**AGAINST STRAWSONIAN EPISTEMOLOGY:**

**TESTIMONY, SELF-KNOWLEDGE, PROMISING, AND RESOLVING[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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Peter Strawson’s distinctive approach to the free will problem (1962) viewed the key to understanding the nature of freedom and responsibility as lying in the reactive attitudes. Our tendency to feel resentment and gratitude, anger and forgiveness and the like, is, as Strawson would have it, ineliminible. More than that, Strawson held that, even if we could, somehow, dispense with such feelings, this would undermine worthwhile human relationships. Human freedom and responsibility are not rooted in any metaphysical fact, according to Strawson. They are, instead, rooted in our tendencies to feel these reactive attitudes, attitudes which are an essential part of a human life worth living.

In recent years, a number of philosophers have adapted this Strawsonian way of looking at things to various epistemological issues. Thus, for example, Richard Moran (2001), Elizabeth Fricker (2006), Benjamin McMyler (2011), Edward Hinchman (2014), and Berislav Marušić (2015) have argued that the key to understanding the epistemology of testimony resides in the feeling of trust we may have in other human beings.[[2]](#footnote-2) Once we understand the way in which trust underlies the epistemology of testimony, these philosophers claim, we see that paradigm cases of properly believing what others say should not be explained as a matter of having adequate evidence for one’s belief. Testimonial belief, on this view, is grounded in a way which is different in kind from, for example, perceptual belief or belief based on inference.[[3]](#footnote-3) We may, in some cases, believe what someone says on the basis of evidence that the testifier is reliable, but when we do so, on this Strawsonian view, we have an attitude toward the testifier which objectifies them and is incompatible with genuine trust. Such an attitude is utterly foreign to healthy human relationships, as these philosophers would have it, and no part of our typical testimonial interactions.

The Strawsonian approach has been applied, as well, to understanding the epistemology of deliberation about what to believe. Richard Moran (2001) argues that the knowledge we have of what we believe, when the belief in question is a product of deliberation, is not a matter of having evidence that we have that very belief; it is different in kind from knowledge based on evidence. Knowledge of what we believe can, on Moran’s view, be evidentially based, but in such cases we are estranged or alienated from our beliefs, just the opposite of the relationship we have to our beliefs when we deliberate. Moran emphasizes the Anscombian (1957) origins of this view, but there can be little doubt that it has deep affinities with Strawson’s approach to the free will problem as well.

Finally, Berislav Marušić (2015), in what is one of the most creative and far reaching applications of Strawsonian ideas, takes a similar approach to some of the beliefs we form when making promises or resolutions to behave in certain ways. As Marušić notes, we frequently resolve to undertake projects which we know will be quite difficult for us and which we will be severely tempted to abandon well before our goals are met. Similarly, we can and do sometimes promise others to undertake such projects. In these cases, Marušić argues that we may properly believe that we will do what we resolve or promise to do, but such beliefs, he argues, are not based on evidence. As with other Strawsonian epistemologists, Marušić argues that the attitude one has in forming beliefs based on evidence would undermine the possibility of promising and resolving in these cases, and it would undermine our status as agents as well. If we are to properly understand the epistemology of such beliefs, according to Marušić, we must see them as different in kind from evidence-based beliefs.

I believe that this approach to all of these issues is fundamentally mistaken. While Strawsonian epistemologists see evidence-based approaches as deeply in conflict with pervasive and rewarding features of human relationships, I believe that the evidence-based approach is actually required for such relationships. But, more than that, I will argue that it is the evidence-based approach, and not the Strawsonian, which gets the epistemology right.

**1. Strawson on freedom**

Strawson draws a distinction between two different sorts of attitudes we might take toward others and our interactions with them. He refers to these as the *objective attitude* and the *participant attitude.* When we take the objective attitude toward someone, we think about the person and our interactions with them in much the way that a contemporary social scientist might. We think about what the person might believe, say, or do in the light of the available evidence that bears on those matters, and we seek to form as accurate an opinion as possible. Taking the objective attitude involves treating the other person, as far as one’s beliefs about that person go, as an object of theory, and we do the best we can to make sure that our theories about other people are true.

When we adopt the participant attitude, on the other hand, we do not distance ourselves from others in the way that the objective attitude requires. And it is precisely because we do not always, or even typically, distance ourselves from others that we are susceptible to the reactive attitudes. We do not merely note that someone has betrayed our trust; we resent it. We do not merely note that someone has extended herself to us at great personal expense; we feel gratitude. And so on.

As Strawson remarks,

To adopt the objective attitude to another human being is to see him, perhaps, 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 account, perhaps precautionary account, of; to be managed or handled or cured or trained; perhaps simply to be avoided, though *this* gerundive is not peculiar to cases of objectivity of attitude. The objective attitude may be emotionally toned in many ways, but not in all ways: it may include repulsion or fear, it may include pity or even love, though not all kinds of love. But it cannot include the range of reactive feelings and attitudes which belong to involvement or participation with others in inter-personal human relationships; it cannot include resentment, gratitude, forgiveness, anger, or the sort of love which two adults can sometimes be said to feel reciprocally, for each other. (1962, 126-7)

As Strawson sees it, taking the participant attitude presupposes that the individual toward whom we take it is free and responsible. Although we certainly can and do avoid taking the participant attitude toward some individuals all of the time, and toward many individuals at some times, Strawson’s view is that the participant attitude is something we cannot simply avoid taking *tout court.* We thus inevitably presuppose that there is such a thing as free action—indeed, that there is quite a bit of it—and that people are quite frequently responsible for their behavior.

Now there is a great deal about this view that one might call into question, but, at this point, I want to simply take it as given and see how well it may serve as a model for epistemological theorizing.

**2. The epistemology of testimony**

We frequently accept the word of others, taking what they say at face value and incorporating it into our bodies of belief. Competing accounts of the epistemology of testimony will not only offer differing views about the epistemically important features of these interactions; they will typically offer competing theoretical accounts of what the most central features of these interactions are.[[4]](#footnote-4) For Strawsonian epistemologists, the central cases of testimonial knowledge involve testimony between friends and intimates, and what is important about communication between such parties is that it is mediated by way of trust.

Thus, consider Elizabeth Fricker’s remarks about the character of knowledge by way of testimony:

When I take another’s word for it that P, I trust her in a way that makes my relation to her different from when I treat her expressed belief merely as defeasible evidence. One might say that I treat her as an end, not merely as a means. Afortiori this contrast holds, when through background information possessed by me, and not by her, I treat the fact of her utterances as a reliable natural sign of what is asserted. Moreover, as suggested earlier, it is plausible to see the function of testimony—its proper means of spreading knowledge—as being through the mechanism of trust in the teller, when her act is taken to be what it purports to be, an expression of knowledge, which offers to the hearer an entitlement to believe on the teller’s say-so. T [Fricker’s account of testimonial knowledge] holds only for the relatively narrow category Ihave described. But it is a category which reveals the nature of the speech act of telling, and of testifying more broadly, and enables us to discern and describe a crucial means of knowledge-spreading which is a true epistemic kind. (2006, 607)

On Fricker’s account, as on all Strawsonian accounts, knowledge by way of testimony constitutes an epistemic kind when there is a certain personal—in her case, moral—relationship between speaker and hearer. It is in virtue of the trust between these parties that knowledge by way of testimony is possible, and this cannot be explained as a matter of the utterance being treated as evidence of the truth of what is uttered.

Others highlight the importance of the personal dimension in cases of testimony in a slightly different way. As Richard Moran puts it, the right way to view such cases does not involve, most fundamentally, believing a proposition; they involve believing a person (2005, 2). Similarly, Berislav Marušić (2015, Chapter 7, esp. section 7.1) tells us that what is involved is *trusting* a person, where this is not only different from, but incompatible with, believing what the person says on the basis of evidence of their trustworthiness. Similar points are made in Hinchman (2014) and McMyler (2011).

These accounts contrast with views on which testimonial knowledge is explained in ways which are of a piece with accounts of knowledge by way of perception or by way of testimony: they are, on such views, similarly evidence-based. Thus, if my wife tells me that she’ll be home late for dinner, I believe what she says because the fact that she said it is evidence of its truth. I have a great deal of evidence of my wife’s veracity. Our long relationship together has provided overwhelming evidence that she would not say such a thing were it not true. And so, when I believe her, I believe her on the basis of this evidence.

The evidence-based account does not make one’s relationship with the speaker irrelevant to what one should believe.[[5]](#footnote-5) Apart from the fact that relationships of long standing give one a great deal of evidence about the trustworthiness of the speaker, there is another important fact about testimony from intimates which bears on one’s evidence: intimates have a great deal more to lose than mere acquaintances should they provide false testimony. If a used car salesman tells you that a car you are interested in buying is in excellent condition, there is no harm to one’s personal relationship should the claim turn out to be a blatant lie, since there was no pre-existing personal relationship to harm. If one’s friend, or spouse, or lover tells a blatant lie, however, this can severely compromise one’s relationship, and since everyone is well aware of this consequence of telling a lie, it gives such individuals still greater incentive, over and above their background commitment to honesty, to be honest in such personal communications. Evidence-based accounts of testimonial knowledge thus do not ignore the epistemological relevance of personal relationships. They merely treat facts about such relationships as further pieces of evidence.

It is precisely this way of dealing with features of personal relationships that Strawsonian epistemologists object to. Marušić is admirably clear on this point:

A simple objection to [evidence-based accounts][[6]](#footnote-6) is that having adequate evidence to believe precludes the need for trust. In particular, if you have adequate evidence to believe that someone will do something, then there is no need to trust her to do it. Hence [an evidence-based account] fails to give an account of trust altogether; it misses the phenomenon it is supposed to explain. (2015, 180)

I would put this point somewhat differently. Those who favor an evidence-based account of testimony do not, of course, deny that there is such a phenomenon as trusting a person. Rather, they see the sort of trust at issue in testimony as nothing more nor less than evidence of trustworthiness or reliability. Thus, we may trust our friends and intimates just because we have such overwhelming evidence that they are worthy of trust, and, therefore, that what they tell us can be relied upon to be true. Of course, the Strawsonian thinks that there is a different phenomenon going on here, and those who favor evidence-based accounts of testimony will, indeed, deny that there is such a phenomenon. But it is important to see this as a theoretical dispute about just what is going on in cases of testimony between friends and intimates.

Why does Marušić believe that evidence-based accounts fail to appreciate the nature of communication between intimates? It is here that Marušić draws on distinctively Strawsonian resources:

…there are two ways to answer the question of what someone else will do. We can answer the question as observers. We will then assess our evidence about what the other will do in light of the fact that she is making a commitment and seek to predict what she will do. Yet we can also, to draw on Strawson’s notion, take a participant point of view. We can *ask* the other what she will do. And, if she promises us to do something, or tells us that she will do something, we can, at least in the good case, take her at her word and trust her. When we take an observer’s view of the other’s future, our belief is rational in light of our evidence; when we take a participant view of the other’s future, our belief is rational in light of the reasons of trust (2015, 192).

Moreover, as Marušić emphasizes, “reasons of trust” are “categorically different from evidence.” (2015, 183)

Now I do think that Marušić has got the phenomenology of communication between intimates exactly right. When my wife tells me that she’s going to be late for dinner, I don’t stop to think about the extent of her trustworthiness, or the amount of evidence I have from her behavior, over a period of many decades, that she will tell me the truth. Nor do I think about the ways in which our relationship would be harmed were she to lie to me, and the fact that she is aware of the harm that such violations of trust can cause in a relationship. None of these things cross my mind. I just trust her.

But, of course, none of these facts about the phenomenology of trust have anything to do with the question of what my testimonially based belief is ultimately based on.[[7]](#footnote-7) Thus, consider the fact that we not only have friends and intimates who are eminently trustworthy. Many of us have personal relationships with individuals who are less than fully trustworthy. Indeed, rather than seeing trustworthiness as a simple yes/no matter, it is no doubt more accurate to see the matter of trustworthiness as spanning a wide range of cases, from individuals who are exceptionally reliable to individuals who are exceptionally unreliable. Most people lie somewhere in between these extremes, even when one factors in, as one must here, the context of communication with an intimate. It would be foolhardy not to be sensitive to these differences, and to take them into account in one’s epistemic interactions with others. And, of course, we do take these things into account.[[8]](#footnote-8) In cases, where our relationship with the speaker is close and of longstanding, these matters can be taken into account without having to bring them to conscious attention. I don’t need to think about my wife’s trustworthiness or her commitment to be honest with me in order for this to play a role in my acceptance of what she says, any more than I need to focus attention on the untrustworthiness of the snake-oil salesman in order to be uninfluenced by his mendacious lies. Indeed, we can only account for the differential way in which the testimony of others affects us by recognizing the role which these background beliefs play without having to be brought to mind.

Those who favor an evidence-based approach to testimony will thus see the proper role for the recipient of testimony as residing in the objective point of view. We should simply be responsive to the evidence available, and form the appropriate conclusions on its basis. Evidence about our relationship to the speaker is relevant, of course, in just the ways enumerated above. But it is the objective attitude which rightly describes the way in which we should respond to testimony.

Now if we accept some of Strawson’s claims about the consequences of viewing others from an objective, rather than a participant, point of view, this will certainly raise various practical concerns. If Strawson is right, for example, that the objective point of view undermines satisfying human relationships, then, if evidence-based accounts of testimony are correct, we seem forced to choose between being epistemically responsible in dealing with the testimony of intimates, on the one hand, and having satisfying human relationships, on the other. Marušić encourages this view when he says that when we think of others from the objective point of view, we “treat the other as an object” (2015, 200). Similarly, he quotes Moran approvingly when Moran remarks that, “refusing to acknowledge an epistemic stance toward the speaker’s words other than as evidence means that speaker and audience must always be in disharmony with each other…” (Moran 2005, 23; quoted in Marušić 2015, 182).

But this way of thinking about the matter surely provides us with a false dichotomy. Consider my response to my wife’s telling me that she will be late for dinner. Taking the objective stance does not require treating her as an object. For one thing, it is just an objective fact that my wife has mental states, so the objective stance will certainly involve thinking of her as a person. And while there would certainly be something very odd, and alienating, if I were to self-consciously rehearse the reasons for thinking that my wife does not lie to me,[[9]](#footnote-9) this too is completely irrelevant to whether I am adopting an objective attitude toward her. If my belief that she will be home late is based on evidence in the right sort of way, then I am adopting the objective attitude. I do not see any reason to think that someone who is moved by the evidence in this sort of way would have their relationship with the speaker thereby compromised. In cases where the relationship with the speaker is a good one, the kind of etiology for belief that an objective attitude requires simply does not threaten to produce the kind of alienation and distance which Strawson, and Strawsonians, suggest.

One might think that alienation threatens, with its attendant harm to personal relationships, in cases where an objective attitude would provide less confidence in the speaker’s assertion. There is, of course, a range of cases here. Sufficient acquaintance with the speaker will not require that the hearer self-consciously rehearse any reasons in order to take them into account, so that cannot be the worry, wherever the case may fall on the spectrum from extremely trustworthy to extremely untrustworthy. One may certainly have close relationships with people who are highly trustworthy in general, and yet are not to be trusted on certain topics. If my friend Jerry, who is otherwise highly trustworthy, has a huge blind spot about his children, always viewing them in the best possible light, and never seeing their shortcomings, however obvious those shortcomings may be to others, then I may simply discount his joyous remarks about his children’s latest accomplishments, without having to mentally rehearse the reasons for failing to take them at face value. But this needn’t get in the way of having a meaningful relationship with Jerry. If such a thing did stand in the way of meaningful and satisfying relationships, then the world would present very few opportunities for such relationships. Most people find little trouble negotiating such blind spots and minor failings, both moral and epistemic, in their friends and intimates.

Of course, Strawson is right that in extreme cases, an objective attitude may require the kind of emotional distancing which makes a close personal relationship impossible. There are all sorts of character disorders which, once one recognizes that a speaker is subject to them, will make it impossible to have a close personal relationship with that person. But here it is not the objective attitude, but rather the character disorder itself, which is the source of the problem.

Strawson’s worry, then, that objectivity of attitude will inevitably lead to regarding others as mere “object[s] of social policy,” and thereby undermine the possibility of satisfying human relationships, is badly misplaced. By the same token, those who would leverage Strawson’s ideas about the reactive attitudes into an account of the epistemology of testimony have a terribly inaccurate idea of what being responsive to evidence requires, and reject an evidence-based account of testimonial knowledge on the basis of that misunderstanding.

**3. The epistemology of self-knowledge**

Richard Moran (2001) has applied Strawsonian ideas to the epistemology of self-knowledge. Moran is interested, in particular, in the phenomenon of deliberation, especially about what to believe, as well as the knowledge we have of what we believe as a result of the deliberative process. As in the case of Strawsonian views about testimonial knowledge, Moran is concerned that viewing one’s beliefs about what one believes as evidentially-based will result in a certain sort of alienation—or estrangement, as he puts it—in this case, from oneself, as opposed to the alienation from others which Strawsonians worry about in the case of testimony.

Consider Gareth Evans’s (1982) famous example. If you ask me whether I think there will be a third world war, I may stop to consider the issue. When I deliberate here, I think not about my mental state—what it is I believe or think; instead, I think about the world’s political situation. Here we have the first-person perspective of the deliberator, the Strawsonian participant perspective. I might, however, direct my attention to my mental states, as well as the behavior which provides evidence about them. Here I treat myself in much the same way that I would treat you if I were asked what you believe on a certain matter. Here I adopt the Strawsonian objective perspective. Moran insists that the deliberator’s perspective on his own beliefs cannot be evidentially-based: “It is part of the ordinary first-person point of view on one’s psychological life…that evidence is not consulted…” (Moran 2001, 92)

Just as in the case of testimonial knowledge, it seems clear that the Strawsonian account certainly has the phenomenology right. There is all the difference in the world between self-consciously focusing on evidence about what my mental state is—for example, whether I have good evidence that I believe there will be a third world war—and what goes through my conscious mind when I deliberate about whether there will be such a war, where my conscious attention is focused on evidence about the political scene. In general, if you ask me what I believe about various issues, I am not consciously aware of attending to evidence about my mental state.

And just as with the case of testimonial knowledge, it should be clear that what I am consciously aware of tells us very little about what it is that my belief is actually based upon. Indeed, a great deal of evidence has been offered by a variety of psychologists (see, e.g., Gopnik 1993; for discussion, see Carruthers 2011; Cassam 2105) that our beliefs about our own beliefs, and, indeed, about our propositional attitudes generally, are indeed, evidentially-based. This view is not uncontroversial, but there can be little doubt that, if the view is to be rejected, something more than an appeal to how things seem from the first-person perspective will be required.

But much as Moran does seem simply to take for granted that the first-person perspective on our mental states is not evidence-based, it would be unfair to leave it at that. There is a contrast which Moran is getting at which deserves further exploration, and which does not presuppose anything about the basis of judgments about our own mental states which are a product of the first-person perspective.

There is an important distinction between avowing a belief and reporting a belief. One might, as a result of extensive psychotherapy, come to recognize that one believes that one’s brother, who disappeared long ago, is dead. That one has this belief is very clearly the best explanation of one’s behavior; alternative explanations all face utterly conclusive refutations. In such a situation, one would be able to report what it is that one believes. But this does not assure that one would be able to avow it. One might, after all, recognize that one has a variety of irrational beliefs, and, in these cases, one could report that one had them—acknowledging, for example, that one should probably try to do something to overcome one’s own irrationality. In such cases, precisely because one recognized these beliefs to be irrational, one would not be able to avow them. And if the question of the rationality of a belief remains unsettled, a similar conclusion might apply: reporting that one has the belief would be possible; avowing it would not.

Now we will all need to be able to make this distinction, even if we think that the distinction should not be explained as due to a difference between beliefs which are based on evidence and those which are not. And there can be little doubt that the person who can report on the content of his belief but cannot avow it is properly described as somehow alienated or estranged from his own beliefs. But once we give up Moran’s suggestion that the difference between the person who is estranged from his belief and the person who is not is due to the presence or absence of an evidential basis for that person’s belief about his own belief, then what remains of the epistemological significance of the distinction between beliefs we can avow and those we can only report?

Consider the following passage from Moran:

…it does seem appropriate to distinguish between different levels at which one conceives of oneself as a psychological subject. Believing involves taking something as true; and of course, one also takes other people to have true beliefs sometimes. But the beliefs of other people represent facts (psychological facts, to be sure) on the basis of which one may make up one’s mind about some matter, whereas one’s own beliefs just are the extent to which one’s mind *is* (already) made up. That is, the beliefs of another person may represent indicators of the truth, evidence from which I may infer some conclusion about the matter. I may trust or mistrust them. With respect to my own beliefs, on the other hand, there is no distance between them and how the facts present themselves to me, and hence no going from one to the other. (2001, 75)

Moran is quite clearly talking here about beliefs one might avow, since beliefs one is able to report on without being able to avow them are not examples of “how the facts present themselves”; they are, instead, psychological facts about oneself, epistemologically on a par with the beliefs of others.

Now, of course, one may avow a certain belief, and then find oneself in a position where evidence is presented which undermines one’s confidence in it. Someone might avow that a particular job candidate is not well-suited for a given job, and yet, on being presented with evidence about implicit bias, come to question whether the belief about the candidate should be maintained (Brownstein and Saul 2016). Or one may avow a belief about how the check at a restaurant may be fairly divided, and come to question that belief as a result of disagreement from others (Christensen 2007). Or one may avow a belief as a result of deliberation about what to believe, and entertain serious doubts about the matter as a result of learning about confabulation (Wilson 2004; Kahneman 2011; Kornblith 1999, 2012). Beliefs which one avows are not immune to doubt, and when one is presented with reasons for doubt, one may come to look upon them as psychological facts about oneself which may, or may not, be good indicators of how things stand in the world outside one’s mind. In situations of this sort—situations which are in no way exceptional—one finds oneself switching back and forth between being able to avow one’s belief and only being able to report it.

This ability to shift perspectives on one’s beliefs—to move back and forth between a Strawsonian participant perspective and an objective perspective—is absolutely crucial for any circumspect believer. It may be, as Moran suggests, that the individual who avows a belief regards the truth of that belief as settled (2001, 77), but even if this is the right way to think about avowal, regarding a certain matter as settled at a particular instant must then be fully compatible with regarding it as unsettled just a moment later. And if one regards individuals who take an objective perspective on their own beliefs as thereby alienated or estranged from their beliefs, then this kind of alienation or estrangement is an altogether healthy thing epistemically. Psychological evidence about the illusions which the participant perspective brings with it (Kornblith 2012, 2013) can serve as an important corrective to the first-person perspective. Refusing to take such an objective perspective on one’s own beliefs would be epistemically disastrous.

Perhaps Moran would not disagree.[[10]](#footnote-10) Moran is concerned to distinguish between two different sorts of authority which we might claim to have over our beliefs: epistemic authority and the authority of rational agency (2001, e.g., 92-3). Claims about, for example, invulnerability to error, or to certain types of error, fall under the heading of epistemic authority; but what Moran calls the authority of agency involves the ability to avow a belief, and this ability does not flow from any degree of epistemic authority, no matter how great. One might have superb evidence that one has a certain belief, and yet still be unable to avow it. What the Strawsonian participant perspective on one’s belief allows for—the ability to avow the belief—is the recognition that one is the author of one’s beliefs; that what we believe is up to us. As Moran sees it, when we take the objective perspective on our beliefs rather than the participant perspective, we thereby lose the authority of agency, and, with it, we fail to view ourselves as responsible for our beliefs.

When we deliberate about what to believe, as Moran sees it, we view what we will believe as up to us. We are the authors of our own beliefs, and the process of deliberation, on this view, is the method by which we take our beliefs in hand and take responsibility for them. Someone who takes the objective perspective on their beliefs loses out on this.

For if he cannot see the empirical question of what he believes as answerable to his current explicit thinking about the matter, then just being informed what his belief is leaves open the question whether this information shall count as a *reason* for him or not. As it is, he is no better off than if he had been told that some other person has this belief, or that he himself once did at some other time. (Moran 2001, 123)

Let us consider, first, an individual who occupies the Strawsonian participant perspective on his own beliefs. Let us call him Sal. Sal deliberates about what to believe on a certain matter. He evaluates the reasons for and against a certain proposition *p*, and, after reviewing the reasons carefully, he concludes that the evidence he has strongly favors *p* over *not-p*, and he therefore comes to believe that *p*. Sal views himself as the author of his belief, and he views the reasons he rehearsed as his reasons for believing that *p*, and, indeed, as good reasons to believe that *p*. Sal takes responsibility for his belief; it is fully his own; and, as is typical in the case of such deliberation, Sal will avow that *p* when asked what he believes on this matter.

Consider, now, a second individual, Cal, who also deliberates about whether *p*, and goes through the same private monologue as Sal. She too concludes that *p*; she takes this belief to be based on the reasons which she rehearsed in her private monologue; and she takes these to be good reasons. But then she stops and thinks again. Cal remembers what she learned about the psychology of deliberation, and she takes an objective perspective on her belief that *p*, as well as on her deliberative process. She reminds herself that the process of deliberation does not very accurately track the beliefs on which one’s conclusion is based. One’s belief is based on a great many other beliefs which one did not bring to consciousness, and many of the beliefs which one did bring to consciousness may have had little effect on what one ultimately believes (see, e.g., Kunda 1999, 308). In taking this perspective on her belief that *p*, Cal no longer regards the beliefs she rehearsed in the process of her deliberation as an accurate accounting of her reasons for believing that *p*, and she begins to wonder whether the reasons for which she actually believes that *p* are genuinely good ones. For this reason, Cal is no longer in a position to avow her belief that *p*.

Cal may consider the matter further, and consult with various authorities on the psychology of deliberation. She may participate in a variety of experiments designed to determine even idiosyncratic features of her own psychology. Let us suppose that this is done in extraordinary detail and with great accuracy. Cal comes to understand, from the objective perspective, just what went on in her when she deliberated about whether *p*, and she comes to recognize exactly what her reasons were for believing it. These reasons are not ones which she can recognize from the first-person participant perspective, and Cal does not regard the reasons which were part of her private monologue when she deliberated as the ones which settled for her the question of whether to believe that *p* or *not-p*. Given what she knows about the deliberative process, she cannot take her private monologue under conditions of deliberation as accurately revealing what her reasons for belief actually were. As Cal now sees things, the participant perspective distorts her view of her reasons. It is only the objective perspective which allows her to appreciate what her reasons were, even if, when she takes that perspective, she can only report, and not avow, that these were her reasons. Cal knows too much about the process of deliberation to take it at face-value in the way that the participant perspective demands, and it is for precisely this reason that Cal cannot take her explicit thinking when she deliberated to be what settled the matter of her belief about whether *p*.

Does taking an objective view of one’s processes of belief acquisition thereby undermine one’s rational agency, prevent one from taking responsibility for one’s belief, or limit one to reporting, rather than avowing, one’s belief? It might. If an objective view of the way in which I arrived at a belief reveals it to be the product of non-rational or irrational processes, this may well be the result. Thus, in Nisbett and Wilson’s (1977) classic paper on confabulation, a large percentage of subjects came to believe that a certain pair of pantyhose were the best of those presented, not, as they thought, because they had noticed certain good-making features of the favored pair, but as a product of a tendency to favor objects on the right. Learning this about one’s belief would certainly undermine rational agency; it would surely undermine any sense of responsibility for one’s belief; and it would prevent one from avowing the belief, even if the objective perspective revealed that one continued to hold it.

Needless to say, not all beliefs are produced by non-rational or irrational processes, and so an objective perspective on one’s processes of belief acquisition may reveal that a particular belief one holds was, in fact, rationally acquired. In cases of this sort, the objective perspective would in no way undermine one’s rational agency, nor would it prevent one from taking responsibility for holding the belief. The discovery that one’s belief was rationally produced would not in any way interfere with one’s ability to avow it. Just as the objective perspective on one’s interlocutor needn’t get in the way of satisfying personal relationships, an objective perspective on one’s beliefs and their etiology needn’t get in the way of a view of oneself as a rational agent, responsible for one’s beliefs.

Moran’s Strawsonian worries, then, that the objective perspective on one’s beliefs must inevitably result in alienation or estrangement from them, are misplaced. Moreover, when the objective perspective does result in such alienation, because the manner in which one’s belief was produced was either irrational or non-rational, the resulting alienation is, epistemically, a good thing. It can be an essential first step to putting one’s epistemic house in good order.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**4. The epistemology of promises and resolutions**

Berislav Marušić (2015) takes a Strawsonian approach to the epistemology of promises and resolutions. Marušić points out that people frequently make promises and resolutions to do things in cases where they have a good deal of evidence that they might not follow through. Thus, for example, a heavy smoker may resolve to quit smoking, even knowing that he has tried to quit several times, on each occasion going back to his old habits fairly quickly. Such private resolutions are surely not uncommon. By the same token, one may promise a loved one, in the very same situation, that one will quit smoking. Marušić is interested in whether one should believe, in these sorts of situations, that one will actually follow through on one’s resolution or promise.

Following Marušić, let us stipulate that we are dealing with a case in which, if one were to take an objective attitude towards one’s behavior, one could not reasonably believe that one will follow through. It would be epistemically unjustified to believe, in the kind of case Marušić has in mind, that one will actually quit smoking. This is not to say that one should believe that one won’t. Rather, the evidence simply does not permit an epistemically justified belief that one will succeed in quitting.

Nevertheless, Marušić wishes to argue that it is permissible to believe that one will succeed in one’s undertaking in this sort of situation, and the form of the argument he presents is straightforwardly Strawsonian. On Marušić’s view, making a promise or a resolution requires that one take a participant attitude toward one’s situation, rather than an objective attitude. Although an objective attitude would reveal that one should not believe that one will follow through, promising and resolving preclude taking an objective attitude toward oneself, and the participant perspective leaves room for beliefs which the objective perspective would rule out. As Marušić explains,

Our view of what we will do, when matters are up to us, is made rational by our practical reasons; in contrast, our view of what will happen, when matters are not up to us, is made rational by our evidence… (2015, 123)

It will help to consider an example in some detail. Suppose that Ibrahim, concerned for Mary’s health, asks her to promise him that she will quit smoking. It’s not that Mary does not want to quit smoking; she very much does, both for her own health, and out of respect for her relationship with Ibrahim. But in the past, this has not led to any progress in giving up the habit which both she and Ibrahim view as a bad thing, all things considered.

Now if Mary considers whether she is likely to succeed in quitting this time, should she promise Ibrahim to quit, she can take an objective perspective on her behavior and her past performance. If she does this, she will find that her evidence does not permit her to believe that she will succeed in quitting. But taking this perspective, as Marušić sees it, would have Mary viewing her behavior as something over which she has no choice; it is simply dictated by her psychological make-up together with various facts about her situation. Taking the objective perspective thus amounts to viewing her own smoking as something which is not up to her; it thus inevitably involves ducking responsibility for her own behavior. In order for Mary to take responsibility for her smoking, she needs to adopt the participant perspective.

If Mary takes the participant perspective in response to Ibrahim’s request, she will not be focused on features of her psychology or the ways in which they will causally interact with her situation. Instead, she will consider what the reasons are for quitting, and here, to be sure, all the reasons count in its favor. But this just means that Mary has reason to promise Ibrahim that she will quit. To take the participant perspective involves viewing one’s behavior as something over which one has a choice, and, when Mary views quitting in this way, and she considers the reasons she has to quit, “she can settle the question of what she will do by considering her practical reasons” (2015, 124). And what this means is that Mary should believe that she will quit.

The objective perspective and the participant perspective would lead one to different, and incompatible, beliefs in this situation. And it is for this reason that Marušić insists that one must simply resist taking on the objective perspective. Here, he quotes Bas van Fraassen with approval:

I say, “I promise you a horse,” and you ask, “And what are the chances you’ll get me one?”. I say, “I am starting a diet today,” and you ask, “And how likely is it that you won’t overeat tomorrow?”. In both cases, the *first* reply I must give is “You heard me!”. To express anything but a full commitment to stand behind my promises and intentions is to undermine my own avowals as a person of integrity and, hence, my entire activity of avowal. (van Fraassen 1984, 254; quoted in Marušić 2015, 152)

Indeed, Marušić goes further than van Fraassen. He insists that “we should refuse to take a theoretical view of ourselves” (2015, 154).

Now, I admit that when someone says, “How do I know that you will do it?,” in response to a promise, this can be rather rude. Still, there will be situations in which it is perfectly understandable that someone should ask this question, and, indeed, the situations Marušić has in mind, where there is a good deal of reason to doubt that the promissor will follow through on the promise, are just such situations. Since Mary has tried to quit smoking many times, with no success, and no progress toward success, Ibrahim might understandably wonder what reason there is to believe that Mary will do as she promises; and so he may ask her just that. If Mary does as van Fraassen suggests and insists that, as a person of integrity, her word should be trusted, Ibrahim would have good reason to worry. After all, she has tried and failed before. Mary may well be a person of integrity, but something more is needed if Ibrahim is to have any reasonable confidence that Mary will actually quit smoking this time. And if Ibrahim presses her again, and she follows Marušić’s advice and simply refuses to adopt the objective perspective on her behavior, then Ibrahim has very good reason not to expect that this time will be different.

Just consider what Mary could have said to Ibrahim instead of simply refusing to examine her behavior from the objective point of view. If she said that she believes that this time will be different because making the promise will give her added reason to quit, and added resolve as well, then this, at least, would be some reason to think that this time might be different. If she explains that she has tried a similar strategy with other promises which were difficult to keep, and this often had salutary results, then Ibrahim might have even greater reason to think that this time might well be different. But both of these remarks would require Mary to take an objective perspective on her behavior rather than just the participant perspective.

Notice, as well, that if Mary does adopt the objective perspective, and she finds some real reasons for optimism, then this in no way undermines her agency. An objective view of her own behavior could, of course, undermine her agency if, for example, the objective view forces her to recognize that she is powerless to change her behavior given the nature of her addiction to tobacco, and the features of her own character. But in such a case, it was these things about Mary which undermined her agency, not her taking the objective perspective.

And if Mary is, instead, more fortunate, and an objective perspective reveals that she is able to withstand the temptations of tobacco this time, then the objective perspective will not undermine her agency; it will allow her to recognize the reasons for which she will be able to follow through on her promise. Admittedly, what conditions will need to be satisfied for the objective perspective to make room for agency will depend on whether compatibilism or incompatibilism is true. But either way, the objective perspective could, in principle, reveal that those conditions are met, and that when Mary promises, she will indeed follow through as a result of the exercise of her own agency. So Marušić should not worry that the objective perspective would, of necessity, undermine Mary’s view of herself as a free agent.

The attempt to find reasons to believe that one will follow through on one’s promises and resolutions which somehow bypass the objective perspective is therefore misguided. An objective perspective doesn’t serve to undermine agency. Agency can, of course, be undermined by facts about the agent’s psychology in conjunction with facts about the agent’s situation, but then the objective perspective merely reveals what was independently true: that the agent is in no position to do as he or she promises or resolves. And when the facts are more congenial, and the agent is actually in a position to do what was promised or resolved, the objective perspective will make this plain to the agent, which will surely play no role in undermining agency. Those who make promises and resolutions have no reason to resist taking an objective perspective on the facts of their lives.

**5. Conclusion**

Strawsonian epistemologists are thus mistaken in thinking that there are benefits to be had by taking a participant perspective on testimony, self-knowledge, or the activities of promising or resolving, and refusing to occupy the objective perspective. To the extent that the participant perspective differs from the objective perspective, either by leaving things out which the objective perspective includes, or by virtue of elements which are incompatible with an objective view of one’s self and one’s situation, the participant perspective is thereby inferior to an objective view of matters. Strawson himself, and Strawsonian epistemologists, exaggerate the extent to which an objective perspective will result in alienation, either from others, or from one’s own beliefs, or from one’s agency. Unsurprisingly, departures from the objective perspective are not conducive to believing as one ought.[[12]](#footnote-12)

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1. The term ‘Strawsonian epistemology’ is used by Wilaschek (2013) to denote quite a different sort of epistemological view, one which is rooted in Strawson’s “Freedom and Resentment” in a way not directly related to the views discussed here. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It is Marušić (2015) who points out the Strawsonian roots of this approach. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The issue here, and in Strawsonian epistemology generally, as I see it, is not so much whether these beliefs are based on evidence, but whether a proper understanding of the epistemology of these beliefs will see them as different in kind from both perceptual and inferential beliefs. I will thus use talk of “being evidence-based” as shorthand for this longer description both to make exposition more straightforward, and because this is the way the Strawsonian epistemologists themselves describe the situation. Whether the right way to characterize the epistemology of perception and inference is in terms of evidence, or, instead, something else, is orthogonal to the concerns of this paper. I myself do not favor thinking about these issues in terms of evidence, but believe, instead, that they are better approached in terms of the notion of reliability. Still, none of that will matter for the issues discussed here. I have discussed this issue further in Kornblith (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For example, see Michaelian (2010) for an account, and a system of classification, which is informed by psychological work on deception detection. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Marušić surely overstates his case on this matter when he remarks, “Since [an evidence-based account] fails to attribute any significance to the interpersonal relationship that is involved in trust, it should be rejected.” (2015, 182) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Marušić speaks here of “the Evidentialist Response,” but I prefer to put this more neutrally, for reasons given above in note 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For a useful discussion of these issues, see Miranda Fricker (2007), Chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Indeed, we begin taking such things into account as very young children. See Harris (2012), especially chapters 5 and 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The worry that the objective attitude would require such a conscious rehearsing of reasons is reminiscent of Bernard Williams’s “one thought too many” argument against utilitarianism (Williams 1981). (Indeed, there is some reason to think that Marušić may have Williams’s argument in mind, since he alludes to the question of what to do when one’s spouse is drowning, the very example which is the focus of Williams’s discussion (Marušić 2015, 199).) For an illuminating discussion of the “one thought too many” argument, see Baron (1984), especially 211-214. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. It’s quite hard to say just what Moran’s position is here. He quotes Wittgenstein’s remark that, “One can mistrust one’s own senses, but not one’s own belief,” with approval (2001, 75). And he goes on to say, on the same page, that, “…this must mean not that I take my beliefs to be so much more trustworthy than my senses, but that neither trust nor mistrust has any application here.” But the familiar points made in the previous paragraph of the text certainly suggest that raising questions about the trustworthiness of one’s own beliefs not only makes perfectly good sense—and thus that it would be wrong to say it has no application—but that it is an important part of an epistemically healthy life. In a footnote, Moran remarks,

    The ancient contrast between the seductive, misleading Senses and the trustworthy dictates of Reason can be seen, in part, as resting on a failure to recognize a related differe in kind between the two. The Senses can be compared to an unruly mob, in conflict with itself, because they belong to the category of deliverances *on the basis of which* one forms a judgment. But, insofar as Reason represents the unifying judgment one forms *from* this basis, it is not a faculty superior to or in competition with the Senses. (2001, note 6, 75-6)

    Moran seems to take this as reason for thinking that, “…from the first-person point of view, the relation between one’s own belief and the fact believed is not evidential or empirical…” (2001, 76) The idea that the reliability of reason cannot be treated as an empirical matter is similarly defended by Thomas Nagel 1997. I have discussed this matter in some detail in my 1999, where I argue that the reliability of reason can and should be viewed as an empirical matter. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Similar considerations apply to concerns about alienation in cases of decision making. Thus, L.A. Paul 2014 argues, in Strawsonian fashion, that it would be a mistake to make important decisions, such as whom to marry or whether to have a child, by taking an objective perspective on one’s decision. Paul insists that we must make our choice from the participant perspective:

    If we don’t choose this way, then in an important sense, we alienate ourselves from our choices, and thus alienate ourselves from our own futures. In other words, if you don’t make choices about your future from your own personal point of view, and instead attempt to map out choices based only on some sort of impartial, uncommitted, third personal point of view, you in effect cede authority over yourself. (2014, 130)

    Just as in the epistemic case, this kind of distancing of oneself from the participant perspective seems to me, instead, to be the better part of wisdom. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I am grateful for comments on a previous version of this paper to Nathan Ballantyne, David Dunning, the participants at the Fordham Conference, and, especially, to Berislav Marušić. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)