

## Ciurria and Strawson – how deep is the divide

In this text, I will focus on Ciurria's critique of P. F. Strawson's incredibly influential paper "Freedom and Resentment", and more generally present-day Strawsonians about moral responsibility.

Said critique is much needed. Strawson attempts to paint a picture of what our moral responsibility practices, by and large, look like. He further argues that their justification does not rest merely on consequentialist considerations, nor does it require the existence of libertarian free will; our natural emotions and ordinary human relationships can do the justificatory work just fine. This is, of course, a *very* rough recap, and different philosophers make different interpretations of the paper. Nevertheless, it should be uncontroversial that Strawson does not present a distant ideal for what our moral responsibility practices *ought to* look like after radical revisions; the paper talks of how *they are*. Later Strawsonian philosophers tend to follow him in this.

Ciurria rightfully argues that the picture painted of "our responsibility practices", on the contrary, is highly idealized; it ignores crucial power asymmetries and oppression. I agree with this. However, it seems to me that Ciurria sometimes lacks awareness of exactly how profound the disagreement between her and Strawson and his followers is.

Here is a basic outline of Strawson's theory, where I try to avoid both controversial interpretations and too much detail:

When interacting with other people, the *participant attitude* is default. We normally care about what others think of us, and demand a certain level of good will from each other. If a normal fellow human were to treat me with ill will, or at least an objectionable level of indifference, I feel resentment bubbling inside me, and blame him for what he did. If he does not have a good excuse at hand (which might show that what he did was, say, an honest mistake, and not at all a display of ill will or indifference towards me), I blame him (Strawson 1962/2013 pp. 66, 74-75). A retributivist criminal justice system is a natural outgrowth of this kind of normal, human interaction. In a court of law, people are also held responsible for their actions, albeit more serious ones; blame and punishment are both ways of holding people morally responsible (ibid pp. 79-80). When others take a participant attitude to me, this has both a pleasant and unpleasant side: On the one hand, they treat me with respect, as a competent adult capable of taking responsibility for myself and being argued with. People can also praise me

and express their gratitude for good deeds I have done. On the other hand, they will demand things from me, and blame or even punish me if I fail to live up to said demands.

The objective attitude is reserved for a smaller number of people; mostly small children and people with serious intellectual disabilities or mental disorders (ibid p. 69-70, 75). We can temporarily adopt an objective attitude towards normal adults too, to save ourselves from the emotional strain involved in engaging with them, but it is difficult to keep this up for long – a more enduring objective attitude are for the “deranged”, “underdeveloped”, and children. These people do not really know what they do and cannot control themselves the way normal adults can; therefore, we should not take, e.g., acts of aggression on their part personally and get angry with them. Instead, we must find ways to handle, train or manipulate them as best we can (ibid p. 69). Being subjected to the objective attitude, too, has a pleasant and unpleasant side. On the one hand, I am free from many normal demands, and will therefore not be blamed or punished when I fail to live up to them. On the other hand, people do not take me seriously, I do not get to make my own decisions, and others might manipulate me as they see fit instead of being honest and argue with me.

Thus, on the Strawsonian picture, you can be taken seriously and seen as a candidate for both praise and blame, or you are not taken seriously and neither praised nor blamed. These things go together. Strawson allows for the possibility of more mixed attitudes, to be used, for instance, with older children. However, a more mixed attitude presumably means that we take the person semi-seriously, or take them seriously in some contexts but not in others. Praise and blame will likewise be toned down and/or appropriate in some contexts only. All this is supposed to be a morally justified way of relating to different kinds of people *that we already practice*. Not always and not perfectly, but mostly.

Ciurria points out that people tend to see members of marginalized groups as less rational than more privileged ones. Women are considered less rational than men, and black people less rational than white people (e.g., Ciurria 2020 pp. 122; 146). On the Strawsonian picture, seeing someone as largely irrational should modify our reactive attitudes in such a way that we are not only less prone to praise them for good deeds, but also less inclined to blame and punish them when they do wrong. “When we see someone in such a light, *all* our reactive attitudes tend to be profoundly mollified” (Strawson 1962/2013 p. 69, emphasis mine). This is not how things work in the real world, though: Instead, marginalized and supposedly less rational people are often considered *more* blameworthy (Ciurria 2020 p. 7. Hutchison 2018, discussed by Ciurria, also recognizes this). Regardless of whether the Strawsonian picture works as a normative ideal,

Ciurria is clearly right about the empirical facts. However, I wish Ciurria had made a louder and clearer point in her text of the fact that she contradicts Strawson here: He claims that seeing someone as underdeveloped and irrational dissolves resentment and blame, when in reality, we tend to *amp up* blame and punishment. Regardless of how obvious this is to someone well versed in the relevant empirical fields of research, it is certainly not obvious to many moral responsibility philosophers immersed in Strawson and his legacy.

Ciurria most clearly recognizes the disagreement between herself and Strawson, and argues for her own view over the Strawsonian one, when it comes to the assumption that most people are rational, responsive to argument, and thus best approached from a participant stance (Ciurria 2020 Ch. 4). Still, in some places she seems to forget, once again, that on the standard Strawsonian picture, the participant attitude is a strong default for how to deal with people, and the objective one only fit in exceptional cases. This seems to be the case when she criticizes Hutchison's claim that the objective attitude should be imbued with compassion.

Hutchison writes that toddlers and people in the middle of schizophrenic psychosis are not morally responsible, and thus not fit for the participant attitude (Hutchison 2018 pp. 209 and 216-217). She explicitly says that she ignores, in her essay, cases where we temporarily adopt an objective stance as a way of avoiding emotional strain (ibid p. 219). Instead, she focuses on individuals towards whom it would be *unfair* to adopt a participant stance and demand that they answer for their behaviour (ibid p. 218).

Ciurria writes:

Interestingly, Katrina Hutchison take *compassion* to be the main driver of the objective stance, regardless of the standpoint or social position of the target – of whether the target is Elliot Rodger or an 8-year-old. (Ciurria 2020 p. 96)

Ciurria motivates this interpretation of Hutchison by citing her saying that the objective stance is fit for individuals who cannot partake in “normal morally reactive exchanges”. Of course, one might reasonably argue (as Ciurria does!) that people as misogynistic as Rodger cannot do so, at least not with women. But in light of everything Hutchison writes in her text and the entire Strawsonian tradition, it is unlikely that the real disagreement between Ciurria and Hutchison is about whether to be full of compassion towards misogynistic murderers. Rather, the disagreement plausibly concerns whether the objective stance really applies to large swaths of prejudiced, biased and hateful people, or only to children and people with clear intellectual disabilities and mental disorders.

Strawson's talk about “members of our moral community” does seem to imply that evil is sufficient ground for exemption. But Gary Watson and others in the debate tend to discuss this

as a *problem* in Strawson's text, and as a likely *unintended* implication. The objective attitude is *supposed to* be restricted to little children, the intellectually disabled and mentally ill, whereas evil people are supposed to be blamed and punished. If Strawson's text implies otherwise, it is a bug – or at least a *problem* we must find some way to handle – not a feature.<sup>1</sup>

For instance, Watson writes:

On the face of it, [Robert] Harris is an 'archetypical candidate' for blame. We respond to his heartlessness and viciousness with moral outrage and loathing. (Watson 1987/2013 p. 97)

Of course, Watson moves on to complicate the picture. But he does so against what is supposed to be the default view – that people like Harris (or, plausibly, Rodger) should be met with blame and moral outrage, reactions stemming from a *participant* attitude.

Finally, Ciurria lumps together “calling psychiatrists” and “calling the police” to take care of someone bothersome or threatening. She sees both actions as a way to simply *handle* – or rather, have someone else handle – a person, instead of holding him responsible and arguing with him (Ciurria 2020 p. 108). I believe she is right in this.

In theory, there is a vast gulf separating the (coercive part of the) mental health system from the criminal justice and prison systems. In theory, the former is all about handling, manipulating and trying to cure those who cannot be held responsible for their actions, due to their mental defects. The latter is all about holding people responsible, blaming them and dealing out the punishments that they deserve. In reality, people subjected to either system frequently experience themselves simultaneously disrespected, objectified and punished. I believe Ciurria is right here and the traditional Strawsonian picture wrong; nevertheless, I wish she had explicitly argued for this view.

It is not clear to me that Ciurria realizes how *radically* she departs from the standard Strawsonian picture, when lumping the mental health system and the criminal justice system together as ways of “handling” people. As already mentioned, Strawson writes that arresting people and throwing them into prison takes place within the realm of the participant attitude, where we see offenders and prisoners as fellow members of the moral community, expected to

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<sup>1</sup> To be fair, Strawson does write (1962/2013 p. 72) that we exempt “moral idiots” from blame. He does not elaborate on what he means by that term, but it is reasonable to assume that he has in mind the kind of textbook psychopath who is utterly incapable of understanding that it is wrong to hurt others. Still, Strawson evidently believes that criminals, *in general*, should be met with a participant attitude; this is clear from how he describes the criminal justice system and institutional punishment.

accept their punishment as morally justified with no feelings of resentment to those carrying it out (Strawson 1962/2013, p. 79-80).

Ciurria accuses Strawson of being ignorant of certain empirical facts relating to the prison industry and mental health industry, namely that depending on both your own and your antagonist's degree of privilege or marginalization, your ability to "handle" people who bother you, threaten or hurt you via these means can vary greatly. This is true enough. But I think she should start on an even more basic level here: Strawson and many of his followers fail to realize that the mental health system can be punitive and the criminal justice and prison system disrespectful. This is how *deep* the disagreement between Ciurria and Strawson goes.

### **References**

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