

RATIONALITY AND THE REACTIVE ATTITUDES

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ABSTRACT

In Strawson's "Freedom and Resentment", the idea of the reactive attitudes is used to provide a corrective for an over-intellectualised picture of moral responsibility and of the moral life generally. But Strawson also tells us that in *reasoning* with someone our attitude towards them must be reactive. Taking up that thought, I suggest that Strawson has provided us with a corrective for an over-intellectualised picture of rationality. Drawing on a Wittgensteinian conception of the relation between thought and its expression, I argue that participation in a form of engagement with others that is reactive in Strawson's sense is a condition of rationality.

Keywords: Strawson, Wittgenstein, expression, attitude to a person

1.

P.F. Strawson introduces the idea of the reactive attitudes in part to remind us just how far natural human feelings like resentment and gratitude commit us to seeing each other as free and responsible agents.¹ This is not a commitment we could be *argued* out of, Strawson insists, and if we were somehow to lose these natural human feelings, we would have lost something that is central to our humanity and to the possibility of ordinary human relationships, and something that is "an essential part of the moral life as we know it" (Strawson 1974, p. 23). But the reactive attitudes are not confined to the sphere of the moral, for Strawson also tells us that

If your attitude towards someone is wholly objective [i.e. not at all reactive], then though you may fight him, you cannot quarrel with him, and though you may talk to him, even negotiate with him, you

¹ Strawson 1974.

cannot reason with him. You can at most pretend to quarrel, or to reason, with him. (Strawson 1974, p. 9)

The inclusion of reasoning on this list might surprise us, for we might have expected it to be the 'objective' attitude, with which Strawson contrasts the reactive attitudes, that is the attitude of reason or rationality, both theoretical and practical. (His examples of objective attitudes include both scientific curiosity and instrumental calculation.) Yet in reasoning with someone, Strawson tells us, our attitude to our fellow reasoner must be reactive. To view someone in a wholly objective light, he implies, would be to withdraw from our engagement with them, not just as a human being but also as a rational being.

We should not be surprised that, having first argued that taking a reactive attitude towards someone is part of treating them as free and responsible, Strawson should then want to say the same about treating them as a rational being. (Hume may be the most obvious influence at work in "Freedom and Resentment", but Kant is never far away.) But how exactly are we to understand the implied connection between reactivity and rationality? Strawson's main concern in "Freedom and Resentment" is to provide a corrective for what he sees as an over-intellectualised picture of moral responsibility and of the moral life generally. I want to suggest that he has also provided us with a corrective for—strange as it may sound—an over-intellectualised picture of rationality. Drawing on a Wittgensteinian conception of the relation between thought and its expression, I will argue that the possibility of rationality, in the sense in which that is a distinctively human characteristic, depends upon our participation in a form of engagement with others that is reactive in Strawson's sense.²

2.

We might have less difficulty seeing what reasoning is supposed to have in common with resentment if we had a more secure grasp of what Strawson means by a reactive attitude. But this is where many readers have seen a difficulty, and it might seem that the inclusion of reasoning on the list of activities requiring a reactive attitude only makes it harder to figure out what his diverse examples are supposed to have in common.³ Strawson's explicit remarks fall short of an actual definition of the term 'reactive', and Jonathan Bennett's instructive attempt to devise one for him ends in an admission of fail-

² Strawson himself holds back from claiming that the reactive attitudes are essential to rationality. He grants that "it might be said" that we get closer to being purely rational creatures by minimising the role of the reactive attitudes, commenting only that "it would not necessarily be rational to choose to be more purely rational than we are". Strawson 1974, p. 13.

³ It is significant that Jay Wallace, in developing his own neo-Strawsonian account of responsibility, chooses to work with a narrow definition of 'reactive' which excludes some of Strawson's own examples, including the case of reasoning; Wallace 1994, ch. 2.

ure.⁴ But we will find that Strawson has left us with enough hints for present purposes, and the inclusion of reasoning turns out to be a helpful clue to the general character of the reactive attitudes.

When introducing the idea of a reactive attitude, Strawson first reminds us of

the very great importance that we attach to the attitudes and intentions towards us of other human beings, and the great extent to which our personal feelings and reactions depend upon our beliefs about these attitudes and intentions. (Strawson 1974, p. 5)

Gratitude and resentment, for example, are

essentially natural human reactions to the good will or the ill will or indifference of others towards us, as displayed in *their* attitudes and actions. (Strawson 1974, p.10)

But not all reactive attitudes reflect a concern with the attitudes of others towards *ourselves*. ‘Personal’ reactive attitudes like gratitude and resentment have their ‘vicarious or impersonal analogues’ in moral approval and disapproval, which for Strawson are equally natural human reactions to good will, ill will or indifference shown towards third parties. Nor is a concern with good or ill will a defining feature of the reactive attitudes. As Jonathan Bennett has pointed out, and as Strawson quickly conceded, the scope and grounds of moral disapproval are not confined to a concern with ill will or lack of consideration.⁵ The inclusion of reasoning and quarrelling among the activities requiring a reactive attitude reinforces that line of thought and pushes it further. The reactive attitudes are not confined to reactions to ill will, and nor are they confined to reactions to the ‘attitudes and intentions’ of others. Where a dispute concerns a question of truth, what each party is reacting to in the relevant sense will presumably be the view or opinion of the other on the question in dispute. Thus for Strawson’s own purposes, we need to conceive of the reactive attitudes more broadly than some of his own formulations might suggest. We need to think of them as a certain kind of attitude towards the attitudes and opinions of others.⁶ But what kind? What distinguishes a reactive attitude towards someone else’s attitude or opinion from an objective attitude towards that same attitude or opinion?

Bennett helpfully reminds us of the close connection between the idea of a mental attitude and the idea of a physical attitude or posture, and of the way in which the latter suggests

⁴ Bennett 1980, pp. 38-39.

⁵ Bennett 1980, p. 45 and Strawson 1980, p. 266.

⁶ I am ignoring self-directed reactive attitudes like guilt or shame (Strawson 1974, p. 15), believing that we first need to get clear about the nature of other-directed reactive attitudes.

a readiness for *action* of one sort or another (e.g. a threatening posture). A reactive attitude, he suggests, is “essentially a posture of the mind which is apt for inter-action of a certain kind”.⁷ But what kind of interaction? What makes a response to another human being a reactive response? This is where Bennett declares himself defeated. Strawson’s remark that a reactive attitude is an ‘attitude of involvement or participation in a human relationship’⁸ is clearly important, but it is not immediately helpful, given the great variety of interactions that *could* be described in these terms, not all of which Strawson would want to regard as involving a reactive attitude. (Bennett cites the relationship between therapist and patient, which for Strawson involves a degree of detachment and objectivity.) In any case, we might have hoped that the idea of a reactive attitude would help us get clearer about what we understand by a human relationship. A more direct pointer to what makes a response reactive is the importance that Strawson attaches to a contrast between responses which are *expressions* of our attitudes and responses which are ‘calculated’. Referring to condemnation and punishment and “all those practices which express or manifest our moral attitudes”, Strawson urges us to remember that

these practices, and their reception, the reactions to them, really *are* expressions of our moral attitudes and not merely devices we calculatingly employ for regulative purposes. (Strawson 1974, p. 25)

If these practices and reactions were merely devices we calculatingly employ, then our attitude to those we address would be the objective attitude of instrumental calculation, a concern with consequences and costs and benefits. A reactive response, by contrast, is an *expression* of our attitude, which I take to be a remark both about the meaning of our response and, connectedly, about its motivation. A reactive response reflects (not a calculation of consequences but) simply a desire or disposition to give expression to our attitude, a desire to give expression to the way we see things. To be in the grip of a particular reactive attitude, to feel resentful or disapproving for example, is (*inter alia*) to see the adequate expression of our attitude as an end in itself—and as something that may call for deeds as well as words, depending on our sense of the seriousness of the matter. Recall, too, that a reactive attitude is a response to the attitudes of others as expressed in *their* words or deeds. A reactive attitude, we can say, is a posture of the mind apt for a specifically expressive kind of interaction with others.

Let us come back now to the ‘very great importance’ that we attach to the attitudes and opinions of others. Strawson is not, of course, suggesting that we possess a detached, calculating grasp of their importance to us. Rather, our grasp of their importance is something more immediate and primitive than that. Our proneness to the reactive attitudes amounts to a *sensitivity* on our part to the attitudes and opinions of others, a sen-

⁷ Bennett 1980, p. 34.

⁸ Strawson 1974, p. 9.

sitivity manifested directly in the response those attitudes and opinions provoke from us. It is worth noting the way in which this sensitivity is shaped by our *own* attitudes and opinions. Whether and in what way I am provoked by your attitude depends, not only on the nature of your attitude, but also on the nature of my own attitude (not to you but) to the object of your attitude. For example, whether I am morally indignant at your attitude to tax evasion will depend on my own attitude to tax evasion. In expressing my indignation at your attitude to tax evasion, I also express my own, conflicting attitude towards tax evasion and my rejection of your attitude. Whatever else it does or seeks to do, my expression of disapproval challenges your attitude to tax evasion and affirms my own. Resentment, too, can be understood as reflecting an underlying conflict of attitude: I see my interests and dignity as being of the first importance, while you seem to see them as being of no importance at all. In expressing my resentment, I challenge your view of the importance of my interests and dignity and affirm my own. In each case we find the same broad pattern of expressive response. Faced with words or deeds of yours which express an attitude towards *x* in conflict with my own, I am disposed to respond by expressing my own attitude towards *x*. In doing so, I challenge your attitude to *x* and affirm my own.⁹ That is the primary significance of my response, and the sense in which it amounts to engaging in a form of interaction with you.

Of course, not all reactive attitudes fit this particular pattern of response; think of gratitude and moral approval. But perhaps the reactive attitudes which don't fit this pattern can be understood as corresponding to some other intelligible pattern or patterns of expressive response to a person. (For example, we might expect agreement in attitude or opinion to be valued and even celebrated.) What the reactive attitudes all share, we might conjecture, is an urge or readiness to engage expressively, in this or that way, with the person in question. However, a fully general definition of the reactive attitudes is less important for present purposes than a better understanding of those attitudes which do fit the above pattern—let us call them the *negative* reactive attitudes. They are of particular interest in part because it is negative attitudes like resentment and blame that we are most tempted to think we would be better off without.¹⁰ The way we have characterised these cases goes beyond Strawson's own discussion in drawing attention to the role played by one's own first order attitude to the object of the other's attitude (e.g. one's own attitude to tax evasion). It is this that allows us to see our response as a challenge to the other's attitude and an affirmation of one's own. It allows us to see resentment and disapproval, and the negative reactive attitudes generally, as manifestations of disagreement of one sort or another. And that in turn helps us to see why Strawson included quarrelling and reasoning among the activities that require a reactive attitude. We have already noted how the inclusion of quarrelling and reason-

⁹ This is not to say that you are my only intended audience. Being sensitive to the attitudes of others in general, I may be concerned that no one else should follow your lead, and keen to enlist the support of others against you. I may want the *world* to know that I reject your attitude.

¹⁰ For examples of this temptation, see Sommers 2007, Galen Strawson 1986, ch. 6.6, and Skinner 1971.

ing forces us to think of the reactive attitudes as attitudes, not just towards the *attitudes* of others, but also towards their views and opinions; and our present way of thinking about resentment and moral disapproval makes this a very natural move. Using the term ‘view’ in a suitably broad sense, we might restate the pattern of response which distinguishes the negative reactive attitudes as follows:

Faced with words or deeds of yours which express a view of x in conflict with my own, I am disposed to respond by expressing my own view of x . In doing so, I challenge your view of x and affirm my own.

Thus to be prone to the negative reactive attitudes is to be disposed to challenge views one sees as mistaken or inappropriate (or some of them at least). Strawson doesn’t himself speak of challenges, but he does associate the reactive attitudes with the making of a *demand*—most centrally, though presumably not exclusively, a demand for good will.¹¹ We may also find it natural to speak here of a demand for respect, or for recognition. But the demand most immediately suggested by the above pattern of expressive response, the demand that is implicit in the act of challenge, is the demand that others see things as we do, the demand (as we see it) that others see things aright.

3.

It is not difficult to see that the pattern of response which characterises the negative reactive attitudes is also a feature of the activity of reasoning with someone. We would hardly be serious if we didn’t express our own view on the matter in dispute and challenge the expression of views we see as mistaken. And these responses to the other party should come naturally to us, as a direct expression of our concern that the other sees things aright, not as the outcome of some strategic calculation on our part—that would be at most *pretending* to reason with them. Thus reasoning involves, at its core, the same pattern of expressive response we find in resentment and moral disapproval. In itself that is not enough to show that reasoning involves taking a reactive attitude. A reactive attitude is an attitude towards a person, and while what we have described is certainly a *response* to a person, in speaking of what that response *expresses* we have so far spoken only of the expression of views on the matter in dispute. To conclude that reasoning involves taking a reactive attitude, we need to be able to see the act of challenging the other’s view as also expressing an attitude towards the other as an individual. We have no ready name for such an attitude, but that doesn’t mean that none is expressed. Strawson sees himself as reminding us of the phenomenology of the moral life. We need to try to do the same for the activity of reasoning.

¹¹ Strawson 1974, pp. 21-22.

My challenge to your view says firstly that it *matters* to me how you see things; you and your view are not simply being ignored. To that extent, my response says that I take you seriously as someone with a view, that what you have to say is *worth* challenging. Moreover, the kind of concern with you and your view that my challenge expresses is clearly not objective in Strawson's sense. It is not that your view is, for me, an object of scientific curiosity, or a possible obstacle to my plans, to be handled strategically. As with resentment and disapproval, the attitude expressed by a challenge made in the course of reasoning or debate is one of readiness for a particular form of expressive engagement with the other, and with that comes an engaged, non-detached way of *seeing* the other. I see you as mistaken and so as needing to be put right, and not simply for your own benefit. (Nor is it that you have committed an *offence* for which you deserve *rebuke*.) What you say matters to me because you have claimed to speak truly, and if that claim goes unchallenged, it has been tacitly conceded. I must challenge your view or be taken to accept it. What is at stake is what will henceforth be accepted as true, by you and by all concerned. I see you and your view as a threat to something that matters to me, a threat to things being seen aright. I see you as mistaken and so 'needing' to be challenged and brought to see your error. Thus my response to you expresses, not just a view on the matter in dispute between us, but also an engaged, non-detached way of seeing *you*. It is this last, this engaged way of seeing those with whom one disagrees, that is the counterpart in the present context of resentment and moral disapproval, and which qualifies as a negative reactive attitude on our present understanding of that class of attitudes.

I have argued that there are significant analogies between the attitude of one reasoner to another and the central Strawsonian examples of resentment and moral disapproval, analogies that make it appropriate to think of the former, too, as a reactive attitude. There are also disanalogies of course, and one is worth noting if only to be clear what is *not* being said about reasoning. The attitude of a reasoner, I have suggested, reflects only a forward-looking concern that things should henceforth be seen aright. (No one is being rebuked for what they have said, or if they are, we have stopped reasoning with them.) As we have seen, resentment and disapproval share this forward-looking concern, but they are also backward-looking in that they focus on a past (and perhaps ongoing) offence and find their characteristic expression in complaint and rebuke, revenge and punishment—none of which have any parallel in the business of reasoning. Strawson sometimes seems to suggest that all reactive attitudes are backward-looking in this sense,¹² but that cannot be his considered view if he is serious about including reasoning within their scope. (He cannot have intended to describe the attitude of one reasoner to another as 'blame- and praise-related'.) Nor, in saying that the attitude of a reasoner is reactive, are we saying that it is an 'emotional' attitude—or not essentially so at any rate. Reasoned disputes can, of course, get heated and anger may surface, but the attitude I have described, and which I am suggesting is essential to what is said count-

¹² As for example when he refers to them as "blame- and praise-related attitudes", Strawson 1980, p. 266.

ing as reasoning, is not anger. In any case, there is often nothing particularly emotional about resentment and moral disapproval.¹³ What will be important for Strawson is that challenging falsehood, like all reactive responses, is one that comes *naturally* to us; it is not a calculated response. It comes naturally to us, not in the sense of being biologically innate, but rather in the sense that it is a direct response to something we perceive as calling for that response—as for example when we move to avoid an obstacle in our path or to catch something that falls. A reactive attitude is (*inter alia*) a way of seeing a person that is internally related to a certain way of responding to them. It is thus a way of seeing a person that is itself motivating.

This is not the way analytic philosophers are accustomed to thinking about motivation. The usual picture assumes rationality on the part of the agent and insists on a clear distinction between world-representing states like beliefs and perceptions, which are held to be in themselves motivationally inert, and motivational states proper (desires, goals, preferences, values, etc) which are *not* world-representing. On this picture of motivation, no belief or perception is non-contingently connected with any particular response to what is perceived or believed. How we respond depends, to the extent that we are rational, on what else we happen to believe and what we happen to desire. By contrast, the idea of an intrinsically motivating way of seeing things blurs the distinction between belief and desire and implies a non-contingent connection between perception and response. Thus a reactive motivation excludes, not just calculation in the sense of conscious planning or reflection, but belief-desire style rational motivation of any kind, even one held to operate at an unconscious level.¹⁴ A reactive response does not reflect an ‘all things considered’ judgement of what to do for the best. Like a smile or a frown, it is a response to a specific individual or circumstance seen as calling for that response. In this sense, a reactive response is a less than fully rational response. That hardly counts as news, but it may seem to cause problems for the claim that reasoning requires a reactive attitude. Reasoning with someone is surely an exercise of our rational powers, no less than reasoning with or to oneself. Can Strawson be suggesting that the attitude of one reasoner to another is (must be!) such as to compromise the rationality of the proceedings? Well he isn’t, of course, because in the relevant sense, the rationality of our response is *not* compromised by it being a reactive response. To insist that a fully rational response to one’s fellow reasoner must be under the control

¹³ Strawson puts it this way: “I am not in the least suggesting that [our reactive responses] are always or commonly accompanied by indignant boilings or remorseful pangs; only that we have here a continuum of attitudes and feelings”. (Strawson 1974, p.22)

¹⁴ It might be objected that what we have here is not a distinct type of motivation at all but simply an odd way of speaking which says nothing that can’t be said, and said more clearly, in terms of beliefs and desires. But the belief-desire framework does not allow us to say everything we want to say about the reactive attitudes. If we are to see resentment or moral disapproval as reflecting a kind of *disagreement* between self and other, then that disagreement must concern ways of seeing things that are themselves motivating (e.g. that tax avoidance is wrong, or that my interests and dignity are of the first importance). To desire different things is not in itself to disagree. Motivating perceptions combine with other perceptions and beliefs to form a more complete view of the situation we face; desires combine in a different way.

of belief-desire style practical reason is to misunderstand the activity of reasoning and what it requires of us. The reactive attitude specific to reasoning involves, as we have seen, a concern with the truth of what is said *to the exclusion of other unconnected concerns*, which is precisely what reasoning requires of us. That kind of concern with truth is a condition of what we are doing counting as reasoning.

4.

Let us step back now from questions about reasoning, for I want to suggest that there is a more fundamental way in which the reactive attitudes are implicated in rationality. The same considerations which suggest that the attitude of a reasoner is reactive also suggest that the normal attitude of one speaker to another must be reactive, at least in so far as the assertoric use of language is part of their repertoire. There are many contexts besides reasoning in which to speak at all is to claim to speak truly, and whenever such a claim is made, the speaker lays herself open to the possibility of challenge from other speakers. Without that possibility of challenge, what is said would not amount to a claim to speak truly.¹⁵ An uncalculated disposition to express one's own view and challenge mistaken views is surely constitutive, not just of the activity of reasoning, but of the assertoric language game as a whole. And with this pattern of response goes the same basic phenomenology. In asserting this and challenging that, we manifest a concern that things be seen aright. Seen through the eyes of that concern, other speakers are potential threats who may need to be challenged, for once again, if mistaken views go unchallenged their truth has been tacitly conceded. Sometimes this aspect of language use remains far in the background, sometimes it erupts into the foreground, but in one way or another this engaged and uncalculating way of seeing those with whom one disagrees is a feature, not just of reasoning but of any truth-claiming use of language. In fact it is a requirement on speakers that their attitude to other speakers be reactive in this way, for it is part of the requirement of sincerity.

The possibility of challenge and dispute is an essential part of the assertoric language game, but it is not, of course, the whole of that game. There can be disagreement only against a background of very considerable agreement, for in the absence of agreed standards of correctness nothing could count as a claim that those standards are met, nothing could amount to a claim with which one could disagree. There would also be little point in giving expression to our own way of seeing things if that had no tendency to induce others to see things that way too. Rather we need to think in terms of an underlying tendency to accept the expressed views and attitudes of others, a tendency amounting, once again, to a sensitivity to those views and attitudes.¹⁶ Some such ten-

¹⁵ I offer more argument for these claims in Ross 1989.

¹⁶ As Hume observes, "no quality of human nature is more remarkable...than that tendency we have to sympathise with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from or even

dency to accept what others express is vital, both to the dynamics of the moral life as Strawson conceives it, and to the dynamics of the assertoric life as we are now conceiving of it.¹⁷

So the normal attitude of one speaker to another, the attitude of sincerity, is reactive in Strawson's sense. My task now is to make the case for seeing the possession of language as a condition of rationality. There is more than one way of seeing a connection between language and rationality, and more than one way of understanding the idea of rationality for these purposes. One familiar approach identifies rationality with concept possession and argues that without language there can be no concepts; but let us not get drawn into a debate about the nature of concepts. A more illuminating way of thinking of rationality for these purposes is as the achievement of objectivity of attitude in Strawson's sense. Notice that this definition puts rationality squarely in conflict with reactivity of attitude, as we would expect it to be. Even so, there is nothing paradoxical about the suggestion that reactivity of attitude is a condition of, or is involved in, rationality in this sense. The claim is only that language, and therefore a reactive attitude towards other *speakers*, is a condition of the possibility of taking an objective attitude towards that of which we speak.

5.

My argument for this last claim draws on a Wittgensteinian conception of the relation between thought and its expression, though it also amounts to a defence of that conception in the face of what might seem a fatal counter-example. Wittgenstein's insistence that inner processes require outer criteria is best understood, not as an application of a general verificationism to the case of mental states, but rather as a point about the importance of the idea of *expression* to our idea of the mental. His thought is that it makes sense to attribute a given state of mind (e.g. hope or regret) only to creatures capable of giving expression to that state of mind. Thus the essence of a state of mind is revealed by what we are prepared to count as its expression. The essential thing, the mental state itself, is not merely contingently related to the behaviour that gives it expression; rather the relationship between a mental state and its expression is an internal relation. On this Wittgensteinian conception of the mental, we can attribute objectivity of attitude only to a creature capable of behaviour we can recognize as giving expression to such an attitude. So our question becomes: what kind of behaviour could amount to a criterial expression of an objective attitude? I will now argue that it is only linguistic behaviour that is capable of giving expression to such an attitude.

contrary to our own... To this principle we ought to ascribe the great uniformity we may observe in the humours and turn of thinking of those of the same nation." (Hume 1888, Book II, Part I, Section XI)

¹⁷ For a fuller discussion of why we believe what we are told, and of our attitude to other speakers, see Ross 1986.

As an argumentative strategy this may well seem perverse. For many philosophers, the problem will be to understand how any behaviour could amount to a criterial expression of any state of mind. How can the relation between thought and its expression *ever* be internal? As it happens, the reactive attitudes and other motivating ways of seeing things (e.g. seeing something as a threat or an obstacle) provide plausible examples of the kind of internal relation between thought and its expression that Wittgenstein envisages. Where a way of seeing things is itself motivating, there is a non-contingent connection between that way of seeing things and the response or responses it motivates. In such cases, we can say, the response amounts to a criterion of (is necessarily normally sufficient for) the presence of the corresponding perception. Admittedly, it is not immediately obvious how this kind of example of criterial expression can help us understand what might count as the criterial expression of an *objective* attitude. On the usual view, an objective way of describing or thinking of something is supposed to be precisely *unmotivating*, detached from all particular concerns or purposes, though capable of guiding us in the pursuit of any. (Thus the belief-desire picture of practical rationality requires our beliefs to be objective in this sense.) But the case of motivating ways of seeing things is more generalisable than it might seem. We need to take a closer look at how an internal relation arises in this case.

The fox sees the farmer's wife, for he reacts to her presence. But does he see her *as* a farmer's wife, or only as a potential threat, as something to be avoided? If the fox is inclined to flee or to seek cover, and that is his *only* response to the farmer's wife, we will be inclined to say that he sees her only as a potential threat, for that is all his response expresses. It is not that we have established an empirical correlation between seeing something as a threat and the response of flight. The point is rather that flight is an *appropriate* response to a (certain kind of) threat. It is because there is an appropriate response to the *fact* of a threat that the *perception* of a threat is a motivating perception. In seeing something as a threat, we see it as something to flee from, as something to which flight is an appropriate response. At the same time, it is because flight is an appropriate response to an actual threat that flight is recognizable as an expression of the perception of a threat, even if no actual threat exists. In responding appropriately to items encountered in its environment, a creature manifests an awareness of those items, and what it sees them *as* is revealed by what its response is appropriate *to*. Here, then, is one way in which an internal relation can arise between thought and action, one way in which a response can amount to a criterial expression of a state of mind.

We will shortly consider how this idea might be extended to the case of a linguistic response, but let us stay for a moment with non-linguistic responses. The present way of thinking about the possibility of criterial expression implies, schematically at least, a way of thinking about the content so expressed. To see an object as an α is to treat it, or be disposed to treat it, as an α . The content of a creature's perceptions is revealed by that to which its response is an appropriate response. Now this criterion of content implies a certain constraint on what is expressible non-linguistically (i.e. wholly independently

of language).¹⁸ Though the awareness expressed in this way may not always be motivating in quite the way that an awareness of a threat is motivating, it is fundamentally an awareness of the world in action-relevant terms, an awareness of the environment as affording this or that possibility of movement, as containing dangers, sources of nourishment, places of shelter or hiding, and so on. It is an ‘involved’ awareness, not at all the detached attitude implied in the idea of objectivity of attitude. In fact the awareness that is expressed by non-linguistic action is precisely a *subjective* awareness in the sense that everything is seen in relation to the particular needs, concerns, vulnerabilities and powers of the subject.¹⁹ What constitutes a danger, or an escape route, or food for one creature may not be those things for another. The awareness expressible in this way is also essentially restricted to the here and now. In short, non-linguistic behaviour cannot give expression to an objective view of the world. From which it follows, on a Wittgensteinian conception of the mental, that we cannot attribute the capacity for such a view to a creature that lacks language.

6.

We are unlikely to need persuading that language is *not* restricted in its expressive power in the ways I have claimed non-linguistic action to be restricted. But having appealed to a Wittgensteinian conception of the mental in arguing that without language a creature cannot be credited with objective thought, I need to show that the implications of this conception of the mental are different once a creature has language. We must be reassured that Wittgenstein’s insistence on an internal relation between thought and its expression does not force us to deny the possibility of objective thought to ourselves. How, then, can the power of speech make a difference? One way in which speech marks an advance on non-linguistic action is in furnishing an expression of thought that is detachable from any direct practical response to its object. With language we can speak, and thus think, of things in their absence and away from the urgent need for a practical response. This kind of detachment from immediate practical concerns is surely a minimum condition of anything counting as ‘thinking’, let alone rational thinking.

How, though, can the content that language expresses avoid the kind of subject-relativity that I have claimed constrains what is expressible non-linguistically? We have understood the Wittgensteinian conception of the mental as implying that what an action expresses is a function of that to which it is an appropriate response. How are we to apply this criterion of content to the case of language use? In speaking loosely of language as

¹⁸ I will focus here on purposive action rather than, say, non-linguistic expressions of emotion, for I assume it will be readily agreed that the latter fail to express an objective attitude.

¹⁹ Thus in describing the awareness expressible in this way as a subjective awareness, I am not saying that it is an awareness of the agent’s subjective states. Rather it is a subject-centred awareness in which the world is seen in subject-relative ways. It is the world that is seen, not the subject.

providing us with a way of responding to an object, an alternative to fleeing from it or eating it, I am not, of course, imagining us speaking *to* the object. What I have in mind is such activities as describing the object to someone who hasn't seen it, challenging someone else's description of it, asking the opinion of another about it, making a note about it for future reference, and so on. All but the last of these would more naturally be described as responses to, or interactions with, other *speakers*; but what we say to each other can be appropriate or inappropriate to how things are in the world of which we speak. In the case of non-linguistic action, 'appropriate' can only mean 'appropriate for that individual, given her situation, needs, vulnerabilities, etc.' Thus flight is an appropriate response only to the presence of a current threat to the fleeing individual. That is why it can express only a subject-relative view of the world. In the case of language use, however, 'appropriate' can mean 'true', and where a response is appropriate in this sense, it is a response that is appropriate (in this sense) for *anyone* to make. Language is governed by public standards of appropriate use, and those which concern truth are impersonal in a way that (indexicality aside) allows the content of what is expressed to be the same for all speakers. It follows that thought expressed linguistically can be free of the relativity-to-self that constrains what is expressible non-linguistically.²⁰ I say 'can be' because it is evident that language can also give expression to more subjective ways of seeing things. The attitude we express towards the things of which we speak depends in familiar ways on the specifics of what we say. The present claim is only that language allows for the possibility of avoiding the kind of subjectivity that constrains what is expressible non-linguistically. Seen from a Wittgensteinian perspective, it is language that opens up the possibility of viewing the world objectively.

There are of course degrees of objectivity. I am not primarily concerned with the kind of objectivity sought in specialised areas of discourse like the natural sciences. I have in mind something that language makes routinely available to us, even where it is employed in the pursuit of here and now practical concerns. (Via methods of measurement, for example, and much of our everyday descriptive vocabulary.) The possibility of this everyday kind of objectivity is presupposed by the belief-desire picture of rational motivation, and indeed by any plausible conception of practical rationality. It is equally presupposed by any conception of rational enquiry. To say that we owe the possibility of such objectivity to language is, I have argued, to say that we owe it to our participation in a form of engagement with others that is reactive in Strawson's sense. Thus the possibility of rationality, in the sense in which that is a distinctively human characteristic, depends upon our reactive engagement with others. It rests on a type of sensibility natural to an expressive being, amounting to a certain kind of sensitivity to the views of others. It is natural to think of objectivity of attitude as a particular way of seeing the world, but it also involves a particular way of seeing other people. In using language to express one's own view and to challenge the views of others, we manifest a

²⁰ The claims made in these last few sentences are defended in Ross 1989.

concern with truth. We can think of the concern with truth thus manifested as facing in two directions. On the one hand, it is a concern with *what other speakers say and think*, amounting to a concern that they see things aright. On the other hand, it is a concern with the *facts*, with the *world*; though it is not the kind of practical concern with the world that we could attribute to a creature without language. It has the form, we might say, of a concern that the world be correctly described, a concern that it be seen aright. Thus the concern with the world and the concern with what others think are, in truth, one and the same concern. Yet the image of a concern that faces two ways serves to capture the intimate connection between the achievement of an objective view of the world and our natural commitment to a reactive view of our fellow human beings.

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