

Attitudes, Reactive

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The term “reactive attitude” entered the philosophical lexicon with P. F. Strawson’s seminal essay “Freedom and Resentment” (2003: 72–93; *see* STRAWSON, P. F.). Strawson introduces the term to refer to a class of attitudes that respond to qualities of will – good, ill, or indifferent – that people manifest toward each other and themselves. Consider: You are riding on a crowded bus and someone steps on your toe, causing you great pain. In such circumstances, you might understandably feel angry. Compare, however, the scenario where the person’s toe-stepping reflects no ill will (perhaps the bus took an unexpected turn, forcing the person onto your foot) with the scenario where the person intended to cause you pain (perhaps in the hope of beating you to the last available seat). In the former case, presumably, resenting the person’s action is out of place in a way that in the second case it arguably is not. The phenomenon of resentment, a paradigmatic reactive attitude for Strawson, thus demonstrates that whether or not a person’s actions and attitudes manifest ill will, indifference, or good will *matters* to us. It matters, moreover, in varying degrees depending on the relationship in which we stand to the person. (Try substituting, for example, your spouse for the stranger.) This suggests a connection between the kind of relationship in which we stand to another person and the expectations and demands for good will that we legitimately make of them. We can thus understand the reactive attitudes to be “reactive” in the sense of being reactions to features of persons that manifest their response to the expectations and demands of good will that constitute our relationships to one another. To regard oneself and others as legitimate targets of reactive attitudes – such as gratitude, resentment, forgiveness, love, and moral praise and blame (*see* GRATITUDE; LOVE; BLAME) – just is to hold oneself and others responsible for meeting such expectations and demands.

Strawson’s employment of the concept of a reactive attitude is in the service of reconciling traditional opponents in the debate over free will (*see* FREE WILL) and determinism, that is, the incompatibilist and the compatibilist about determinism and moral responsibility (*see* RESPONSIBILITY). Strawson agrees with the compatibilist in arguing that the justification of the reactive attitudes, including those of moral praise and blame, does not require free will in any sense of freedom that is incompatible with the truth of determinism. At the same time, Strawson is sympathetic to the incompatibilist insistence that something vital is lacking in those compatibilist justifications of moral praise and blame that appeal to the efficacy of such attitudes in regulating behavior. Thus, although Strawson would have the incompatibilist abandon metaphysical worries about free will, he acknowledges a remaining moral worry. The moral worry is that the appeal to the efficacy of moral praise and blame provides

the wrong sort of justification of moral attitudes that purport to be forms of moral address, as opposed to merely tools of social control. Strawson's reconciling project thus requires the incompatibilist to abandon (metaphysical) freedom of will as a necessary condition of the justification of moral praise and blame, while requiring the compatibilist to concede that appeals to social efficacy are not adequate justification.

Strawson's Catalogue of Reactive Attitudes

Strawson draws a number of distinctions in outlining the concept of a reactive attitude. He first isolates the "personal" or "participant" reactive attitudes, citing resentment, gratitude, forgiveness, love, and hurt feelings as paradigm cases. The personal reactive attitudes are what Strawson calls "nondetached" in the sense that they are "reactions of people directly involved in transactions with each other" (2003: 75). Although the language of transaction perhaps is unfortunate in suggesting a material exchange, Strawson intends to draw our attention to attitudes that typically arise in the context of particular interpersonal relationships (e.g., among family members, friends, lovers, and colleagues) and direct encounters. The nondetached, personal reactive attitudes are the reactions of persons involved in such relationships to each other's qualities of will as manifested toward each other, in the light of the expectations and demands legitimate to relationships of the relevant kind.

The personal reactive attitudes contrast both with "detached" reactive attitudes and with self-reactive attitudes. Strawson describes the detached reactive attitudes, of which moral indignation is a paradigm case, as "sympathetic or vicarious or impersonal or disinterested or generalized analogues" of the nondetached reactive attitudes (2003: 83). Thus, moral indignation is the analogue of resentment in being directed at another person in virtue of the ill will that they manifest but differs from resentment in responding to ill will as manifested toward another, not toward yourself. For example, a stranger's intentional insult warrants my moral indignation when directed at a third person, whereas the insult warrants my resentment when directed at me. The detached, impersonal reactive attitudes thus are reactions among persons whose only relationship may be that in which any two moral agents stand to one another, and the expectation of good will they presuppose is one made on behalf of moral agents simply considered as such.

Finally, the self-reactive attitudes are a person's reactions to his or her own quality of will as manifested toward others. Your self-reactive attitudes reflect your acknowledgment of (if not always compliance with) the expectations and demands that others make on you. Strawson places in this class the sense of obligation, compunction, guilt, remorse, and shame (*see* GUILT; SHAME AND HONOR).

The Reactive Attitudes as Moral Attitudes

Given Strawson's understanding of the reactive attitudes as reactions to manifest qualities of will and the role he assigns them in constituting moral responsibility, one might suppose they are essentially moral attitudes – in a way that attitudes such as

disgust or admiration, for example, arguably are not. Strawson's own account, however, suggests a different understanding of the moral–nonmoral distinction as applied to the reactive attitudes. Strawson proposes to distinguish moral from nonmoral reactive attitudes by appealing to his distinction between, respectively, detached and nondetached reactive attitudes.

The tendency to view the moral domain as requiring impartiality – such that moral demands are addressed, and compliance with them owed, to all – offers one explanation why Strawson may be drawn to designating only the detached reactive attitudes “moral.” Even waiving objections that challenge understanding the moral domain in this way, however, Strawson's proposal is problematic. Certainly, the fact that another's insult reflects ill will toward me rather than toward some third person fails to make the insult any less morally objectionable as a violation of a legitimate demand for good will. In both cases, we can assume, the target of the insult is wronged. Why suppose, then, that my subsequent resentment is not properly deemed a moral attitude, with indignation, as against a nonmoral attitude such as disgust? Indeed, Strawson (1980) later acknowledged his proposal was too restrictive in limiting the class of moral reactive attitudes to those experienced vicariously or impersonally. Rather than take a restrictive understanding of the “moral” to delimit a proper subset of the reactive attitudes, then, one alternatively might welcome the breadth of attitudes Strawson's concept encompasses as an invitation to reconsider the range of attitudes of significance to moral philosophy. On the latter proposal, regarding someone as within the scope of the reactive attitudes is constitutive of regarding that person as a moral agent in the sense of being answerable to an expectation or demand that forms part of a system of expectations, demands, and rights regulation accordance with which is necessary for aspiring to moral community with one's fellows. Absent some further distinction among particular reactive attitudes, then, there is no reason to suppose that certain of them (e.g., indignation) are privileged so far as their moral import is concerned.

The Objective Attitude

The fundamental moral import of the reactive attitudes in general is evident once one turns to Strawson's distinction between reactive attitude and “objective” attitude. When we take what Strawson calls the objective attitude toward a person, we view him or her as “an object of social policy; as a subject for what, in a wide range of sense, might be called treatment” (2003: 79). Consider, again, the example of a stranger on the bus who steps on your toe, causing you great pain. Suppose that you find yourself resenting the stranger because you believe she deliberately stepped on your toe out of frustration at not getting your seat. Later, however, you discover that the person has Tourette Syndrome and that her behavior is a symptom of her disease. This explanation of the stranger's toe-stepping behavior breaks the connection between the behavior and the person's attitude toward you. You thus come to realize that the behavior does not manifest ill will or indifference to your pain in the way that justified resentment presupposes. In short, her condition gives the stranger an excuse and gives you a reason to forgo resenting her symptomatic behavior. Imagine, however, that you

were to regard all of someone's behavior as if it were like the involuntary physical and verbal tics characteristic of Tourette Syndrome and, so, divorced from his attitudes toward you and his judgments about how to behave toward you. Imagine, that is, that you were to regard his behavior never as expressions of his will but as mere happenings – much as you regard the weather. You would thereby take toward him the attitude that is Strawson's concern in speaking of the wholly objective attitude.

To take the wholly objective attitude toward someone is to cease to regard him as a moral agent. It is a stance adopted at significant cost to the possibilities for relationship, for as Strawson poignantly expresses it, "If your attitude towards someone is wholly objective, then though you may fight him, you cannot quarrel with him, and though you may talk to him, even negotiate with him, you cannot reason with him. You can at most pretend to quarrel or to reason with him" (2003: 79). In a relatively neglected passage, Strawson also insightfully acknowledges the phenomenon of adopting the objective attitude as a strategic refuge from "the strains of involvement" in a relationship – albeit a strategy that forebodes the relationship's likely demise (2003: 79–80).

Relevance to the Debate Over Free Will and Determinism

How does Strawson intend his investigation of the reactive attitudes, understood as above, to reconcile the incompatibilist and the compatibilist about determinism and moral responsibility? Strawson sides with the view of someone he dubs "the optimist" – a compatibilist – in arguing that being a legitimate target of the reactive attitudes does not require that one's will be free in any metaphysically robust sense that would be undermined by the truth of determinism. Moral responsibility requires not freedom in that sense but, rather, freedom from a range of standard excusing conditions. Strawson nonetheless is sympathetic to a moral worry that might nag a person he dubs "the pessimist" – an incompatibilist libertarian – and which the pessimist might press against those compatibilists (such as Strawson's own example of P. Nowell-Smith [1948]), who wed an account of (nonmetaphysical) conditions of moral responsibility to a utilitarian justification of our evaluative practices. The worry with the latter is that, first, it treats the targets of our moral praise and blame as objects for social control rather than as moral agents. Second, it provides the wrong kind of reason to justify our evaluative practices: in appealing to the fact that the target will be positively or negatively influenced rather than the fact that the target otherwise merits or deserves praise or blame, it fails to capture the intrinsic value to us of standing in the relationships of mutual regard that the reactive attitudes constitute (*see* DESERT).

With the compatibilist, Strawson emphasizes the significance of the kinds of conditions that we in practice tend to treat as conditions calling for the modification or withdrawal of reactive attitudes that would otherwise be warranted. Among the excusing conditions Strawson highlights are, in one category, considerations that alter our view of the relevant behavior of an agent (e.g., some injury or benefit) without altering our view of the agent: the agent remains a person properly placed within the scope of the reactive attitudes. In the example of the stranger who steps on your toe,

the stranger has caused you an injury. But where the circumstances of the injury are such that the stranger's behavior manifests no disregard of expectations, demands, and rights regulation accordance with which is necessary for aspiring to moral community with us, the circumstances enjoin us to view the injury as an inappropriate basis for resentment. They do not, Strawson emphasizes, "invite us to view 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" (2003: 77–8). In addition to force, Strawson includes in this first class of excusing conditions (nonculpable) ignorance, among others.

A second class of excusing conditions differs from the first in altering our view not of the behavior but of the agent – either temporarily (subclass 2a) or indefinitely so (subclass 2b). In 2a Strawson groups cases where a person has acted out of character, under great stress, or even post-hypnotic suggestion. Class 2b includes the cases of children, psychological compulsion, and pathology. Class 2 cases call in varying degrees for the suspension of our typical expectations or demands for good will from the person in question. In thus calling for us to view the person as lying outside the proper scope of the reactive attitudes, they call for adopting the objective attitude toward the person.

Strawson's investigation of the conditions that we typically treat as calling for the modification or withdrawal of reactive attitudes gives rise to two lines of response to the incompatibilist. First, with regard to the participant reactive attitudes, he argues that it would be "practically inconceivable" to abandon them altogether, because to abandon them would entail a form of emotional isolation that would make adult relationships as we know them impossible. Second, supposing it were possible for us to so alter our psychology, he argues that the truth of determinism would not suffice to render such a choice rational; the weight of countervailing reasons for retaining our practices as they stand is simply too great to be outweighed by whatever reason a conviction in such a theoretical truth is thought to provide. Finally, Strawson argues that, as it goes with the personal reactive attitudes, so too with their impersonal analogues: "they stand or lapse together" (2003: 87). That is, although Strawson acknowledges that it might be easier to conceive of forgoing impersonal attitudes, such as indignation, without as great a cost to our relationships as the abandonment of the personal reactive attitudes would entail, the result would be a form of "abnormal egocentricity" (2003: 87). It would be so, presumably, because it would require one to treat responses to the expectations and demands that one makes on those with whom one stands in special relationships as significant to oneself but of no significance to other members of the moral community.

While Strawson thus lends support to the compatibilist cause, he nonetheless offers a novel account of the status of the excusing conditions, an account meant to comfort the incompatibilist. Whereas compatibilists such as Nowell-Smith and J. J. C. Smart (1961) take conditions that call for forgoing praise and blame to do so because neither will influence the target's future behavior, Strawson suggests another explanation: in the cases where an excusing condition is present, the behavior is not properly regarded as an expression of the agent's will. The significance of the excusing conditions for Strawson, then, lies not in their implications for the possibility of controlling a person's future behavior but in their implications for what

the person's actions express or mean in the context of their relationships. Far from tools of social control, moral praise and blame emerge on Strawson's picture as invaluable forms of moral address. That this is so even in the case of moral indignation is registered in the fact that moral offenders accept that they merit such reactive attitudes for violating legitimate expectations of good will, an acceptance reflected in their corresponding forfeiture of the reactive attitudes that injury would typically provoke (e.g., resentment). This, then, is the vital element that the incompatibilist correctly demands of the utilitarian compatibilist and which Strawson's account of the reactive attitudes aims to provide.

Relevance of the Reactive Attitudes in Contemporary Moral Psychology

Although Strawson's work on the reactive attitudes is perhaps most often cited in the context of philosophical discussions of moral responsibility, it enjoys a broader influence on contemporary moral philosophy. A less remarked but nonetheless significant achievement of the work, especially given the time and context of its writing, is the attention it focused on a broad range of sentiments that contemporary Anglo-American moral philosophers had long neglected (*see* SENTIMENTS, MORAL). Most recently, the work has inspired important contributions to the metaethics of moral obligation. Stephen Darwall draws on what he dubs "Strawson's Point" – the view that "Desirability is a reason of the wrong kind to warrant the attitudes and actions in which holding someone responsible consists in their own terms" (Darwall 2006: 15) – to support a sophisticated account of a perspective he calls "the second-person standpoint." The second-person standpoint implicit in the reactive attitudes, Darwall argues, is indispensable for understanding the authority that moral obligations purport to have over us all.

See also: BLAME; DESERT; FREE WILL; GRATITUDE; GUILT; LOVE; RESPONSIBILITY; SENTIMENTS, MORAL; SHAME AND HONOR; STRAWSON, P. F.

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