***Ressentiment* as a Reactive Attitude**

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**1. Introduction**

In his essay “Freedom and Resentment,” Peter Strawson famously challenges the notion that the causal determination of human action is a basis for skepticism about moral responsibility (Strawson 1974). To make his argument, Strawson introduces the concept of reactive attitudes. Reactive attitudes refer to a set of attitudes, including “gratitude, resentment, forgiveness, love, and hurt feelings” (Strawson 1974, 3). These attitudes are distinct because they constitute human practices of praise, blame, approval, and disapproval. For instance, imagine Jack steals Jill’s lunch money, and Jill resents Jack for it. Jill understands her relationship with Jack as beholden to certain normative expectations.[[1]](#footnote-1) When Jack violated these expectations, Jill held Jack responsible for this action. Importantly, Strawson argues that whether Jack was determined to act in the way he did is beside the point. What matters is the way persons navigate their relationships together, the way such relationships inform the normative expectations they have for one another, and how violating or fulfilling such expectations makes reactive attitudes appropriate. In Strawson’s terms, to hold one another responsible is to engage with one another as social participants, not as objects fully determined by causes external to us.

Strawson calls this first way of relating to one another and ourselves “the participant point of view” (or “stance”) and the second “the objective point of view” (or “stance”) (Strawson 1974, 16). The participant stance—not the objective stance—is the default in our everyday interactions. To justify the objective stance toward others, some special conditions must obtain. Strawson discusses three of these (Strawson 1974, sec. 4). First, in certain cases, persons can be excused for their actions. For instance, it could be that Jack was stealing Jill’s lunch money to pay a debt to save Jill’s life. This special condition excuses Jack because it seems at first that Jack has an ill will toward Jill, but, as it turns out, Jack intended a benefit, not a harm. Second, in other cases, Jack may have succumbed to a bout of insanity. In this state, Jack is not the type of agent to whom one can reasonably hold to normative standards. Jack is exempt from being a social participant in the sense that he is not fit for reactive attitudes.[[2]](#footnote-2) The third kind is what Pamela Hieronymi has described as using the objective stance as a social “resource” (Hieronymi 2020, 19). For instance, a therapist may think about their patient objectively by exploring the way their childhood trauma explains their behavior. The therapist is justified in using this resource to make the patient better.

Strawson’s paper refutes the view that causal determination is a basis for moral responsibility skepticism because such views treat *all* human behavior as falling under one of these three conditions. Such skepticism attempts to explain away moral responsibility. However, this attempt constitutes a core mistake because it reverses what has explanatory priority, namely the practice of holding responsible itself. Gary Watson aptly describes this insight from Strawson,

In Strawson’s view, there is no such independent notion of responsibility that explains the propriety of the reactive attitudes. The explanatory priority is the other way around: It is not that we hold people responsible because they *are* responsible; rather, the idea (*our* idea) that we are responsible is to be understood by the practice, which itself is not a matter of holding some propositions to be true, but expressing our concerns and demands about our treatment of one another. (Watson 2004a, 222)

Several interpreters have treated Friedrich Nietzsche as a skeptic of moral responsibility. Others have aimed to retain a conception of moral responsibility in his philosophy, sometimes in explicitly Strawsonian terms (Snelson 2021).[[3]](#footnote-3) In this chapter, my focus will not be on this debate *per se*.[[4]](#footnote-4) I will focus on how a Strawsonian reading of responsibility in Nietzsche can help clarify the role of *ressentiment* in *on the Genealogy of Morality*.[[5]](#footnote-5) More specifically, I will argue that what Nietzsche calls “*ressentiment*”is a psychological state in which the capacity to discern when to take the objective stance is attenuated. In this way, *ressentiment* is a malfunctioning reactive attitude. Thus, it is distinct but informatively related to Strawson’s conception of resentment.

I will make my argument in five sections. First, I discuss an important distinction for Nietzsche between two types of social arrangements. He calls the first “the morality of custom,” where commands are the central mode of ensuring social cooperation, and the second is one in which “the conscience” plays a similar function. Those in the first kind of social arrangement are *exempt* from moral responsibility, but this is not the case in the second. Second, I argue that the social dynamics before the development of conscience in Nietzsche’s genealogy mean that the so-called “nobles” and “slaves” from *GM* I are also exempt in the relevant sense. In section three, I then argue that this fact helps explain the role of *ressentiment* in *GM*. This is because *ressentiment* should be understood as a reaction to the perception of being denied a certain kind of social recognition. People have a deep need for this recognition. The slave types develop *ressentiment* because they are systematically denied this recognition from the noble types. However, in virtue of being socially exempt, the nobles, in principle, cannot fulfill this need. In section four, I address a possible worry about this view regarding what kind of recognition is operative in this dynamic. In the final section, I use this analysis of *ressentiment* to expand on Strawson’s view. Strawson argues that reactive attitudes are necessary for what I will call “a life of social participation.” Still, they are necessary in the sense of being *a transcendental condition* for such a life. As such, social life is not possible for creatures like us, given a universal objective stance. The flip side of this conclusion is that the objective stance is sometimes necessary. Because of this necessity, it is also a transcendental condition for a life of social participation. My analysis of *ressentiment* in previous sections shows that *ressentiment* can result in an attenuated sense of knowing when to take the objective stance.

**2. Genealogy, Imperatives, and Judgments**

In *GM*, Nietzsche accuses previous attempts at providing an account of morality’s genealogy of “think[ing] *essentially* ahistorically” (*GM* I: §2). Such accounts are mistaken because they fail to “*critique* moral values” (*GM* Preface §6). Nietzsche means that previous attempts fail in various ways to critically evaluate their evaluative commitments, which they then assume in their historical investigations of the past. This method risks an inaccurate account of morality’s history because past ways of life may have been radically different from those of the present. For instance, Nietzsche argues that previous explanations for the emergence of unegoistic action results from a commitment to the singular value of pleasure. Conversely, Nietzsche argues that ancient nobility was interested in ranking different types of values out of a “*pathos of distance*,” or a feeling that there is a strong hierarchy of different values (*GM* I: §2).

Such differences apply not just to the content of the values or how one values but also the psychological profile and capacities of valuers. One of the best examples of a shift in psychological capacities happens in the Second Treatise. The topic of this treatise is to provide an account of “the long history of the origins of *responsibility*” (*GM* II: §2). Nietzsche correlates this history with what he describes as a development of the ability to make and keep promises. This ability requires several psychological sub-capacities, which he lists: “man must first have learned to separate the necessary from the accidental occurrence, to think causally, to see and anticipate what is distant as if it were present, to fix with certainty what is end, what is means thereto, in general to be able to reckon, to calculate,—for this, man himself must first of all have become *calculable*, *regular*, *necessary*, in his own image of himself as well, in order to be able to vouch for himself *as future*, as one who promises does!” (*GM* II: §1)

Although Nietzsche describes the development of these sub-capacities in terms of developing the ability to make and keep promises, he has something in mind wider than promises, which he describes as “a true *memory of the will*” (*GM* II: §1) and “a power over oneself and fate” (*GM* II: §2). What Nietzsche has in mind is a capacity to make and abide by cross-temporal commitments. He contrasts the emergence of these capacities to a simpler form of social organization, which he deems “the morality of custom” (*GM* II: §2). ‘The morality of custom’ refers to a kind of social arrangement that Nietzsche cites in *the Genealogy,* but he develops it earlier in *Daybreak*.[[6]](#footnote-6) The “chief proposition” of the morality of custom, Nietzsche argues, is that “morality is nothing other (therefore *no more*!) than obedience to customs, of whatever kind they may be” (*D §*9). He cites the relevant feature of the morality of custom as “*making* man to a certain degree necessary, uniform, like among like, regular, and accordingly predictable” (*GM* II: §2).

Within a morality of custom, individuals do not, say, abide by a plan to act on some maxim or principle. Rather, if there were a rule in place, like “keep your promises,” they would follow this rule simply because it is a prescription from a higher authority. As Nietzsche describes it, in a morality of custom, “A higher authority which one obeys, not because it commands what is *useful* to us, but because it *commands*” (*D* §9). Moreover, such prescriptions are followed unreflectively. He observes that in this kind of social arrangement, those in authority “demanded one observe prescriptions *without thinking of oneself* as an individual” (*D* §9).

There are two components worth highlighting here. First, in the morality of custom, Nietzsche emphasizes the central role of *imperatives* and not an individual’s *judgments*. R. M. Hare distinguishes between imperatives and judgments (Hare 1952, 175–79). Imperatives, like “Don’t Smoke,” do not invoke general principles, while “you ought not to smoke” does. To obey such a principle, one must judge that it applies in each case. Conversely, imperatives are specific commands backed by some external authority. In Nietzsche’s story, this authority “is fear in the presence of a higher intellect which here commands, of an incomprehensible, indefinite power, of something more than personal –there is *superstition* in this fear” (*D* §9). Moreover, for Nietzsche, “imperatives” do not require a capacity for practical reason. He has in mind, for example, that training a dog to sit at the command “sit” counts as an imperative in the relevant sense.

Second, such imperatives differ from a later development in the genealogy, which precedes and leads to internalizing rules of conduct. As Nietzsche describes in vivid language, “Whenever man considered it necessary to make a memory for himself it was never done without blood, torment, sacrifice; […] all of this has its origin in that instinct that intuited in pain the most powerful aid of mnemonics” (*GM* II: §3). He then argues that “With the help of such [violent] images and processes one finally retains in memory five, six “I will nots,” in connection with which one has given one’s *promise* in order to live within the advantages of society,—and truly! with the help of this kind of memory one finally came “to reason”!” (*GM* II: §3) The threat of intense violence creates a social pressure to obey certain rules, which will include judgments on behalf of those subject to them. This is why Nietzsche describes the emergence of such rules as the development of “reason.” Notice that sanctions are not needed in the morality of custom because Nietzsche argues that what is operative in such a social arrangement is “the perpetual compulsion to practice custom,” which Nietzsche explains as a need for survival through cooperative and predictable behaviors (*D* §14, §16). The principal means of social cooperation in the morality of custom is imperative, which does not include reasoning about following rules because it is “*useful*” to do so (e.g., to follow a rule to avoid a sanction). This fact changes with the introduction of threats of extreme violence, the social function of which is obedience to shared codes of conduct. One consequence of introducing such threats into the social milieu is that it forces individuals to make reasoned judgments about what to do, solidifying the shift from social cohesion via imperative to judgment.

The task of *GM* II, then, is to explain how humans moved from the morality of custom to possessing the ability to have cross-temporal commitments, including the ability to make and keep promises. The introduction of reasoned judgments regarding one’s conduct is crucial. Nietzsche calls this capacity “a conscience,” which he describes as being “permitted to vouch for oneself, and with pride, hence to be *permitted to say “yes”* to oneself too—that is, as noted, a ripe fruit, but also a *late* fruit” (*GM* II: §3). The conscience is a reflective capacity to follow some standard of conduct in accordance with one’s evaluative assessments or measures (one’s “reason”). This begins as a capacity to judge that one ought to avoid threats of violence. However, keeping a promise also involves acting by one’s conscience and out of “the proud knowledge of the extraordinary privilege of *responsibility*, the consciousness of this rare freedom, this power over oneself and fate” (*GM* II: §2). Therefore, Nietzsche maintains a tight connection between the historical development of the ability to hold oneself to cross-temporal commitments, the development of a conscience, and responsibility. These abilities are presented in contrast to the imperative-governed social relations of the morality of custom.

**3. A Noble Exemption**

The emergence of the conscience is thus a significant development in Nietzsche’s genealogy. Avery Snelson has recently provided a compelling interpretation of this development in Strawsonian terms.[[7]](#footnote-7) Snelson highlights Nietzsche’s emphasis on the role that the development of trust plays in the capacity to promise, the emergence of the conscience, and the privilege of responsibility. Snelson argues, “The development of conscience, bad conscience, and guilt, […] bear a direct and obvious connection to “responsibility” when one instead understands that in terms of the *practice* of holding oneself and others to affectively charged expectations” (Snelson 2021, 244). On Nietzsche’s view, this practice is possible because one develops the capacity to hold oneself to cross-temporal standards of action and a conscience that regulates sticking to such standards. Furthermore, when such capacities emerge within a social arrangement, individuals can trust that others with similar capacities can and will do the same. The convention of holding responsible then emerges as an expectation that others will properly regulate themselves following their commitments. Snelson highlights that Nietzsche’s view of responsibility is consistent with Strawson’s view in which responsibility should be understood naturalistic terms of such practices. Part of Nietzsche’s task in the Second Treatise is to provide a genealogy of how such a practice could be possible.

Skeptics of the Strawsonian view charge this view with giving up on the philosophical task of providing an account of responsibility. It seems that what matters is not whether people hold themselves and others responsible. The important question is whether they should do so. Pamela Hieronymi calls this “the crucial objection” to Strawson’s view (Hieronymi 2020, chap. 4). Hieronymi answers this objection by invoking Strawson’s “Social Naturalism.” We cannot give reasons for engaging in interpersonal social relations, but we are engaged in them. Taking up the participant stance is constitutively a part of such relations. Thus, the possibility of this engagement includes this stance, at least for creatures who do not meet the special conditions of exemption, excusing, or implementing the objective stance as a resource. Importantly, one feature of Strawson’s naturalism is that this reactive form of social life is, in part, determined by the psychological profile of the creatures that inhabit it. Creatures without the ability to set, abide by, and properly internalize normative expectations are not fitting objects for reactive attitudes—they are exempt from reactive assessment. As a natural category, persons are the types of creatures with these abilities, and when they are functioning well, such creatures are not exempt from such assessment. Taking up the reactive stance is part of what it means to be this kind of creature existing in a social arrangement. For such creatures, “There are no general conditions on the appropriateness of ordinary interpersonal relating that are not also conditions on its possibility” (Hieronymi 2020, 63). Let’s call such psychological conditions transcendental conditions on responsibility.

As we have seen, Nietzsche draws a tight connection between the capacity to make and stick to cross-temporal commitments, the conscience, and responsibility. But Nietzsche does not hold that all conceivable forms of social life depend on these capacities. The morality of custom is one example. Importantly, the development of the capacities Nietzsche describes in *GM* II as necessary for responsibility, but they are not necessary for valuing. For instance, prior to developing the capacity to promise, Nietzsche describes the psychological profile of the ancient nobility (*GM* I). As several scholars have noted, “nobility” here does not necessarily refer to social or class dynamics but rather a certain kind of valuer (Anderson 2011, 27; May 1999, 51). Noble values, Nietzsche argues, were originally established as good, while “bad” was reserved for “common,” “vulgar,” or “base” values (*GM* I: §4). For Nietzsche, these latter values are understood as merely a lack of noble value—they do not yet have any positive content.

It is helpful here to invoke Gary Watson’s distinction between “aretaic responsibility” and “accountability” (Watson 2004b). Aretaic responsibility concerns whether certain actions can be attributed to a creature based on whether what they do is a product of what they value. Accountability relates to whether sanctions may be fairly applied to them. Noble valuers possess values attributable to them. For instance, noble values do count as “*typical character trait*[s]” (*GM* I: §5), but they do not yet have the requisite psychological capacities for *accountability*. Part of this is because they are exempt from justified sanctions. This exemption applies in virtue of the fact that they do not possess the psychological capacities for sanctions to function effectively as sanctions. The most noteworthy capacity here is a conscience or the ability to make reasoned judgments within the context of cross-temporal commitments. Nietzsche illustrates this point in how noble types deal with their enemies, “To be unable for any length of time to take his enemies, his accidents, his *misdeeds* themselves seriously […] Such a human is simply able to shake off with a single shrug a collection of worms that in others would dig itself in; here alone is also possible […] the true “*love* of one’s enemies”” (*GM* I: §10). This makes sense given that the nobles cannot relate to the future “as their own.” For instance, to hold another responsible for some past wrong, the wronged party must have a cross-temporal conception of themselves as the past subject of harm who now deserves recompense. Moreover, they must be able to hold the offending party to cross-temporal standards of conduct. The noble types lack this capacity. Therefore, the noble type as a valuer is fit for aretaic responsibility but not accountability. They are exempt, in Strawson’s sense of the term, for assessments of accountability.

We can therefore tie together the two main conclusions thus far. Prior to the development of a conscience, the main regulative social dynamic was one of imperatives, not judgments. For imperatives to have social uptake, they do not require certain psychological capacities involved in the relevant sense of “judgment,” most notably the conscience. Moreover, without a conscience, a creature is exempt from being accountable, while they may still be fit for aretaic assessment. The noble types fall into this category. I will now use these ideas to analyze the significance of *ressentiment* on Nietzsche’s view.

**4. The Role of *Ressentiment***

In this section, I will argue that the fact that noble types are exempt from reactive assessments is critical for understanding the central role of *ressentiment* in Nietzsche’s genealogy.

*Ressentiment* plays a central explanatory role in Nietzsche’s account of morality because it explains the emergence of new values that reject those championed by the noble types. Nietzsche first refers to *ressentiment* in *GM* within the context of a rejection of old values as “the slave revolt” in morality:

The slave revolt in morality begins when *ressentiment* itself becomes creative and gives birth to new values: the *ressentiment* of beings denied the true reaction, that of the deed, who recover their losses only through an imaginary revenge. Whereas all noble morality grows out of a triumphant yes-saying to oneself, from the outset slave morality says “no” to an “outside,” to a “different,” to a “not-self”: and *this* “no” is its creative deed. This reversal of the value-establishing glance—this *necessary* direction toward the outside instead of back onto oneself—belong to the very nature of *ressentiment*: in order to come into being, slaver morality always needs an opposite and external world; it needs, psychologically speaking, external stimuli in order to be able to act at all,—its action is, from the ground up, reaction. (*GM* I: §10)

Several features are worth noting about *ressentiment*’s profile:

1. *Ressentiment* is the source of creating new values.
2. This creation is carried out by responding to some “external stimuli.”
3. One experiences *ressentiment* when they are unable to retaliate against some external stimuli.
4. *Ressentiment* involves some self-deception about this reaction.

In addition to these features, Max Scheler has emphasized the self-poisoning aspect of *ressentiment* (v) (Scheler 1994, 25). *Ressentiment* is not merely a response to being denied retaliation. It involves systematic repression of an emotional reaction. This systematic repression leads to long-term changes in one’s evaluative disposition. This dispositional change to one’s character distinguishes *ressentiment* from revenge.[[8]](#footnote-8) Revenge also involves a delayed retaliation, but it has a singular object. For instance, if Jill wanted revenge against Jack for stealing her lunch money, she may need to wait to retaliate. But once she does, the revenge will have been served. If Jill cannot ever retaliate, she may develop *ressentiment*. If she does, this affects her evaluative outlook on the world, becoming a feature of her disposition toward the world and herself. It has this effect because *ressentiment* involves a dispositional tendency to treat suffering *as an offense*. I will now explore why Nietzsche thinks this is the case.

Bernard Reginster provides a unifying explanation of these features (Reginster 2021, chap. 2). He argues that according to Nietzsche, *ressentiment* is a reaction to a particular kind of suffering related to one’s standing in the world (Reginster 2021, 59). *Ressentiment* is spurred by a denied reaction to retaliate in such an instance where one’s standing could be regained, and the inability to gain restitution is a source of great suffering (points (ii) and (iii)). Reginster emphasizes that this desired retaliation is not one to prevent further suffering. It is instead “backward-looking” (Reginster 2021, 53). It is backward-looking because one is not attempting to gain some benefit. They are instead trying to recover from this demoted status. Reginster described this status as “being someone who ‘counts’, a ‘person of consequence’, as we say, or someone whose presence in their world makes a difference in it” (Reginster 2021, 57). *Ressentiment* arises from an injury of this sort—one in which a person whose standing is discounted as having any importance.

Reginster emphasizes that the desire to ‘count’ in this sense is a deeply engrained need that people have. When retaliation is denied, this need goes unmet. There are a few important results of this unmet need. The denied reaction “involves the inability to let go of an injury” (Reginster 2021, 53). Because this injury cannot be forgotten, it becomes a point of obsessive dwelling for the person who has suffered (point (v)). This state of obsessive dwelling is itself painful. Since the desired retaliation is impossible, the way that relief from this pain happens, Nietzsche argues, is through the sufferer’s belief that “Someone must be to blame for the fact that I feel bad” (*GM* I: §15). Reginster explains this feature of Nietzsche’s view by appealing to the will to power. The will to power, on this interpretation, is the ability to affect change in the world. Therefore, when a person is denied their retaliatory reaction, the loss of status they experience is one in which they perceive themselves as impotent or lacking power.

One way a sufferer can restore this status is by holding the perpetrator responsible for their actions. While this does not grant the sufferer the retaliation that they deeply desire, it does constitute a self-deceptive distraction from this suffering (point (iv)). By holding the cause of the suffering responsible for the suffering, one has located a source to blame for their suffering, which offers some relief. Reginster argues that this relief is explained by an appeal to the will to power. What will bring relief to the sufferer is some explanation for why their suffering is unjustified, and by locating a source of blame, something can now be done about this suffering. Consider that if a person undergoes some grave and systematic suffering, they will instinctively want to know why this is happening. Nietzsche famously argued in the final section of *the Genealogy*, that “The meaninglessness of suffering, not the suffering itself, was the curse that thus far lay stretched out over humanity” (*GM* III: §28). By locating a source of blame, one at least knows what to do to regain this status. The belief that some perpetrator *deserves* retaliation provides at least a route to make sense of one’s suffering. Therefore, Nietzsche argues that “this kind of human *needs* the belief in a neutral “subject” with free choice” (*GM* I: §13).

The invention of a “subject” of free choice also affects how the person of *ressentiment* experiences themselves, namely as having chosen the values they also possess. This move is also self-deceptive (point (iv)). With the introduction of desert, the explanation of the creation of new values takes center stage (point (i)). By making one’s values a matter of choice, one ultimately becomes responsible for those values. This leads to the following comparative judgment between the person of *ressentiment* and the noble types,

These weak ones—someday *they* too want to be the strong ones, there is no doubt, someday *their* “kingdom” too shall come—among them it is called “the kingdom of God” too shall come […] they need eternal life so that in the ‘kingdom of God’ they can also recover eternally the losses incurred during that earth-life “in faith, in love, in hope.” (*GM* I: §15)

The person of *ressentiment* gains redemption through the belief that what they take to be a rightful claim of restitution will, eventually, be restored.

Moreover, Max Scheler emphasizes how self-deception (point (iv)) functions relative to point (i), namely that *ressentiment* gives rise to new values (Scheler 1994, 45–46). The person of *ressentiment* ultimately wants to retaliate against the noble type, even though they explicitly repudiate the value of such retaliation in place of values of faith, love, and hope. This makes sense given that *ressentiment* was caused by an inability to retaliate against external stimuli. Thus, as Scheler argues, the person of *ressentiment* still, in a self-deceived sense, operates within the noble’s evaluative framework, which includes valuing social domination. After all, Nietzsche argues that they believe they can “recover eternally the losses incurred during that earth-life” (*GM* I: §15).

I will adopt most of Reginster’s story, as well as Scheler’s conception of value delusion. However, I will challenge how Reginster construes the suffering associated with losing one’s standing in the world, which he renders as wholly distinct from the psychology of resentment.

Reginster argues that, unlike *ressentiment*, “resentment is a response to the failure by others to show me respect, to which I consider myself *entitled* in virtue of my *rightful* standing” (Reginster 2021, 56). However, one problem with this interpretation is that Reginster indicates two independent sources of suffering that should be kept distinct. First, there is *the painful impotence* of not being someone who counts, where ‘counting’ is understood in terms of causal efficacy. Second, there is *a loss of one’s status* as someone who counts. These can come apart. For instance, say a former basketball star is now elderly and can no longer walk, let alone play basketball. This person no longer has the causal efficacy to play basketball well. He is powerless in this sense. But he is unlikely to experience *ressentiment* based on this fact alone. However, if his former achievements were to go unrecognized or be denied, this would constitute the denial of his status as a great basketball player in the eyes of others. Conversely, the former player may suffer from the inability to play *now*, even if they are properly recognized as having the status of having been a great player.

Crucially, such status requires uptake grounded in second-personal address and competence (Darwall 2006; Fichte 2000). When he addresses others, he expects them to share this evaluation. Because of his self-perceived standing and his belief that such a self-perception is accurate, the former basketball star expects others to share in his assessment. Moreover, he assumes that others are competent in making such judgments. For instance, he does not expect second-personal recognition from his dog. Imagine a related case in which somebody is the greatest basketball player in the world (he has plenty of power), but he is denied recognition of this status. He may then perceive the mismatch between his ability and the recognition of that ability as a great injustice. Intuitively, then, it seems that the person who is denied such status (which is a good constituted in part by the recognition of others) will be the more likely candidate for *ressentiment*. Therefore, *ressentiment* is uniquely tied to one’s self-perceived standing, which one expects others to recognize and be competent in recognizing.

Furthermore, consider that Nietzsche’s description of the slave revolt is one in terms of a revolt *in morality*, which is a shift in *values*, not a revolt *in power* *of any kind*. We could imagine, for instance, that the slave types could band together to force punishment on some noble type(s). This dominance would not necessarily function as a relief for the suffering that the slave types have experienced. To see this, consider how Nietzsche compares the social dynamic between the noble and slave types as one between a predator and prey:

That the lambs feel anger toward the great birds of prey does not strike us as odd: but that is no reason for holding it against the great birds of prey that they snatch up little lambs for themselves. And when the lambs say among themselves “these birds of prey are evil; and whoever is as little as possible a bird of prey but rather its opposite, a lamb,—isn’t he good?” there is nothing to criticize in this setting up of an ideal, even if the birds of prey should look on this a little mockingly and perhaps say to themselves: “we do not feel any anger towards them, these good lambs, as a matter of fact, we love them: nothing is more tasty than a tender lamb.” (*GM* I: §13)

As I argued in the previous section, the noble types have aretaic responsibility but are exempt from accountability. The noble types’ cruelty and dominance over the slave types is innocent because of this exemption. Even if some retaliation could be made against them, this retaliation would not function as *a sanction* because the noble types do not yet have the proper psychological capacities to be held responsible. Therefore, Nietzsche claims that “To demand of strength that it *not* express itself as strength, that it *not* be a desire to overwhelm, a desire to cast down, a desire to become lord, a thirst for enemies and resistances and triumphs, is just as nonsensical as to demand of weakness that it express itself as strength” (*GM* I: §13). This demand is nonsensical in the same way that it would be nonsensical to hold anything exempt subject to standards of responsibility.

The inability of the noble types to be accountable strengthens Nietzsche’s case for *ressentiment*. If *ressentiment* results from the loss of any kind of power, this loss would be commensurate with the gain of any kind of power, like if the slave types revolted. This would mean that Nietzsche’s genealogy would be contingent upon the slave types never having gained power, which seems like a historical possibility. Moreover, such a view conceived of “nobles” and “slaves” as social classes, which, as I have argued, is not the correct way to understand these categories.

Alternatively, on the interpretation I am proposing, *ressentiment* is a historical inevitability because the only true relief that the slave types could find from their suffering would be recognition from the nobles of their wrongdoing. That is, it would not be sufficient for them to cause the noble types suffering—they need further second-personal uptake. Such uptake could be the nobles recognizing their accountability, or at least, if they do not recognize this, they understand that they are being held accountable. However, the nobles are, in principle, incapable of this. Thus, the slave type’s need is systematically and inevitably unmet.

The current interpretation makes sense of how the “nobility” and “slaves” refer to types of valuers, not social classes. For example, imagine a group of noble types who occupy the social status of slaves and slave types who occupy the social status of nobility. If there were, for instance, a revolt such that the noble types dominated the slave types, this could still be a source of *ressentiment* for those slave types. The slave types may continue to desire recognition from the now-ruling noble types (e.g., the slave types are now forced to exist as equals with the noble types, but they believe themselves to be inherently superior). Such recognition is unlikely to happen in any case, but if what I have argued is correct, then such recognition is also *impossible*.

Moreover, this explanation of the slave types’ suffering elucidates an important component of the self-deceptive nature of *ressentiment* (point (iv)). Since the noble types are agents in the sense that they value, but they cannot be held accountable, the slave types invent a sense of responsibility, which they then assign to the noble types:

just as common people separate the lightning from its flash and take the latter as a doing, as an effect of a subject called lightning, so popular morality also separates strength from the expressions of strength as if there were behind the strong an indifferent substratum that is free to express strength—or not to. But there is no such substratum; there is no “being” behind the doing, effecting, becoming; “the doer” is simply fabricated into the doing—the doing is everything. Common people basically double the doing when they have the lightning flash; this is a doing-doing: the same happening is posited first as cause and then once again as its effect. (*GM* I: §13)

The slave types hold the noble types responsible for their actions, but since the noble types are incapable of being held responsible, they are not the fitting object for such reactive attitudes. For the slave type’s need for recognitional uptake must be met, so they then invent “a doer” behind the deed, and “they thereby gain for themselves the right to hold the bird of prey *accountable* for being a bird of prey” (*GM* I: §13).

The failure of second-personal uptake is central to the dynamics of *ressentiment* because it explains why the invention of “a doer” or “subject” is a crucial part of the story. Only with the invention of this can the slave type’s need for recognition be met, albeit the fact that it is met out of a deep self-delusion.

**5. Addressing a Possible Objection**

I will return to this topic of inventing “a doer” in the final section. But even if we grant that what the slave types need is second-personal recognition, a possible objection arises. Not all instances of a failure to recognize some status are the same. Stephen Darwall has argued that Nietzsche’s conception of *ressentiment* differs from resentment because the former is in response to one loss of some status of esteem, while the second is in response to not being treated as a creature (in Kant’s terms) of worth (Darwall 2013, 81).

Darwall emphasizes that the noble types feel *contempt* for the slave types. This is certainly a feature of how Nietzsche describes the relationship between the two. Nietzsche argues

When the noble manner of valuation lays a hand on reality and sins against it, this occurs relative to the sphere with which it is *not* sufficiently acquainted, indeed against a real knowledge of which it rigidly defends itself: in some cases it forms a wrong idea of the sphere it holds in contempt, that of the common man, of the lower people; on the other hand, consider that the affect of contempt, of looking down on, of the superior glance—assuming that it does *falsify* the image of the one held in contempt—will in any case fall far short of the falsification with which the suppressed hate, the revenge of the powerless, lays a hand on its opponent—in effigy, of course. Indeed there is too much carelessness in contempt, too much taking-lightly, too much looking away and impatience mixed in, even too much of a feeling of cheer in oneself, for it to be capable of transforming its object into a real caricature and monster. (*GM* I: §10)

Nietzsche here describes contempt from the point of view of the noble type. Three features are worth highlighting. First, contempt is a matter of looking down upon its object and thinking of oneself better or above it.[[9]](#footnote-9) This alone does not require an object of second-personal address. Consider the types of contemptful comparisons some philosophers make when basing their arguments on what makes human beings superior to non-human animals. This comparison often leads to the conclusion that humans are, by nature, more dignified than animals. Similarly, Nietzsche argues that “the nobles felt themselves to be humans of a higher rank” (*GM* I: §5). But this kind of contempt does not involve, even implicitly, a recognition that the object of contempt has worth as opposed to esteem. In philosophical arguments comparing human contempt for animals often entails that animals lack worth (Kant is the best example). Therefore, contempt can involve a denial that the object of contempt has worth, not just esteem.

Second, Nietzsche argues in the above passage that contempt “sometimes forms a wrong idea of the sphere it holds in contempt” such that it falsifies the image of that object. The implication is that the noble types may hold the slave types in contempt, denying them as creatures of worth. But this can be a “falsification” in the sense that from the noble’s point of view, the slave types are akin to objects, for instance, to be mani­­­­­pulated and used (again, the comparison between the noble types and slave types and rational creatures and non-person animals on Kant’s view is apt). However, the slave types are subjects of harm who have the desire to make sense of their suffering. Being the victim of this suffering is an injustice rooted in the perception that one’s status is undermined. The undermined status cannot be lost or regained. It demands recognition, namely the thought that one counts in a basic moral sense or has “worth.”

Third, Nietzsche describes the noble type’s contempt as incapable of transforming them into monsters. Why he asserts this should be clear at this point. The noble types are not the types of creatures to whom accountability can be attributed. They are exempt from being accountable. The tension between the noble and slave types is a historical inevitability between an *incapacity* of one party to recognize the basic way in which another party counts, the second party has a deep need to count in that way, and the natural emergence of *ressentiment* is a consequence of this need and its denial. The dynamics between the nobles and slaves in *GM* create a perfect storm for *ressentiment*. Moreover, this *ressentiment* arises from a deep need to be seen as having worth.

**6. Why *Ressentiment* Matters for Us**

I have focused so far on *ressentiment* in *GM* as it arises between the nobles and slaves. These dynamics are interesting, but we (you and me) are psychologically very different from the noble and slave types in *GM*. In this section, I will turn to the relevance of *ressentiment* for creatures like us.

As I discussed above, Pamela Hieronymi has defended an interpretation of Strawson in which the practice of holding responsible, as constituted by reactive attitudes, is a transcendental condition for the possibility of social life (Hieronymi 2020, chap. 4). That is, reactive attitudes are a part of the very possibility of social life for creatures like you and me.

We can now return to the point that, on Nietzsche’s view, such attitudes are not transcendental conditions on *any* human social arrangement—the nobles and slaves in Nietzsche’s genealogy, whether historically actual or not, at least provide a picture of a very different type of social dynamic in which social relating does not require standards of accountability. At the same time, such dynamics may involve relations of aretaic responsibility. It is, therefore, not strictly true that practices of accountability are necessary for the very possibility of human social life. But it still may be true for this very possibility, assuming that the psychological profile of the people we are talking about is neither always exempt, excused, or the fitting candidate for the resource of determinism. These are people like you and me. I will argue in this final section that the dynamics of *ressentiment* that Nietzsche describes in *the Genealogy* are still of interest to us because they illustrate an important type of overly reactive attitude in which the invention of a “subject” is key.

First, it is worth saying more about what Strawson thinks other views about responsibility get wrong. Strawson describes two views he aims to refute, the pessimist and the optimist. These views are two kinds of reactions one may have to the thesis of determinism. Although this thesis is subject to specificities of one kind or another, the rough idea is that a naturalistic view of the world is one in which any given configuration of the world is fully determined by antecedent configurations plus the laws of nature (Van Inwagen 1975). This thesis excludes the possibility of any *sui generis* causes, including an agent who has it within their power to act otherwise than they did. The optimist reacts to this thesis by retaining the concept of moral responsibility. But the optimist argues that we should hold responsible only if doing so is conducive to desirable consequences. The pessimist maintains that the optimist makes a mistake because praise and blame are inherently concepts related to *desert* (Strawson 1974, 3). Determinism undermines the deservingness of anybody for praise and blame. Thus, the pessimist denies responsibility.

The problem with these approaches, according to Strawson, is that they are attempts to apply what is otherwise a statistical anomaly of social life to the level of a universal principle. We have already seen that responsibility, and more narrowly accountability, is inappropriate in certain cases, like exemption, excusing, or resource cases. Strawson uses these considerations to defend the view that practices of praising and blaming do not need to be justified since these attitudes are transcendental conditions on responsibility (Hieronymi 2020, 62–69). Given this fact, using the objective stance as a resource to explain all human actions is misguided. To do so would be equivalent to rejecting any picture of possible human social life.

These points are controversial, but I will grant that Strawson is right that taking a universal, objective stance toward social life is incompatible with any structure of human social relations, at least for creatures like you and me. We are not like the noble types in this way. Therefore, the participant stance is constitutive of any possible configuration of our social life. It is not optional. I will refer to this life as “the life of social participation.”

A life of social participation is not an option for creatures like us. One way of reading Strawson’s criticism of the optimist is that he aims to jettison the criteria of the desirability of holding responsible in a given case. Stephen Darwall describes this as the key feature of Strawson’s view, which he refers to as “Strawson’s Point” (Darwall 2013, 15). But this does immediately jettison the notion of desirability as it relates to the life of social participation. We may think this life, as a general mode of social engagement, has some justifiable value. We may then distinguish between justifying some instances of holding responsible by appealing to their value, which Strawson rejects, and justifying the value of *the practice itself* of holding responsible. We may wonder then if the optimist of the second sort could be consistent with Strawson’s view.

Hieronymi argues that even this kind of optimism is inconsistent with Strawson’s view. She discusses “the broadly Wittgensteinian thought: it makes no sense to question or to criticize a practice, as a whole, in terms that owe their meaning to that practice” (Hieronymi 2020, 57). But even with this thought, we may still think that there could be some external standard of the justifiability of the practice. Hieronymi considers this version of optimism, as well,

while the broadly Wittgensteinian thought might address an opponent who asks whether it would be *moral* (or just, or fair) to continue in our moral practices, that is not the opponent Strawson gives to himself. Rather, the crucial objection, as Strawson poses it, asks what it would be rational to do if determinism is true. This *extramoral* question can be asked even if one grants the broadly Wittgensteinian thought—an it could be answered, as the optimist answers it, by appeal to the gains and losses to human life. Strawson clearly thinks such a question is not “real,” something we “cannot have.” (Hieronymi 2020, 57)

Nietzsche himself is interested in such “extramoral” questions. As I discussed above, his main criticism of other genealogists was a failure to properly call their values into question. He declares that *GM* “*for once the value of these values must be called into question*” (*GM* Preface §6). If we take calling the value of our values into question as an extramoral question (or in other words, a question about the justifiable value of morality that is itself not a moral question), then it is hard to see how a Strawsonian interpretation of Nietzsche can be maintained. Our moral practices, including the practice of holding responsible, it seems, are liable to questions of justification on Nietzsche’s view. But this is precisely the question we “cannot have,” according to Strawson. Hieronymi argues that we cannot have this because of Strawson’s commitment to naturalism. Given the type of creatures that we are, we cannot entertain questions about the justifiability of a life of social participation.

There is a way to reconcile Nietzsche’s and Strawson’s views. One consistent theme in Nietzsche’s philosophy is a concern for the trajectory of human life in the long term. For instance, in the famous “madman” passage from *the Gay Science*, Nietzsche is concerned with the currently unanticipated consequences that the death of God will have on the future of human values (*The Gay Science* §125). I will not go into details here about why Nietzsche argues this, but I will mention one interpretation in passing. Paul Katsafanas argues that the death of God represents a loss of higher values (Katsafanas 2015). Higher values have several characteristic features, which include “demandingness, susceptibility toward creating tragic conflicts, recruitment of a characteristic set of powerful emotions, perceived import, exclusionary nature, and their tendency to instantiate a community” (Katsafanas 2015, 406). Moreover, Katsafanas argues that such higher values imbue human life with meaning and direction. Nietzsche is concerned with a possible trajectory of humanity in which higher values are no longer needed, which he describes as “the last man” (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* Preface §5). Nietzsche thinks that if humanity ended up like the last man, this would be regrettable. Importantly, the last man would not include repudiating higher values, it would consist of developing an inability for higher values.

If something like the last man is a possible regrettable route for the future of humanity, then it is possible that human forms of life in the future will be very different from our own. Part of Nietzsche’s project in *GM* is to show that similar changes have already occurred within the history of humanity. Valuers in the past were radically different from you and me. Therefore, we may agree with Strawson that *we* (you and me) cannot entertain the question of the justifiability of the life of social participation *for ourselves*. But Nietzsche’s view is that we can entertain the question both by looking toward past valuers and future valuers. We have seen how this applies to the noble types in *GM*. You and I are unlike the noble types in that we can be held to standards of accountability, but this does not bar us from thinking about the noble types as valuers and the kinds of social dynamics that follow from this fact. Therefore, Nietzsche’s view is consistent with Strawsonian skepticism about extramoral questions as these questions help us think about kinds of social arrangements that are not possible for valuers like us (here and now).

With this compatibility between Strawson and Nietzsche in mind, let’s return to *ressentiment*. One important difference in the dynamics between the nobles and slaves in Nietzsche’s *GM* and us is that we possess the psychological capacities for both aretaic responsibility and accountability, excluding the relevant special conditions. We can experience reactive attitudes based on the normative expectations we have for ourselves and one another. Moreover, unlike the resentment the slaves may have for the nobles, our resentment can be *legitimate*. But even legitimate claims of resentment can be denied, and in this way, *ressentiment* is still relevant for us. For example, imagine Jack steals Jill’s lunch money, and Jill is justified in taking a reactive stance toward him. She then has a legitimate claim against Jack because of the injustice he committed against her. Furthermore, imagine that Jack feels contempt for Jill—maybe he makes jokes about her at her expense, treats Jill’s anger as if it is unreasonable, etc. Jack does not view Jill as a moral equal, and thus his contempt is an insult to Jill. Unlike the nobles and slaves, Jack is not exempt from being accountable for this cruelty.

Jill may be used to ignoring people like Jack. But let’s say that Jack’s mistreatment eventually becomes too much for her to ignore (as it could be for anyone no matter how good they are at ignoring), and she develops *ressentiment*. In addition to suffering the injustices perpetrated against her, Jill then suffers a sense of not counting that is constitutive of being the object of contempt and comes with not being recognized as a moral equal. Moreover, Jill knows this lack of recognition is what she needs. She could retaliate by attacking Jack and harming him. But unless this leads to Jack realizing his accountability, such retaliation may leave her feeling as if she has not gotten what she deeply wants, which is recognition through reparations (or at least an apology).

If Nietzsche’s description of *ressentiment* is accurate, it may be that Jill develops a sense of deep hate for Jack. She may begin to interpret everything Jack does as carrying with it contempt for her, even in the cases where Jack is doing something unrelated to her. Moreover, since *ressentiment* affects one’s overall disposition toward the world, she may start to interpret other people this way. She may even begin to interpret misfortunes as offenses against her.

Jill is suffering, and Jack is to blame. But not only is the injustice leveled against Jill a series of discrete injustices (e.g., Jack stealing Jill’s lunch money). If Nietzsche’s description of *ressentiment* is accurate, Jack’s persistent wrongdoings against her affect her capacity to take an objective stance when appropriate. She may develop a disposition to treat cases of legitimate exemptions or excuses as fitting for a reactive attitude. This may compound, as well. Jack may interpret Jill as ultimately unreasonable because she accuses him and others of wrongdoing, even when they may have a legitimate excuse. Importantly, a life of social participation requires not only the ability to take up the reactive stance but the capacity to know when it applies. These are both transcendental conditions of a life of social participation. Thus, not only does Jill suffer discrete injustices, the effects of *ressentiment* on her alter her ability to engage in such a life. For instance, she may be prone to invent “doers” behind the deed when attributing responsibility is not apt, and this capacity is necessary for a life of social participation.

Nietzsche views *ressentiment* as so dangerous because of the way it can change the nature of the transcendental conditions of social dynamics, as it did for the noble and slave types in *GM*. We may think then that *ressentiment,* if it is the kind of phenomenon that Nietzsche describes,remains dangerous because it can change *the nature of human agency itself* and, therefore, the possible social arrangements that can be realized by those agents. On Nietzsche’s view, social domination can itself alter the transcendental conditions of social dynamics, even those necessary for a life of social participation.

Such radical transformations are unlikely to happen in the short term, but as I noted above, Nietzsche is often concerned with such changes over long periods of time. He anticipates that humanity’s future could go in a variety of ways. He thought it possible that we could end up like the last man, incapable of higher values. Or he thought it might be possible that some “overman” would instill new values that would open new avenues of human agency, flourishing, and, ultimately, social life. We can remain agnostic on the specifics here (that an “overman” would be the one to do this), and we can put concerns about future possible forms of social life to the side.

I think we can abstract from Nietzsche and his concern for the long-term future, and we can consider the ill effects of *ressentiment* on us here and now. One may think that cruelty is the central social vice that threatens the essential features of just human social arrangements. Nietzsche’s conception of *ressentiment* suggests a redirection of attention to *contemptful* cruelty, where not only is cruelty a matter of making another suffer but of denying a need that cannot be fulfilled elsewhere. That is, the need to count in some basic sense to one another. As we’ve seen, denying this need is the breeding ground for *ressentiment*. *Ressentiment* results in the attenuation of the ability to know when the objective attitude applies, which is itself one of the transcendental conditions of the life of social participation.

If Strawson is right, then we (you and me, here and now) are implicitly committed to such a life. Asking whether such a life is justifiable is a question we “cannot have.” But the question of justifiability is distinct from the question of care.[[10]](#footnote-10) While we cannot jettison a life of social participation, Strawson’s view is that by engaging in a practice of holding responsibility, we implicitly care about this kind of life—this is a feature of his naturalism. Moreover, if Nietzsche is right, *ressentiment* attenuates one’s ability to meaningfully engage in this kind of life. As such, *ressentiment* is an encroachment on a type of life we implicitly care about. These considerations are relevant for us because we are accountable for the conditions that can give rise to *ressentiment*—the nobles were exempt from their contempt, we are not.

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1. Discussing reactive attitudes in terms of “normative expectations” comes from (Wallace 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The concept of exemption and excuse are from Strawson, but these titles comes from (Watson 2004a). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In this way, much of what I say here is in line with Avery Snelson’s excellent paper on the Strawsonian reading of Nietzsche (Snelson 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Much has been written on this topic. For a nice overview of the various views see (Katsafanas 2016, chap. 9). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I will refer to *on the Genealogy of Morality* by the abbreviation “*GM*” (Nietzsche 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I will refer to *on Daybreak* by the abbreviation “*D*” (Nietzsche 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. (Snelson 2021) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For more on this “self-poisoning” aspect of *ressentiment*, see (Huddleston 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For a helpful analysis of the different kinds of contempt in Nietzsche’s thought, see (Alfano 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For instance, see (Frankfurt 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)