alvarez (2021: 199), Bennett (1980: 14, 23-24, 40), Darwall (2006: 145, 251), Fischer and Ravizza (1993: 15), Pereboom (2014: 72), and Watson (2004: 226-227). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Chaplin (2023: 22-23) has a problem here. On the one hand, she is an orthodox reader who holds that Strawson explains moral responsibility in terms of the class of reactive attitudes as a whole. On the other hand, she holds that ‘moral’ in ‘moral reactive attitudes’ should be identified with ‘impartial’. She then suggests that Strawson uses ‘moral’ in two different senses, a wide one (as in ‘moral responsibility’, explained in terms of both personal and moral reactive attitudes) and a narrower one (as in ‘moral reactive attitude’). In our view, however, Strawson uses ‘moral’ in one sense only, a sense which is different from the wide sense of orthodox readers *and* from ‘impartial’. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Watson (2004: 229) writes that ‘the reactive attitudes express a *moral* demand’ (Watson’s italics). He attributes to Strawson the view ‘that the reactive attitudes essentially involve regarding the other as “a morally responsible agent, as a term of moral relationships, as a member of the moral community” (FR 17)’ (234). But Watson misinterprets the quotation from FR 17, where Strawson is talking only about the moral reactive attitudes, not about reactive attitudes in general. For a similar misinterpretation, see Darwall (2006: 60-61): ‘reactive attitudes like blame, reproach, resentment, and indignation … address violators in a way that, as Strawson puts it, “continu[es] to view him as a member of the moral community; only as one who has offended against its demands” (FR 23)’. Again, this passage in FR is specifically about the moral reactive attitudes, not about the whole class of reactive attitudes. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. On the distinction between descriptive and normative characterizations of morality, see Gert and Gert 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Many thanks to two anonymous reviewers for extremely helpful comments and suggestions. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)