

Responsibility Skepticism and Strawson's Naturalism*

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But it cannot be a consequence of any thesis which is not itself self-contradictory that abnormality is the universal condition.

Now this dismissal might seem altogether too facile; and so, in a sense, it is. (P. F. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," 71)

There are few who would deny that P. F. Strawson's "Freedom and Resentment" (1962) ranks among the most significant contributions to modern moral philosophy.¹ Although any number of essays have been devoted to it, Pamela Hieronymi's *Freedom, Resentment, and the Metaphysics of Morals* is the first book-length study.² The aim of Hieronymi's study is to show that

* A review of Pamela Hieronymi, *Freedom, Resentment, and the Metaphysics of Morals* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), pp. 168, \$29.95 (cloth). Parenthetical citations in the text are to this book. My colleagues in the Lund | Gothenburg Responsibility Project organized seminars devoted to an examination of this book, and I am grateful to them for their valuable observations and comments. I am especially grateful to Michael McKenna, Dave Shoemaker, and Andras Szigeti for their helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this review essay. Finally, I would like to thank Pamela Hieronymi, who participated in two of these seminars and provided an interesting and helpful account and defense of her views.

1. P. F. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48 (1962): 1–25; reprinted in *The Philosophy of Free Will*, ed. P. Russell and O. Deery (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 63–83. All page citations are to the latter.

2. There are a number of books that discuss and examine Strawson's views in some detail. Among these we might mention R. Jay Wallace, *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); Paul Russell, *Freedom and Moral Sentiment: Hume's Way of Naturalizing Responsibility* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Michael McKenna, *Conversation and Responsibility* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); David Shoemaker, *Responsibility from the*

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Strawson's "central argument" has been "underestimated and misunderstood." Hieronymi interprets this argument in terms of what she describes as Strawson's "social naturalism" (63). Understood this way, Hieronymi maintains, "the argument is powerful" (71). In what follows I will argue that while Hieronymi's discussion is stimulating and provides valuable insights into "Freedom and Resentment," neither the interpretation advanced nor the social naturalist position that it describes is convincing.

I. ABNORMALITY, INCAPACITY, AND STRAWSON'S FACILE ARGUMENT

One of Strawson's principal aims in "Freedom and Resentment" is to refute or discredit the claim, as advanced by the "pessimist," that if the thesis of determinism is true then our attitudes and practices associated with moral responsibility would be unjustified and should be altogether jettisoned and discarded. According to the "pessimist," if determinism is true, then excusing considerations of some kind will apply to all human action and hold universally. In circumstances of this kind it would follow that no one is responsible for anything. Strawson argues that a proper survey of the relevant set of excusing and exempting consideration will show that determinism has no such implications.

The key to discrediting pessimism, as Strawson sees it, begins with recognizing the significance and role of reactive attitudes and feelings in this sphere.³ Our reactive attitudes are themselves an expression of "the very great importance that we attach to the attitudes and intentions towards us of other human beings."⁴ In general, we expect and demand "some degree of good will or regard" on the part of those whom we interact with. Where another person or agent fails to show the relevant degree of goodwill or concern toward ourselves or others, this will naturally arouse resentment, indignation, or blame of some kind.⁵ This general stance toward other people involves "participant attitudes" and "interpersonal relationships." It contrasts with what Strawson calls "the objective attitude."⁶ We adopt the objective attitude toward another human

Margins (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). There are also two collections of papers devoted to Strawson's "Freedom and Resentment": D. Shoemaker and N. Tognazzi, eds., *Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility*, vol. 2, "Freedom and Resentment" at 50 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); and M. McKenna and P. Russell, eds., *Free Will and Reactive Attitudes: Perspectives on P. F. Strawson's "Freedom and Resentment"* (Abingdon: Ashgate, 2008; repr., London: Routledge, 2016).

3. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," 66–67, 79–81; see also P. F. Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties* (London: Methuen, 1985), 31–33, 39–41.

4. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," 66.

5. *Ibid.*, 79.

6. *Ibid.*, 69; Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism*, 33–34.

being when we see them simply as an object of “social policy,” an individual whom we might manage or direct in some way, but not someone who engages our reactive attitudes.⁷ In order to understand conditions of moral responsibility, we need to describe the way in which some considerations serve to modify or alter our reactive feelings and attitudes or even require us to withdraw them altogether. This brings us to Strawson’s theory of excuses and exemptions.

There are, according to Strawson’s analysis, two broad categories of consideration that alter or inhibit our reactive attitudes.⁸ First, excusing considerations indicate that the agent’s will was not of the kind that displays malice or an uncaring attitude (as in cases of ignorance, accidents, etc.). Although an injury of some kind may have been caused, the agent’s quality of will is unobjectionable. The other category of considerations are exemptions. Exemptions are based on the claim that the agent in question is in some way an inappropriate target or object of our reactive attitudes, not only in the specific case at hand but also more generally. From this perspective, Strawson argues, the agent is viewed as somehow “abnormal” (warped, neurotic, etc.) or “immature.”⁹ In circumstances of this kind we are required to drop the participant stance that involves engaging our reactive attitudes and, instead, adopt the objective attitude.

The key objective for Strawson’s naturalistic line of reasoning is to show that, even if determinism is true, none of the standard excusing and exempting conditions can be generalized or judged to hold universally (i.e., in virtue of the truth of this metaphysical thesis).¹⁰ With respect to excuses, nothing about the thesis of determinism implies that agents are always ignorant about what they are doing, or that they never act intentionally, or that everything that is done is an accident or inadvertent.¹¹ The more crucial and problematic aspect of Strawson’s argument rests with showing that we have no reason to suppose, contrary to what the “pessimist” suggests, that if determinism is true then exempting conditions apply to everyone. According to Strawson, as long as an agent is not incapacitated from ordinary personal relations, then no such policy is required of us: “the participant attitude, and the personal reactive attitudes in general, tend to give place, and it is judged by the civilized should give place, to objective attitudes, just insofar as the agent is seen as excluded from ordinary adult human relationships by deep-rooted psychological abnormality—or simply by being a child. But it cannot

7. Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment,” 69; Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism*, 34.

8. Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment,” 67–73.

9. *Ibid.*, 69.

10. Nor, if this argument is sound, could any other “theoretical conviction” of this general kind (e.g., the existence of God) have this skeptical implication.

11. Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment,” 71.

be a consequence of any thesis which is not itself self-contradictory *that abnormality is the universal condition*.”¹² Although Strawson acknowledges that this might come across as “too facile,” the real concern here is that these remarks obscure the relevant issue. More specifically, it is incapacity and not abnormality that is relevant to understanding the rationale of exemptions. Strawson’s (facile) argument equivocates between “abnormality” and “incapacity. Plainly there is nothing “self-contradictory” about the suggestion that incapacity is the universal condition.¹³

In order to understand the relevant basis for exemption, we need some general account or description of what capacities are required for (full, effective) responsible agency. Strawson’s remarks on this subject are very thin—too thin to serve as a convincing refutation of the charge, as advanced by the “pessimist,” that if determinism is true then we would all be morally incapacitated. Strawson’s brief remarks suggest that all that is required for responsible agency is an ability to engage in “ordinary adult human relationships.” Plainly the pessimist takes a different view and argues that the relevant capacity involves libertarian metaphysics of “free will” or some form of “contra-causal freedom.”¹⁴ Strawson rejects views of this kind on the ground that they commit us to “obscure and panicky metaphysics” that “cannot be coherently described.”¹⁵ While Strawson may be right about this, it does not relieve him of the burden of saying something more adequate and convincing about what responsible agency does involve. In the absence of any satisfactory account of this kind, we are in no position to assume that a general ability to participate in “ordinary adult human relationships” will suffice for responsible agency (or that it is not threatened by the truth of the thesis of determinism). At most, what Strawson succeeds in doing is casting doubt on one interpretation of what the relevant capacities are supposed to be. What we require in order to discredit the pessimist, and the skeptical threat more generally, is an account of what is involved in or required of our moral capacities, such that we can say who is or is not exempted from moral responsibility. Strawson’s remarks remain

12. *Ibid.*; emphasis mine.

13. The line of criticism presented here draws from Paul Russell, “Strawson’s Way of Naturalizing Responsibility,” *Ethics* 102 (1992): 287–302; it is also presented in Paul Russell, “Moral Sense and the Foundations of Responsibility,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, 2nd ed., ed. R. Kane (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 199–220; and in Paul Russell, “Free Will and Moral Sentiments: Strawsonian Theories,” in *The Routledge Companion to Free Will*, ed. K. Timpe, M. Griffith, and N. Levy (London: Routledge, 2017), 96–108. All three of these essays are reprinted in Paul Russell, *The Limits of Free Will: Selected Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

14. Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment,” 81.

15. *Ibid.*, 83; see also P. F. Strawson, “Reply to Ayer and Bennett,” in *Philosophical Subjects: Essays Presented to P. F. Strawson*, ed. Z. van Straaten (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 260–66, 265; Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism*, 32, 40.

too sketchy and superficial to achieve this task, and for this reason there is a significant “gap” or “lacuna” in his own position. Given these difficulties and shortcomings in Strawson’s (naturalistic) argument, we may conclude that his argument, as presented, fails to discredit the pessimist.

Let us describe the above line of criticism of Strawson’s (naturalism) argument as “the capacity objection.” The key to the capacity objection is the suggestion that what matters for our understanding of moral responsibility and any associated rationale for exemptions is the capacity/incapacity distinction and not, contrary to Strawson’s (facile) argument, the normal/abnormal distinction. Due to his conflation of abnormality and incapacity, Strawson suggests that we can (easily) bypass the issue of moral capacity on the basis of the observation that abnormality cannot be “the universal condition.” Once this error is unmasked, the critic continues, it is evident that Strawson is not relieved of the burden of providing a credible account and defense of what capacity or capacities are actually involved (i.e., such that we are able to say what agents whom we exempt are, in fact, lacking).

Understood this way, there are two fundamentally important claims that the capacity objection turns on:

1. It is claimed that there is nothing self-contradictory or impossible about the thesis that all human agents may be incapacitated (as per the pessimist’s concern).
2. It is also claimed that any convincing or persuasive argument that aims to discredit the pessimist must provide a robust, detailed, and accurate account of what sort of moral capacity responsible agency (actually) requires.

It is evident that the capacity objection maintains that universal incapacity is not impossible. In order to show that this is not our situation (whether determinism is true or not), we need to provide a clear and independent account of what we take moral capacity to be. Only then will we be in a position to say that the truth of determinism is irrelevant to this matter.

II. SOCIAL NATURALISM AND STRAWSON’S “CENTRAL ARGUMENT”

Pamela Hieronymi’s fundamental concern in *Freedom, Resentment, and the Metaphysics of Morals* is to defend an alternative reading of Strawson’s “Freedom and Resentment” and to show that it provides a “powerful” argument against the “pessimist” (1, 71). This alternative reading emphasizes Strawson’s “social naturalism” (61–63), which is constructed around what Hieronymi calls Strawson’s “central argument.” Ironically enough, the argument concerned is the “facile argument,” as targeted by the

capacity objection (15–21). It is Hieronymi’s concern to show that this argument is not flawed or confused in the way that the capacity objection suggests. While it may be true that this argument needs to be further developed and supplemented (using other work by Strawson), this argument serves as the relevant foundation for Strawson’s social naturalist position. It is this aspect of Strawson’s contribution, Hieronymi maintains, that is most valuable and worth salvaging.

In order to defend social naturalism, both as an interpretation of Strawson and as a viable reply to the pessimist, it is essential for Hieronymi to discredit the capacity objection. To this end she advances two claims that directly contradict the two key claims employed by the capacity objection:

1. Contrary to what the capacity objection assumes, the social naturalist endorses the claim that it cannot be the consequence of any general thesis that moral incapacity is the universal condition (17–18, 23, 29–31, 44, 76, 95–96).
2. We exempt agents only when they are incapable of participating in “normal” or “ordinary human relationships” (17–21, 43–46, 49, 63, 66, 71–72, 74, 79, 81–82). There are, therefore, no standards for moral capacity that are distinct from or make no reference to statistically “ordinary human relationships.”¹⁶ It follows that it is a mistake to suppose, as the capacity objection does, that we may first identify what moral capacities are required for responsible agency and then ask whether the “ordinary” or “normal” person possesses them or fails this standard. What the “normal” or “ordinary” person is capable of sets the relevant baseline for whatever this standard may be.

Hieronymi’s “social naturalist” interpretation is constructed around these two claims, positioning itself in direct opposition to the capacity objection and the two contrary claims that it relies on.

The social naturalist takes the view, contrary to the capacity objection, that Strawson is correct in suggesting that there is some kind of “contradiction” involved in claiming that all (or most) human beings are incapacitated for ethical life and responsible agency (17–18, 43–44, 105). It should be clear, however, that whereas the claim that “abnormality is the universal condition” is, as it stands (*simpliciter*), self-contradictory, this is not true of the claim that “incapacity is the universal condition.” What, then, is the basis of the charge of contradiction that the social naturalist makes? The contradiction arises when we add further premises describing

16. Hieronymi repeatedly emphasizes the point that “statistics matter” with respect to this issue (17–18, 20–21, 32–33, 37, 100).

“the facts as we know them.”¹⁷ The facts as we know them include the fact of society itself. In placing emphasis on this starting point, Hieronymi refers not just to “Freedom and Resentment” but also (especially) to “Social Morality and Individual Ideal,” a separate paper that Strawson published a year earlier (1961).¹⁸ The fact of society serves as the foundation—or key “ingredient”—of a “transcendental argument moving from the existence of society to the conditions required for it” (28).

What are the relevant “possibility conditions” for the existence of society, and how are they relevant to “ordinary interpersonal relating” (28, 49, 63, 72, 74, 93)? The core transcendental argument—that serves to identify the “contradiction” involved in supposing that incapacity is the universal condition—rests with the following four claims (or premises):

1. The existence of society is a known fact or “given.”
2. The existence of any human society requires some sort of “minimal morality” (28).¹⁹
3. Where society and morality exist, we also know that the “basic demands” and “expectations” that morality involves are “pretty regularly fulfilled” (28–29).²⁰
4. If the (minimal) demands of morality are “regularly fulfilled,” then the agents concerned must be ethically competent (however this may be interpreted).

Given these premises, we can conclude from “the facts as we know them” that most human beings are ethically competent in these terms (29).²¹ We contradict ourselves, therefore, if we claim that it is possible that “incapacity could be the universal condition”—since the fact of society tells against this.²²

17. Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment,” 64, 81; cf. Hieronymi, *Freedom, Resentment*, 27, 29, 42, 43–44.

18. P. F. Strawson, “Social Morality and Individual Ideal,” *Philosophy* 36 (1961): 1–17; reprinted in P. F. Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1974), 26–44. All page citations are to the latter.

19. See also Strawson, “Social Morality and Individual Ideal,” 30–38.

20. See also *ibid.*, 35–40.

21. It is worth noting, although Hieronymi does not stress this point, that individuals who are similarly ethically competent can disagree significantly about how the “moral demand” should be interpreted and implemented. Given this, the moral order and structure of society may break down or collapse despite high levels of (shared) ethical competence.

22. The following passage provides much of this argument: “Pulling together Strawson’s picture: Strawson believes that the existence of a human society requires some or another system of demands and expectations for regard, including reactions to their violation and to their being exceeded. Moreover, we can know, in advance, that certain of these expectations and demands (the minimal ones) will typically be satisfied, and so we can know, in advance,

These core premises, the social naturalist claims, lay the foundations for an effective reply to the pessimist. However, the first four premises provided above do not, as they stand, discredit the pessimist. What has been proved is that, given the fact of society, it cannot also be the case that everyone (or even most agents) is ethically incapacitated or incapable of responsible agency. Consider, for example, that the pessimist may accept all four of the above premises. What the pessimist claims is that responsible agency requires “free will” or “contra-causal freedom” of some kind. Without some capacity of this kind no relevant form of social morality can exist or operate.²³ It follows that, given “the facts as we know them” (i.e., that society actually exists, etc.), most members of society must enjoy some relevant form of free will. The first four premises can, in this way, serve to generate a reverse “transcendental argument.” Since society exists, and this requires ethically competent agents who have free will, we know that determinism must in fact be false. This confirms rather than refutes the pessimist claim.

It is no less significant that the “optimist,” as Strawson understands this view, might also accept the first four premises of the “transcendental argument.” According to the optimist, all that ethical competence requires is a capacity to act according to the determination of our own will, as directed by our existing motivation and desires. If an agent is not subject to any form of violence or physical restraint (e.g., like a prisoner in chains), then she acts freely and is ethically competent. An individual of this kind is a suitable and reasonable target of our practices of blame and punishment, where the aim of this is to secure obedience and other ends of social utility.²⁴ The same general inference, from the existence of society to the satisfaction of the conditions required for its possibility, is available to them. Clearly, however, Strawson would also reject this argument—even if it does serve to refute the pessimist. If the optimist is right, ethical capacity is simply an ability to act according to your own will. Given the fact of society, and that an ethical capacity of this kind is required for it, we have no reason to accept the pessimist’s claim that if

that those to whom those apply will typically have the capacities required to satisfy them. We can now, I hope, start to see why Strawson thinks that nothing true of everyone could provide an exemption” (33).

23. The relevant form of free will may be metaphysically very “extravagant,” such as a (God-like) capacity to create our own character or be true self-creators. Of course, some pessimists (skeptics) believe that capacities of this kind are not possible, much less actual. Since they deny that human agents have these powers or abilities, then if society exists (which must be granted), it cannot depend on agents having such powers and abilities (contrary to premises 2–4).

24. An “optimistic” position of this kind need not be so crude and could be made much more complex and sophisticated. See, e.g., Daniel Dennett, *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984).

the thesis of determinism is true incapacity is the universal condition. This “optimistic” version of the “transcendental argument” aims to prove that the pessimist’s claim is mistaken. Strawson, nevertheless, rejects any argument of this kind because it fails to capture or even identify essential elements and qualities that the pessimist finds missing in this account—such as desert, justified condemnation and punishment, and so on. On Strawson’s own account, therefore, ethical capacity and competence cannot be reduced or truncated in these terms.²⁵

What follows from these considerations is that in order to refute or discredit the pessimist the Strawsonian naturalist needs to say something more about what sort of ethical capacities are (actually) required for society and morality to exist. In order to move from “the facts as we know them” (i.e., relating to society and morality) to the conclusion that the pessimist is mistaken, we need to extend the argument:

5. Ethical competence of the kind required for responsibility is a matter of an agent being able to (fully and effectively) participate in “normal” or “ordinary human relationships” (42–45, 105–6). We exempt only those agents who are incapable of participating in normal or ordinary human relationships of this kind (i.e., those who are “abnormal” or “outliers”).
6. Nothing about the truth of the thesis of determinism suggests that human beings do not generally enjoy ethical competence understood in these terms. Since we already know that most human adults are capable of ordinary interpersonal relations of this kind, it is irrelevant whether determinism is true or not.
7. We may conclude, therefore, that the pessimist is mistaken in claiming that if determinism is true then incapacity is the universal condition. The “facts as we know them” show that this cannot be the case.

The crucial issue that faces us now is to ask why we (or the pessimist) should accept premise 5.

As we have noted, both the pessimist and the optimist are committed to a very different understanding of what ethical competence of the kind required for responsibility involves. Strawson agrees with the pessimist that the optimist’s understanding of moral capacity lacks any relevant connection or place for crucial items that need to be accounted for (i.e., desert,

25. It is worth emphasizing that Strawson agrees with the pessimist that something essential is missing from the optimist’s account of moral responsibility. From Strawson’s point of view, therefore, a credible response to the pessimist must deliver an account of the nature and conditions of moral responsibility that is sufficiently robust and complex that it can answer to what is missing here (i.e., there is some relevant standard to be met here).

etc.). Strawson accepts that this is a good reason for rejecting the optimist's effort to discredit pessimism. Strawson, nevertheless, agrees with the optimist that the pessimist account relies on incoherent and unintelligible metaphysical assumptions that are disconnected from (empirical) psychological reality. While we may agree with Strawson about both these claims, this still leaves Strawson (and any naturalist following his line of argument) having to show why we should accept premise 5 as an adequate or plausible alternative. Apart from anything else, there remains the option of skepticism: the claim that there is no credible or coherent account of ethical capacity available to us (and so whether determinism is true or not, no agent is morally responsible).

The trouble with the social naturalist's transcendental argument is that, as presented, it takes for granted a key premise that both pessimists and optimists alike may challenge. It is not clear why we should accept the (undefended) claim that being capable of participating (fully and effectively) in "ordinary human relationships" constitutes a credible or plausible interpretation of the sort of ethical competence required for moral responsibility. As it stands, the social naturalist has an unearned confidence that this assumption is correct. The (Strawsonian) social naturalist is, on the face of it, vulnerable to the same general line of objection that the optimist is subject to—a line of objection that Strawson explicitly endorses. That is to say, just as the optimist account of moral capacity understood in terms of "negative liberty" may be judged inadequate or insufficient, so too might the account offered in terms of being capable of participating in ordinary human relationships. The pessimist, for example, may argue that while Strawson purports to salvage the role of desert, justified blame and punishment, and so on, this project fails and does not deliver what it claims to secure.²⁶

Clearly there is a "gap" or "lacuna" in the social naturalist argument. If this is Strawson's argument, it remains vulnerable to the objection that Strawson's naturalistic argument fails to provide any convincing or plausible account of responsible agency—which is what the capacity objection claims. If we set aside the "facile argument" that "abnormality cannot be the universal condition" and reconstruct Strawson's ("central") argument in terms of the framework that is grounded in "the facts as we

26. This is a familiar objection to the Strawsonian project. For two prominent statements of this criticism, see, e.g., A. J. Ayer, "Free Will and Rationality," in *Philosophical Subjects: Essays Presented to P. F. Strawson*, ed. Z. van Straaten (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 1–13 (also reprinted in McKenna and Russell, *Free Will and Reactive Attitudes*, 37–46); and Derk Pereboom, *Living without Free Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). It is a failing of Hieronymi's book that she does not engage with (or even mention) the extensive literature on this subject or address the (significant and numerous) issues that arise from it.

know them,” we still need an argument and evidence to support the (vulnerable) assumption that any agent who is capable of “normal” or “ordinary interpersonal relationships” should be regarded as morally responsible and that only (abnormal) agents who fail this standard can be exempt. It might be possible to defend this assumption, but it requires more than the first four premises of the transcendental argument to do this (since both the “pessimist” and the “optimist” can also accept these four premises).

III. STANDARDS AND THE DYNAMIC ASPECT OF SOCIAL NATURALISM

The social naturalist may argue that the general line of objection that has been advanced relies on the same faulty assumption that the capacity objection relies on. The assumption is that we have some relevant standard by which we can judge whether the capacity to participate in ordinary interpersonal human relations is itself an adequate or satisfactory understanding of ethical competence as required for responsible agency. The social naturalist denies that there is any such standard by means of which this can be decided (45–49, 63, 72, 79, 93, 101). There is “no standard” for moral capacity other than accounting for those conditions that make “ordinary interpersonal relations” and a reliable or “regular” degree of compliance with the moral demand possible. According to this view, “the system of moral and interpersonal expectations and reactions” should be understood not as an “ideal” of some kind—one that may not be realized or actual—but rather as “a framework required for, and therefore guaranteed by, the existence of human society” (29). Since there is no “ideal” standard by which we may adjudicate various proposed accounts of moral capacity, it is a mistake to try to show that a capacity to participate in “ordinary interpersonal human relations” is an adequate account of responsible agency (e.g., in contrast to other proposed accounts of moral capacity). Our capacity to participate in ordinary human relationships, the social naturalist maintains, is the only relevant basis on which to decide which agents are or are not to be exempted.

The framework or system of moral expectations and demands is based on an understanding and interpretation of “what is usual or ordinary” (29). The demands in place are, in this way, always “adjusted” to fit or match whatever the relevant baseline capacities of the “normal” or average person may be: “If we had any different capacities or very different needs, we would, presumably, also have different expectations of one another, and so we live under a different system of demands. If most of us lacked the capacities required to satisfy certain expectations or demands, those expectations or demands would not be sustainable—and so would not be part

of our system. The system will be attuned to the usual capacities” (29–30). It is through this route that we arrive at Strawson’s (otherwise) “baffling” claim that incapacity cannot be the normal condition, much less the universal condition (31; cf. 17–18, 23). If our capacities were such that the normal person could not participate in interpersonal relations or “pretty regularly fulfill” the moral demand, then the demands being made would have to be adjusted so that those to whom these demands apply would “typically satisfy them” (33).²⁷

Given that the system of demands needs to “adjust to what is typical or tolerably ordinary” (32–33), it follows that there is no settled or fixed capacity (or set of capacities) that is required to satisfy the general condition of being capable of participating in interpersonal human relationships. According to this view, if the baseline for normal human capacities were to change, the result would not be widespread (much less universal) incapacity or exemptions. What would change would be the specific demands being made, such that the match between this (new) baseline for “normal”—whatever it may be—and the moral demands being made of the normal agent was effectively restored (i.e., so that the relevant moral demands are again “pretty regularly fulfilled”). It is in this sense that we have “no standard” of moral capacity independent of what the (variable) baseline normal might involve. We cannot, on this account, have a systematic split between what the normal agent is capable of and what we morally expect or require of those agents. With this in mind, Hieronymi suggests that the relevant framework for the social naturalist should be conceived of as “dynamic” (61).²⁸ The dynamic character of this framework—where our moral expectations are always adjusted to the capacity of the ordinary person—ensures that incapacity cannot be the universal (or normal) condition.

Hieronymi provides an example of how this dynamic framework operates in practice. In our present circumstances we might exempt alcoholics because, due to drunkenness, they “lack certain capacities required to satisfy certain of the expectations and demands that we currently impose on one another” (31). Part of the reason we exempt—and here Hieronymi suggests that she is following Strawson’s lead—is because drunkenness “is (relatively) unusual” (31). However, if the normal or average person were to have a similar level of capacity (e.g., a reduction in levels of inhibitory

27. It might be argued that we need to draw a sharper distinction between issues of competence and issues of compliance with respect to these matters. Levels of competence and compliance can move in different directions. For example, even if ethical competence is widely shared, it need not result in high levels of compliance. Even if the moral demand is set at a level that most could “regularly fulfill,” this result may not follow (which would erode social stability).

28. Hieronymi suggests that Wittgenstein is an important influence with respect to this “dynamic” feature of (Strawson’s) social naturalism (57–58, 61–62). See also Strawson’s remarks on the Hume/Wittgenstein relationship in *Skepticism and Naturalism*, chap. 1.

control, attention, and memory), then the system of demands would be “sensitive to those limitations” (32). In this alternative situation, presenting us with a different baseline for normal, we would not hold the normal person to the same sort of expectations that we currently do. Crucially, however, according to the social naturalist (and the dynamic view associated with it), this is not because normal individuals would now be exempt (which would contradict Strawson’s “baffling” claim); it would be because the demands that we place would be abandoned and conduct that was considered disrespectful or wrong would no longer be viewed this way (32; see also 82, 88). In the society we are now presented with, where the baseline normal is diminished in these ways, no relevant expectation has been violated, nor is any relevant demand in place. Diminished capacities do not result in an increase in exemptions, extending to the average person, but rather occasion an “adjustment” in our expectations and demands (i.e., a reduction or jettisoning of expectations that the normal person is no longer capable of).²⁹

Do the dynamic features of social naturalism serve to make a more effective case against the pessimist or show that the capacity objection is somehow mistaken? Obviously, the dynamic view is formulated in such a way that the pair of claims that are essential to the capacity objection are both brought into question. If we accept the dynamic view, then there is no fixed or settled standard for moral capacity, as required for responsible agency, to be identified or described. Since the baseline normal person may vary (i.e., over time or from one group to another), there is no determinate capacity or set of capacities involved in or required for participation in “ordinary human relationships,” as the relevant demands and capacities involved in this vary with the baseline normal person. Given this, there are also no circumstances in which we can say that the normal person living in society is ethically incapacitated because our standard of exemption is always adjusted to what the normal person is capable of. Whatever the (new) baseline of normal may be, we need our moral demands to fit or match the (actual) capacities and abilities of these agents. A society

29. Hieronymi adds a caveat or wrinkle to this. Along with the (downward) “pressure” to shift our standards of regard, so we can “accommodate the majority,” there will be some (upward) “counter-pressure” to retain a more demanding standard. This will occur, she suggests, if we suppose that the “diminished capacity” is a function not of “typical *natural* capacities” but of “typical *socially* developed capacities” (84–88). This makes room for some concession to the “ideal” of “maintaining standards” by “adjusting them upwards.” Nevertheless, as Hieronymi presents it, the social naturalist remains firmly committed to the view that it is “both unreasonable and unsustainable” to adhere to demands and expectations that exceed “typical *natural* capacities.” A significant alteration in the baseline normal capacity will not generate a large number of exemptions (i.e., covering the normal person), but the expectations that we will hold them to will be very different (i.e., significantly or, perhaps, drastically reduced).

with agents who have a diminished or eroded set of ethical capacities is not, on this view, a society where most persons are relevantly incapacitated or exempted but a society where participation in ordinary interpersonal relations is not especially demanding.

How should we assess this social naturalist understanding of the nature and conditions of moral responsibility? Let us begin by considering the case of children and how we understand them with respect to matters of moral responsibility. It is surprising that Hieronymi has little to say about the status of children in relation to social naturalist principles. Not only is this an important category to account for in terms of identifying the boundary of the moral community (i.e., who does or does not belong to it), but this is also a category that Strawson draws attention to in the context of presenting his “central” (facile) argument.³⁰ Children or “the immature” are among those whom Strawson identifies as exempted from reactive attitudes and toward whom we adopt the objective stance. Strawson groups children with others who are damaged or impaired in some particular way (e.g., schizophrenics, compulsives). However, in other respects children are clearly “normal human beings”—a young child is just as “normal” as an old person. Even if children are not the majority of the population, this is still true. This makes the pairing of “abnormality” and “being a child” an awkward pairing for the purpose of understanding exemptions.³¹ Arguably, this is itself evidence that there is something amiss with Strawson’s (facile) argument (and the pairing of “abnormality” and “being a child” that it encourages).

Strawson’s discussion of this issue makes clear that children are like others whom we exempt (i.e., “the abnormal”) in that they are also incapacitated in some relevant way “for ordinary inter-personal relationships.”³² What they lack might include more specific abilities and powers, such as an accurate “picture of reality,” or the intellectual apparatus that enables them to interpret and apply relevant norms, or a clear understanding of their conscious or unconscious motivations and purposes, or, perhaps, a “moral sense” or susceptibility to the reactive attitudes.³³ A description of these specific abilities and powers does not itself require us to make reference to what is “normal” or “ordinary.” Nevertheless, without them participation in “ordinary (adult) human relationships” will be impaired if not made impossible.

What makes children different, according to Strawson’s account, is the way that they “potentially and increasingly” acquire the specific range

30. Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment,” 71; see also 69, 70, 77–78.

31. *Ibid.*, 71.

32. *Ibid.*, 72.

33. *Ibid.*, 72, 75, 76, 78.

of capacities that are required for full and effective participation in “ordinary (adult) human relationships.”³⁴ It is for this reason, depending on the age of the child and the relevant degree and extent of incapacity associated with being that age, that we may treat such individuals as “marginal” cases.³⁵ We exempt, on this view, by degrees and with a view to whether or not relevant abilities to participate in “human relationships” are lacking or not. The “ordinary” adult human has these capacities and abilities, and the immature (for the most part) do not sufficiently possess them. Nevertheless, on this (capacity) reading, should the “average” or “normal” adult human also lack these capacities, then they would also be relevantly incapacitated for “interpersonal relations” (although such relationships would then, per hypotheses, no longer be “ordinary”). How (severely) incapacitated these individuals might be will serve as a measure for the extent to which “human interpersonal relations” are no longer possible or actually realized.

Granted that this is an accurate way of understanding the attitudes that we take toward children, what would we say if the “normal” human adult became relevantly “childlike” in their capacities and abilities? There is no suggestion, coming from Strawson, that we would have to adjust our understanding of ethical competence or whom we would exempt in these circumstances (i.e., operating with a diminished baseline for the normal). What would alter would be the claim that (mature) “interpersonal human relations” of the relevant kind are something that the ordinary adult was still (actually) capable of. In social conditions of this kind society might persist in some relevantly reduced or ethically truncated form. There is certainly no reason to suppose that society would simply collapse or disappear in this scenario—however unrecognizable it may be in terms of our present condition. What this shows, among other things, is that the mere “fact of society’s existence” does not guarantee any specific level of ethical development or competence among its members. From the perspective of the capacity view, therefore, a society may (continue to) exist in some form even though there is a significant degree of incapacity that is prevalent among its members, such that the (new) baseline for normal in the society makes more advanced or developed forms of ethical life rare or perhaps even nonexistent. On any account, given this sort of scenario, there will be significant and real differences between societies (and the specific forms of ethical life that they support) when the relevant baseline for normal varies or changes in these ways. Any adequate theory of responsibility has to be able to account for this and for its significance.

34. *Ibid.*, 77–78.

35. For an illuminating discussion of “marginal cases” in this context, see Shoemaker, *Responsibility from the Margins*.

How does social naturalism understand the situation of children with respect to these matters?³⁶ The social naturalist allows that the relevant human capacities not only vary from person to person but also may vary from society to society (depending on contingent social and historical conditions). If we were presented with conditions in which the normal adult became childlike with respect to their ethical capacities, this would not, according to the social naturalist, have any skeptical implications.³⁷ Given the dynamic framework of social naturalism, the relevant moral demand will need to be “adjusted” (downward). When this happens, we would cease to exempt (many/most) children who might otherwise be exempted, since there is a new (adjusted) baseline for “normal.” Many if not most children would be able to (fully and effectively) participate in “ordinary (adult) human relationships” as adjusted to meet these (reduced or diminished) abilities.

One striking feature of this (new) situation is that although the intrinsic capacities of the children concerned have not changed at all, their status as exempt or competent will change. Clearly, this change in their status is a function not of their intrinsic capacities but of their extrinsic relations to the (variable) capacities of others (i.e., adults). Moreover, although the child who was exempt is now considered competent, she is still incapable of participating in a full or effective way relative to the previous/alternative baseline for “normal” (that was set at the higher level). Her change in status, therefore, does not, in this sense, imply a change in her actual ethical competence. Related to this point, we might ask whether anyone who is worried about the implications of this scenario (i.e., most or all adults becoming childlike with respect to their ethical capacities) would be reassured to be told that these individuals (i.e., childlike adults) are still considered “ethically competent” and are not subject to exemptions, even though there is a real and significant reduction in

36. The question of how we determine or arrive at some relevant baseline for what the “normal” person is like in relation to these matters presents us with a number of puzzling problems. Hieronymi has, it may be argued, too little to say about these (complicated) details. For example, when deciding which individuals are to be exempted, the baseline for exemptions that is set will be a function of what is “*statistically* ordinary” (and will vary accordingly). Given this, we may ask whether children are or are not included in the relevant baseline group (keeping in mind that some children are far removed from the forms of “participation” that the social naturalist focuses on, while others are capable of near-full participation). In general, the identity of the relevant group in terms of which some “normal” baseline is to be determined is not entirely clear.

37. Examples of this need not be so far-fetched or unrealistic. Imagine, for example, that some virus (COVID XX) damages our capacities for memory, attention, or inhibitory control—as we considered in the case of a society of alcoholics (32, 77–78, 82). Shared psychological histories (e.g., collective post-traumatic stress) might result in similar social outcomes.

what it means for them to participate in “ordinary (adult) relationships” (i.e., relative to the new baseline).³⁸

Having made these observations about the way in which the social naturalist might understand the ethical competence of children, we may now ask whether the social naturalist provides us with a convincing or plausible way of responding to the pessimist. The social naturalist, as we have noted, rejects the pessimist worry that incapacity could be the universal/normal condition. This cannot occur on social naturalist principles because any relevant account of incapacity and exemption is adjusted to what the normal or ordinary agent is capable of doing. Nor is there any credible standard of ethical competence, the social naturalist claims, that we can identify or appeal to such that the ordinary or normal agent could fail to satisfy it. The standard of being capable of doing what the ordinary or normal person can (actually) do is the only relevant standard or baseline for assessing who is ethically competent. We know, moreover, that most human beings actually operate with sufficient capacity or ability to participate in human interpersonal life because if this was not the case then there would be no human society—and there obviously is such a society.

This line of reasoning does not serve to discredit the pessimist’s concerns or show that they are mistaken or misplaced. While it may be true, given “the facts as we know them,” that the normal or ordinary person is able to participate in (adult) interpersonal relationships of some kind, this claim is subject to a significant—and troubling—proviso. The relevant baseline for ethical competence remains entirely open and indeterminate (since it is always subject to adjustment to whatever the normal or ordinary person is or is not capable of). The truth of this claim, therefore, is entirely consistent with the normal or ordinary person being capable of only the most rudimentary or diminished forms of “interpersonal human relationship,” and thus wholly incapable of “interpersonal human relations” and expectations of a more demanding or robust kind. While it may be true, on social naturalist principles, that the ordinary agent is (always) “ethically competent,” relative to some variable baseline, this is no guarantee that

38. It seems clear that “normal adults” in this situation (i.e., where the baseline normal is adjusted to match the childlike) are still functionally incapacitated, in terms of how they operate, and also functionally exempt, in terms of how they are treated and responded to, with respect to the original (higher) baseline of normal. For this reason, it may be argued that the reality of this situation is one of prevalent or near-universal incapacity with respect to the original (higher) baseline for normal. This is, moreover, a baseline that some adults might still be capable of functioning within and satisfying. The problem with the social naturalist’s account of “adjustments” to the baseline for “normal” is that it conceals or masks the real and significant difference in the condition and capacities of those who operate at the lower-level baseline for normal (i.e., that they are now mostly/universally incapacitated and exempt in terms of the original/higher baseline).

they are ethically competent at the level or in the form that the pessimist is concerned with in the first place. What the pessimist is seeking reassurance about is that the relevant (high) level of ethical competence is not systematically undermined or eroded. The transcendental argument that the social naturalist advances provides no reason to suppose that this situation is not possible or implied by the truth of determinism. There is no inconsistency between accepting the claims of the transcendental argument advanced by the social naturalist and claiming that a capacity for “interpersonal human relations” of the more demanding and robust kind that concerns the pessimist is never realized.³⁹ We may conclude, therefore, that the “social naturalist” argument is not an effective way of meeting or discrediting the pessimist’s challenge. If Strawson’s naturalism is committed to “social naturalism,” then it is an unconvincing reply.

IV. BACK TO CAPACITY NATURALISM

The pessimist is concerned that if determinism is true then our attitudes and practices associated with moral responsibility, understood in terms that allow us to make sense of desert, justified blame and punishment, and so on, are systematically discredited. In response to this, as we have noted, Strawson advances a bad argument—his “facile” argument that purports to show that incapacity cannot be the universal condition on the ground that no general thesis can imply that abnormality is the universal condition (which is contradictory). The social naturalist attempts to patch up this argument by appealing to “the facts as we know them” concerning the existence of society and the way in which this depends on some form of “minimal morality.” We have argued that not only is this suspect as a plausible interpretation of (“the central argument” of) Strawson’s naturalism, but it is also not the most compelling or promising way of advancing Strawson’s naturalist reply to the pessimist—or so we claim. Given this, the pessimist (or skeptic) may suppose that Strawson’s naturalistic program simply fails, whatever interpretation we opt for. This conclusion would, however, be premature.

The capacity objection suggests that the only effective way to meet the pessimist’s challenge is to provide an alternative account of moral capacity that is sufficiently robust and sophisticated but is not compromised by the truth of determinism. The capacity objection finds Strawson’s answer here unsatisfactory because Strawson attempts to bypass this procedure by means of the “facile” argument—which jumps directly to the conclusions

39. One way of stating this reply to the social naturalist is that you cannot persuade someone who is worried that unicorns do not exist that their worries are groundless by pointing out that there are still plenty of horses to be found in the world. It is the significant gap between (genuine) unicorns and (mere) horses that is the basis of the pessimist’s concern.

that abnormality/incapacity cannot be the universal condition. We have argued that Strawson's naturalistic argument goes off the rails at this point—and that Hieronymi's social naturalist reconstructed version of this approach fails to get the Strawsonian project back on track. In contrast to this, the capacity naturalist argues that there are important elements and features of Strawson's system—which are neglected or overlooked on Hieronymi's social naturalist interpretation—that can serve as a more solid and secure foundation for a plausible naturalist response to the pessimist. What follows below is simply a sketch of what the capacity naturalist might say along these lines, drawing on Strawson's own arguments in "Freedom and Resentment."

One way of explaining the contrast between capacity and social naturalism is to consider again what exactly Strawson believes has gone wrong with the opposing "pessimist" and "optimist" accounts. The pessimist, Strawson argues, imposes a standard of moral capacity, involving "an ultimate, and ultimately unintelligible, kind of 'freedom.'"⁴⁰ The "incoherence" of this condition, and the supposition that the appropriateness of our reactive attitudes requires its fulfillment, may well "infect" our "ordinary concept."⁴¹ Although confused assumptions of this kind may "historically gather around" our concept of accountability, we should, Strawson suggests, tailor and structure our ordinary concept with a clear view to "our ordinary *practice*." One way of understanding Strawson's concern here is to say that our standards of moral responsibility are liable to distortion and corruption when they are formulated with a view to satisfying a particular normative ideal. With respect to this, the ideal that the pessimist aspires to goes beyond matters of desert and justified blame and punishment (i.e., what Strawson is concerned to account for), to a more demanding ideal of "ultimate fairness"—in particular, a form of justice that is pure and untainted by fate or luck of any kind.⁴²

When our standard of accountability or moral responsibility is driven by a normative ideal of this kind, it is liable to become wholly detached from what human beings are actually like and capable of. In these circumstances

40. Strawson, "Reply to Ayer and Bennett," 264.

41. *Ibid.*, 265.

42. My comments here draw more from Bernard Williams's influential discussion of this issue than from Strawson's own remarks; Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, with a commentary by A. W. Moore and a foreword by J. Lear (1985; repr., London: Routledge, 2011), esp. 214–18. Williams's remarks, however, accurately capture the underlying difficulty that troubles Strawson with respect to the aims and concerns of "pessimism." A classic statement of these concerns is provided in Thomas Nagel, "Moral Luck," *Supplement to the Proceedings of The Aristotelian Society* 50 (1976): 137–55; reprinted in Russell and Deery, *Philosophy of Free Will*, 31–42. Nagel articulates these concerns in terms of worries about "moral luck" and the limits of free will. See also Strawson's brief reference to and comments on Nagel in *Skepticism and Naturalism*, 31–32.

the standards being appealed to will force us in one of two directions, both of which are problematic. Either we will construct an illusory and “panicky metaphysics” in an effort to satisfy these aspirations, or, when confronted with the incoherence of this project, we will collapse into simple skepticism—and (mistakenly) suppose that the attitudes and practices of moral responsibility are systematically unjustified.⁴³ This is a form of “reasoning” about moral responsibility that needs to be avoided from the (capacity) naturalist’s perspective.

Strawson’s naturalism suggests that the concepts that we appeal to relating to this matter must be empirically grounded in our observations concerning our actual, concrete human ethical attitudes, feelings, and practice.⁴⁴ It is this—not some independent normative ideal—that is the relevant starting point for our reflections. It is Hieronymi’s contention that this naturalist requirement that our concept of moral responsibility should be properly empirically grounded in our actual practice commits us to “social naturalism.” According to this view, the right place for the naturalist to begin is with our “normal” or “ordinary” human capacities. In taking this route, however, we have to be prepared to adjust our understanding of moral capacity with reference to whatever the (variable) baseline for “normal” may turn out to be. There is, on this account, no fixed or settled set of capacities to be identified, since the baseline may vary or change from one group or one time to another. Following this line of reasoning, we are faced with an (unattractive) choice between (a) a normative ideal that is unhinged from actual (real) human psychology and practice and (b) accepting that there is “no (independent) standard” for moral capacity that can be identified and described without reference to what is possible for the normal (or average) person. As we have already noted, the price that we pay for adopting the social naturalist alternative is that we cannot properly account for the concern that the ordinary or normal agent may not operate or function at a robust or fully adequate level of ethical competence. The social naturalist endorses a permissive standard of ethical competence and exemption that is (always) adjusted to whatever the relevant baseline of “normal” may be, such that even agents operating with diminished or reduced ethical capacities are still judged to be (fully and effective) responsible agents. Clearly, then, both the normative ideal and social naturalist alternatives lead us into serious difficulties.

43. A particularly striking and bold statement of the skeptical view is provided by Galen Strawson, “The Impossibility of [Ultimate] Moral Responsibility,” *Philosophical Studies* 75 (1994): 5–24; reprinted in Russell and Deery, *Philosophy of Free Will*, 363–78.

44. “If we wish to use a concept in a certain way, but are unable to specify the kind of experience-situation to which the concept, used in that way, would apply, then we are not really envisaging any legitimate use of that concept at all.” P. F. Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense: An Essay on Kant’s “Critique of Pure Reason”* (London: Methuen, 1966), 16.

The capacity naturalist argues that we should reject both of these alternatives, as neither is acceptable or credible. The social naturalist is correct (qua naturalist) in insisting that our standards of ethical competence must be rooted in actual, real human ethical life, as we observe and experience it. The mistake that the social naturalist makes, as the capacity naturalist sees it, is to suppose that in order to get an adequate or credible picture of what ethical capacity involves we need to turn to the “normal” or “ordinary” person (i.e., by locating where the relevant baseline is situated for some given social group). The capacity naturalist, in contrast to this approach, looks at the competent agent—whether that agent is “normal” or not. The competent moral agent, as Strawson describes her, has certain complex psychological and social features that need to be carefully and accurately described. Much of “Freedom and Resentment” is devoted to this (capacity) naturalist project.⁴⁵

We can appreciate what this description of the competent ethical agent involves, for Strawson, by considering what it is about the “optimist” view that he finds unconvincing or inadequate. The optimist presents a description of competent ethical agents that is based on our experience and observation of them (i.e., as we actually find them). Consistent with the methodology of capacity naturalism, the optimist avoids appealing to some normative ideal as the relevant standard for judging who is or is not ethically competent. What goes wrong with the optimist’s account is that it provides a wholly incomplete and distorted description of the far more complex and sophisticated features and qualities that are (actually) involved here. We need a description that is adequate to the facts—one that captures our relevant concerns with desert, reactive attitudes, the formation of intentions and purposes, and so on. The optimist’s unbalanced focus on the “efficacy” and pragmatic benefits secured by our practices of condemnation and punishment not only fails to provide a satisfactory description of what is involved in relationships and practices of this kind but also makes it impossible to properly distinguish them from other distinct kinds of relationship and practice, such as when we are “training” or “treating” an individual with a view to some socially desired end.⁴⁶

45. We might note, by analogy, that in order to know what musical capacity involves we should look to (actual, real) competent agents involved in musical life and practice. This is not, however, the same thing as asking what the “normal” or “ordinary” person is capable of musically speaking. The “ordinary” or “normal” person may or may not be musically competent, as judged by the requirements and standards that these practices (independently) rely on. If musical competence becomes increasingly rare and/or diminished, then we might well expect musical society to erode or even altogether disappear.

46. As mentioned earlier, this criticism of the optimist applies not just to particularly crude or simple versions of this view (i.e., the “classical” statements); it might also be directed at some sophisticated contemporary accounts (e.g., Dennett, *Elbow Room*).

The psychological and social apparatus that Strawson describes and presents in “Freedom and Resentment” is meant to fill this “lacuna” or “gap” in the optimist’s account. Although Strawson does not have enough to say about this (crucial) matter, he does make clear what some of these (“missing”) essential features and elements are. He is, above all, very clear that among the crucial items that need to be brought back into the picture are the reactive attitudes or moral sentiments.⁴⁷ In contrast to this, the social naturalist interpretation, as presented by Hieronymi, assigns little weight or importance to Strawson’s concern with the reactive attitudes, except for the part that they play in our “ordinary interpersonal relations.” For the capacity naturalist this feature of human moral psychology and ethical life is central to Strawson’s naturalistic project and his effort to show what sorts of (rational) justification are or are not required in light of this.⁴⁸ In contrast to this, the social naturalist pushes Strawson’s concern with reactive attitudes to the periphery of his (naturalistic) system and places heavy emphasis on his concern with understanding exemptions in terms of “abnormality.” Whatever the philosophical merits of this view, an interpretation along these lines (i.e., social naturalism) is loosely connected with the arguments that Strawson actually presents in “Freedom and Resentment.”

We have argued that, quite apart from the interpretative issue, the capacity naturalist approach provides us with a better way of responding to the pessimist. The social naturalist view leaves the naturalist vulnerable to the objection that it presents agents who may be operating with diminished or even rudimentary forms of ethical competence as still being (fully) morally responsible. The capacity naturalist is not vulnerable to this (serious) objection. The success of the capacity naturalist project rests with its ability to provide an empirically based description of real and robust forms of ethical capacity that do not depend on the falsity of determinism. At the same time, showing that this project succeeds does not, according to capacity naturalism, depend on satisfying the illusory and incoherent aspirations or ideal standards that the pessimist attempts to meet. Suffice it to note, in this context, that in recent years there have been a number of impressive contributions developed along these general lines.⁴⁹

47. Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment,” 64, 66–67, 78–81.

48. There are a number of other (important) features of the reactive attitudes that should be considered here, including how they are relevant to explaining the relationship between being and holding responsible, and what role they play in making sense of our retributive practices (punishment, etc.). These are matters that are, if not entirely overlooked, certainly neglected by Hieronymi.

49. See, e.g., McKenna, *Conversation and Responsibility*; and Shoemaker, *Responsibility from the Margins*. While it is a merit of Hieronymi’s study that it is concise, it is disappointing that it does not engage with or respond to this work.

By way of conclusion, Hieronymi's "social naturalist" interpretation of "Freedom and Resentment" is a stimulating study that provides a number of interesting insights and observations into Strawson's important and influential paper. In the final analysis, however, the interpretation advanced is not tightly connected with the details and specifics of Strawson's own argument. It draws attention away from significant features and considerations that Strawson attaches particular weight and importance to (e.g., his concern with reactive attitudes) and, instead, places heavy emphasis on an argument that Strawson himself describes (with some reason) as "facile." Moreover, even if the social naturalist interpretation is a reliable and accurate account of Strawson's "central argument," it is still less than convincing, considered as a persuasive reply to the pessimist. Contrary to what social naturalism maintains, the capacity objection identifies the relevant weaknesses in Strawson's response to the pessimist. A plausible naturalist response to the pessimist requires a more fully developed account of the nature of moral capacity and further argument and evidence to show that a suitably robust and sophisticated form of this can exist consistent with the truth of the thesis of determinism.