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C11 # Responsibility After 'Morality'

Strawson's Naturalism and Williams's Genealogy

Paul Russell

C11P1 > . . . there is a quite general ambiguity in the notion of 'our ordinary concept' of whatever it might be. Should the lineaments of such a concept be drawn exclusively from its use, from our ordinary *practice*, or should we add the reflective accretions, however confused, which, naturally and historically, gather around it?

C11P2 > – P.F. Strawson (1980, 265)

C11P3 > Scepticism about the freedom of morality from luck cannot leave the concept of morality where it was . . .

C11P4 > – Bernard Williams (1976/1981, 39)

C11S1 ## 1. Introduction

C11P5 The views of P.F. Strawson and Bernard Williams on the subject of moral responsibility have both been highly influential. Strawson's influence drives largely from his 1962 British Academy lecture 'Freedom and Resentment', which has attracted a great deal of comment and criticism in the six decades that have followed its publication.[1] Williams's views have been presented in several different works, including two or three particularly significant papers published in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as his book *Shame and Necessity*, published in 1993.[2] It is, however, a striking and, perhaps, surprising fact that despite their overlapping concerns, and their considerable influence and profile on this subject, neither Strawson nor Williams directly engaged with each other's

[1] Collections on Strawson include: McKenna and Russell (2008/2016); Shoemaker and Tognazzini (2014).

[2] The papers I have particularly in mind are: 'Moral Luck' (1976/1981); 'How Free Does the Will Need to Be?' (1985/1995); and 'Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame' (1989/1995). All these works are, in various ways, closely connected with each other and with *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985/2011), which might be considered a pivotal work for a more general understanding of Williams's views on this subject. For an overview of Williams's views on ethics see Russell (2018).

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views. Their views are, nevertheless, very relevant to one another and, depending on how they are read or interpreted, may be understood to be in direct opposition.

C11P6 The central aim of Strawson's 'Freedom and Resentment' is to discredit scepticism about moral responsibility by employing a set of naturalistic arguments.[3] In contrast with this, Williams employs (Nietzschean-style) genealogy to raise sceptical worries and doubts about 'moral responsibility' and 'blame'.[4] Taken at face value, this suggests that they are at cross-purposes with each other. This is true, however, only on the assumption that the concept of moral responsibility that Strawson aims to defend is the same as the concept Williams aims to discredit. Another way of assessing this situation is to ask whether or not Strawson's naturalistic argument relies on the 'peculiar' assumptions and aspirations of 'the morality system', which is the more general target of Williams's (destructive) genealogical critique? It is this issue that is the central concern of this chapter.

C11S2 2. Responsibility, Scepticism, and Strawson's Naturalism

C11P7 Strawson's principal aim in 'Freedom and Resentment' is, as we have noted, to provide a naturalistic response to scepticism about moral responsibility. The source of the sceptical challenge is the claim that if the thesis of determinism is true then all our attitudes and practices associated with moral responsibility (praise and blame, rewards and punishments, etc.) are really unjustified. This sceptical challenge lies at the heart of the traditional free will problem. Strawson's naturalistic rejoinder is constructed around what he takes to be the (shared) flaws of the standard positions on this subject. As presented by Strawson there are two opposing positions on this subject: which he labels as the 'Optimist' and the 'Pessimist'. (Throughout this chapter these labels are capitalized to indicate their use.) The Optimist is essentially the classic compatibilist view. It maintains that the truth of determinism would in no way systematically discredit the concepts and practices associated with moral responsibility. The concept of moral responsibility that the Optimist is concerned with places heavy emphasis on the efficacy or utilitarian benefits of our practices of blame and punishment and the role that they play in 'regulating behaviour in socially desirable ways' (Strawson 1962/2013, 64). The Optimist's 'one-eyed utilitarianism', critics maintain, involves ignoring or eliminating any relevant role for *deserved* blame and punishment, along with notions of guilt, condemnation, and justice that rest on concerns about

[3] Strawson refers to his approach to the sceptical challenge as 'the way of naturalism' and he describes himself as following Hume's lead in this respect (Strawson 1985, esp. 10–14, 31–42).

[4] See, in particular, Williams's remarks in the opening chapter of *Shame and Necessity*, where he says that we have reason 'for being doubtful about "moral responsibility"' (Williams 1993, 7; see also Williams 1985/1995). Perhaps Williams's most sceptical remarks about moral responsibility and blame are presented in 'Interview with Bernard Williams' (1994, 4–5, 11–12).

desert (Strawson 1962/2013, 64–5, 79–81). Because they are heavily focused on 'forward-looking considerations', and give little weight to 'backward-looking' considerations relating to desert, views of this kind strongly encourage a policy of 'treatment and control'. From this perspective the agent is viewed as someone 'to be managed or handled or cured or trained', a person who we respond to in detached, instrumental terms (Strawson 1962/2013, 69, 79).[5]

C11P8 The Pessimist, as Strawson understands this view, is an incompatibilist and finds the Optimist approach not only inadequate but inhuman (Strawson 1962/2013, 71–3, 79–80). According to the Pessimist there is 'something vital' left out of the Optimist's account. This 'gap' in the Optimist's account 'can be filled only if some general metaphysical proposition is verified' (Strawson 1962/2013, 64, 81–2). Although this proposition has proved difficult to state it is generally taken to involve a kind of 'freedom' that requires the falsity of determinism (e.g. contra-causal freedom of some sort). According to some Pessimists (i.e. libertarians) we can rescue desert-involving responsibility only if a freedom of this nature is possible for human beings. If we are to remedy 'the conceptual deficiencies' of the Optimist account, then we must have 'recourse to the obscure and panicky metaphysics of libertarianism' (Strawson 1962/2013, 83).

C11P9 Strawson rejects both the Optimist and Pessimist accounts. He believes, nevertheless, that with suitable modifications and adjustments, we can arrive at a position that can 'reconcile' them (Strawson 1962/2013, 63). The shared error in the Optimist and Pessimist accounts, Strawson suggests, is that both 'over-intellectualize the facts' (Strawson 1962/2013, 81). The right place to begin is not with either utilitarian benefits or forms of contra-causal freedom but rather with the fundamental and ordinary fact of 'the very great importance that we attach to the attitudes and intentions towards us of other human beings, and the great extent to which our personal feelings and reactions depend upon, or involve, our beliefs about these attitudes and intentions' (Strawson 1962/2013, 66). Our concern with the value that we place on the attitudes and intentions of others takes the form of a general demand for good will or regard (Strawson 1962/2013, 67, 68, 74). The making of this demand is itself manifest or expressed in the form of our proneness to reactive attitudes, such as resentment and gratitude, or moral indignation, guilt, hurt feelings, and shame (Strawson 1962/2013, 66, 68, 69, 74, 79–80). It is in respect of these universal and fundamental features of human (moral) psychology that we need to locate the foundations of what is involved in holding others responsible and viewing a person as a member of the moral community (Strawson 1962/2013, 80). It is these facts about our proneness to reactive attitudes of 'moral sentiments' which serve to fill the gap in the Optimist's account.

[5] One obvious target of Strawson's criticism is Schlick (1939/1966). More recent versions of views of this kind can also be found. See, for example, Dennett (1984) which presents an 'engineering' model of responsibility (esp. 139–44, 153–69).

C11P10 Once the 'complicated web of attitudes and feelings which form an essential part of moral life as we know it' is restored to its proper (foundational) place, we are better placed to address the question concerning the implications of the thesis of determinism for moral responsibility (Strawson 1962/2013, 80). The right way to approach this problem, Strawson argues, is to ask if the truth of determinism would require us to entirely abandon our commitment to the reactive attitudes, such as praise and blame, along with the practices of rewards and punishments that rest upon them. The theory of excuses and exemptions provides the relevant framework for assessing this issue.[6] The Pessimist maintains that if determinism is true, excusing considerations will (somehow) apply to all human action or hold universally. In reply, Strawson points out that excusing considerations apply when they indicate that the agent's will was such that it does not display any malice or lack of due care and concern. In cases such as ignorance, accidents, or coercion, we see that any injury caused is not due to objectionable motivations or an absence of good will. Nothing about the thesis of determinism implies that excuses of some kind apply universally or that in these circumstances we could no longer draw relevant distinctions along these lines (i.e. between actions that do or do not manifest ill will) (Strawson 1962/2013, 68–71). Where excuses do apply the agent is still an appropriate target of reactive attitudes but we have no reason to believe that the basic demand has been violated.

C11P11 In the case of exemptions our reasoning is different. Exemptions are based on considerations that show that in some way the agent concerned is not an appropriate target of reactive attitudes. In cases of this kind we cannot reasonably expect the agent to comply with the basic demand because the agent is either psychologically abnormal or immature (Strawson 1962/2013, 68–71). The agent cannot, in these circumstances, effectively participate in the human (moral) community (Strawson 1962/2013, 72, 75–6, 80). Nothing about the thesis of determinism implies that every agent is in some relevant way abnormal or immature (e.g. mentally ill, a child). It follows from this that, contrary to the claim of the Pessimist, no relevant excusing or exempting considerations can be generalized on the basis of considerations of determinism.[7]

C11P12 Strawson's naturalist response to scepticism leads to the conclusion that 'if we sufficiently, that is *radically*, modify the views of the optimist, his view is the right one' (Strawson 1962/2013, 82, Strawson's emphasis). The radical modification is that the compatibilist claim that is at the core of the Optimist's position can be

[6] Strawson speaks of 'two kinds' of consideration that might lead us to modify or withdraw our reactive attitudes (Strawson 1962/2013, 68). The excuse/exemption contrast marks this distinction.

[7] There is, of course, a second (and stronger) line of argument that Strawson advances in response to the sceptical challenge. This is based on his claim that whatever theoretical or philosophical objections may be advanced, it would be *psychologically impossible* for us to entirely suspend or 'systematically dislodge our commitment to reactive attitudes' (Strawson 1962/2013, 71–2, 77); see also Strawson (1985, 32–3, 39). For criticism of this (distinct) line of argument see Russell (1992/2017; 2011/2017, esp. 74–7; 2017c, 98–101).

accepted only if we reject the inadequate forward-looking, utilitarian oriented concept of moral responsibility that they rely on. Let us call the Optimist's conception U-responsibility (or the U-concept). Strawson agrees with the pessimist that there is 'a lacuna in the optimist's story' and that the crucial missing element involves desert (Strawson 1962/2013, 7, 65, 79, 80–1; see also Strawson 1980, 261–2). A credible compatibilism must, therefore, secure a desert-based conception of moral responsibility. Let us call this D-responsibility (or the D-conception). The mistake that the Pessimist makes is to assume that the only way to 'plug the gap' and provide some relevant foundation for desert is on the basis of 'the panicky metaphysics of libertarianism' and related claims about 'the falsity of determinism' (Strawson 1962/2013, 64, 81, 83). The Pessimist advances a particular interpretation of D-responsibility—let us call it D*-responsibility (or the D*-conception)—that is simply incoherent and unintelligible (Strawson 1962/2013, 81; see also Strawson 1980, 264–5).

C11P13 The force of Strawson's naturalist alternative is that any relevant account of responsibility, one that is adequate to 'the facts as we know them', must begin with the value we (naturally and inescapably) place on 'the quality of others' wills towards us' (Strawson 1962/2013, 73, 81). The importance that we attach to this is manifest, and is of a (psychological) piece, with our liability or proneness to reactive attitudes or moral sentiments (Strawson 1962/2013, 80–1). Beyond this, however, these general facts about the conditions and circumstances of D-responsibility, 'neither call for, nor permit, an external "rational" justification' (Strawson 1962/2013, 81). While there remains 'endless room' for modification, redirection, criticism, and justification within this 'web of attitudes and feelings', there is no question of us being required to (or capable of) altogether discarding this psychological apparatus and the forms of human (moral) life based upon it.

C11S3 3. Responsibility, 'Morality', and Williams's Genealogy

C11P14 Bernard Williams's views about moral responsibility are intimately connected with his more general critique of what he refers to as 'the morality system'.[8] In respect of his concern with the morality system Williams is rightly regarded as a (deeply) sceptical or 'negative' thinker. A central feature of the morality system, as Williams understands it, is its particular conception of moral responsibility.[9] Much of Williams's discussion of responsibility is devoted to discrediting the account of it advanced by the morality system. A particular target of Williams's

[8] Williams (1985/2011, esp. chap. 10). For a general account of Williams's critique of 'the morality system' see Russell (2018).

[9] Along with *Shame and Necessity* and the papers mentioned in note 2 above, see also Williams (1995b, 575–8). See also Williams's remarks at (1985/2011, 41–4, 216–18). For an overview of Williams's views on this topic see Russell (2022b); and Queloz (2022).

various sceptical arguments in this direction is the 'purified conception of blame' that morality attaches special importance to (Williams 1993/1995a, 72–4; 1985/1995, 14–19). Williams regards blame and guilt as the most 'characteristic' reactions of morality (Williams 1985/2011, 197, 215–16; 1993, 91–3; 1985/1995, 15–16). Related to this observation, Williams also suggests that morality is prone to 'binary judgements' that flatten 'the range of attitudes, both positive and negative' (Williams 1985/2011, 42–3; also 1976/1981, 38). To understand all this we need to describe the most general features of the morality system.

C11P15 The morality system is not, Williams suggests, a creation of philosophers but 'part of the outlook . . . of almost all of us' (Williams 1985/2011, 194). As such, it is embodied in our actual attitudes and practices. Although its exact nature is not easily summarized, its essential conceptual features can be described. The most fundamental of these is 'morality's' special notion of obligation (Williams 1985/2011, 7–9, 193). The obligations that morality is concerned with assume a sharp distinction between 'moral' and 'non-moral considerations' and give overriding weight to the former (Williams 1985/2011, 209, 218). These moral obligations serve as 'practical necessities' for the agent and are bound up with two other key concepts: voluntariness and blame. Moral obligations are grounded in reasons that are available to all (i.e. to 'the universal constituency') and they impose demands that attract blame and retribution when they are voluntarily violated (Williams 1985/2011, 200; 1993/1995a, 72–4). Blame carries the heavy baggage of retribution, holding that those who violate (moral) obligations *deserve* to suffer as a matter of justice (i.e. this is a requirement of a just moral order). Williams suggests that 'the most thorough representation of morality is Kant' and allows that, in this respect (i.e. retribution) utilitarianism is 'a marginal member' (Williams 1985/2011, 194, 197). Utilitarianism remains, nevertheless, 'deeply entangled with morality' (Williams 1985/1995, 17).

C11P16 With this conceptual apparatus in place, other key features of morality that Williams rejects fall into place. This includes 'the purity of morality', which holds that it must not be tainted or corrupted by 'other kinds of emotional reaction or social influences' (Williams 1985/2011, 17–18, 43, 216; see also 1993, 91–5, 158). Most importantly morality must be immune to the influence of luck. This is essential if morality is to satisfy its ideal of 'ultimate justice' (Williams 1985/2011, 43, 216–17). The requirement that agents be (somehow) able to 'transcend luck', Williams argues, 'puts too much pressure on the voluntary' (Williams 1985/2011, 215–18; 1985/1995, 16–17; 1993/1995a, 72–5; 1993/1995b, 241–2). In order to satisfy these demands, and morality's 'peculiar' conception of moral responsibility—let us call this M-responsibility (or the M-concept)—we need to further refine or 'deepen' the idea of 'the voluntary'.[10] Judged by this ideal

[10] Understood this way, M-responsibility aims to deliver *pure* desert—untainted by contingency, luck, or fate. Any form of *just* retribution needs to be grounded in this (pure) source.

standard, the mundane materials provided by intentions, choice, deliberation, and related concepts of this (psychological) kind are insufficient and 'not what we really need' (Williams 1993, 40, 67–8; 1985/1995, 8–9). The 'metaphysical fuel' required to satisfy this ideal is 'limitless freedom' or 'total control' of some kind (Williams 1985/2011, 63–5, 216; 1993, 7, 94–5, 152–4, 158; 1994, 4–5, 11–12; 1995b, 578; 2002/2009, 203). As Williams sees it, all this is entirely 'illusory' and a 'fantasy'.[11]

C11P17 The morality system, and the conception of M-responsibility that is essential to it involves, according to Williams, 'a powerful misconception of life' (Williams 1985/2011, 218). Its origins are heavily steeped in Christianity and suggest an untruthful picture of our ethical predicament (Williams 2002/2009, 203; 1993, 4, 9–12, 94–5; 1993/1995a, 72–4; 1994, 11–12).[12] All things considered, we are 'better off' without morality (Williams 1985/2011, 193; 1994, 9–10). Williams's principal method for exposing the falsity of this picture of human ethical life is through a (Nietzsche-style) genealogy, which is presented in the greatest detail in *Shame and Necessity*.[13] It is evident that there is a strong sceptical thread running through Williams's position on this subject. A prime target of this scepticism is M-responsibility and the assumptions and aspirations that are essential to it. What does not follow from this, however, is that Williams was a sceptic about responsibility *tout court*.[14]

C11P18 Williams describes genealogy as 'a narrative that tries to explain an outlook or a value by describing how it came about' (Williams 2002/2009, 210).[15] When we consider a concept or value in these terms our confidence in it may be strengthened or weakened. If the former, we may describe our genealogical reflections as being 'vindicatory'; if the latter, they are 'critical' or 'destructive' (Williams 2002/2009, 198–9, 210; 2002, 35–8; 2002/2014, 409–12; 1998, 258). The question arises, therefore, is Williams's genealogy of our concepts related to responsibility vindicatory or destructive? The answer to this question turns on what concept (or concepts) of responsibility we are concerned with. With respect to M-responsibility the answer is clear: Williams's genealogical critique aims to discredit 'responsibility' and 'blame' as morality understands them. In taking this view Williams follows the footsteps of Nietzsche (Williams 1993, 9; 1994, 4–5;

[11] The key additional item required for 'morality' to secure its ideal of ultimate justice is the (rational) 'will', understood as the essential instrument of 'total control' (Williams 1993, 36, 40, 46).

[12] Williams points out that although the terms 'moral' and 'ethical' are often used interchangeably, they have different origins and different connotations. Williams uses the term 'moral' to flag its specific associations with the 'distinctive content' of 'the morality system'. See Williams (1985/2011, 7–13).

[13] Also relevant is Williams (1993/1995a, esp. 75 n.12) and Williams (2002/2009, 198–9, 210). For an account of this aspect of Williams's methodology see Russell (2022b).

[14] There are, nevertheless, some passages that may encourage the view that he was an unqualified sceptic about responsibility: e.g. Williams (1985/1995, 6–7; 1986/2014, 264–5).

[15] And see, more generally, Williams (2002, chap. 2).

1993/1995a, 72–5).[16] The target here is not, as Williams points out, 'a universal human phenomenon but a particular historical formation' (Williams 2002, 38).[17]

C11P19 There is, nevertheless, another side to Williams's genealogical critique of responsibility that is *vindicatory*, not destructive. This non-sceptical side of his genealogical narrative relies heavily on reflections on 'the Greeks' and tragedy. When we look to the Greeks, we find that they lacked the distinctive conceptual apparatus and aims of 'morality'. But this does not mean that they lacked any conception of responsibility. Nor does it imply, contrary to what the 'progressivist' account suggests, that their way of interpreting it was far removed from our own (modern, Western) view (Williams 1993, chap. 1; 1994, 11–12; 2002/2009, 203). What they share with us are the same essential psychological materials or 'elements' required for human ethical life, including intention, belief, and desire (Williams 1993, 33–4, 55, 67–8, 152). These 'universal materials' and shared elements are not interpreted in the same way in all cultures and societies but we should not suppose that there is one 'correct' interpretation or concept of responsibility (Williams 1993, 55–6). In this way, what we learn from the Greeks, Williams argues, is not only that our own conception of M-responsibility is not self-evidently superior, but that in important respects it is actually in much worse condition and much less truthful about human ethical life.[18] What follows from this is that while Williams was a sceptic about M-responsibility, he was not a sceptic about responsibility in more general terms—it is only our 'local' (modern, Western) conception that he calls into question.[19]

C11P20 It might be tempting to present the split between the destructive and vindicatory dimensions of Williams's genealogy in terms of the divide between libertarianism and compatibilism. It is certainly true that the aspirations of libertarian metaphysics to secure some form of 'ultimate' agency or 'limitless freedom' is motivated by the concerns of morality (Williams 1985/2011, 63–5, 196–8; 1976/1981, 20–1; 1994, 4–5; 1985/1995, 6–7, 17; 1993/1995a, 72; 1993, 66–8, 152, 158). It is also true that in rejecting M-responsibility Williams is rejecting libertarian understandings of moral responsibility, much as Strawson rejects D*-responsibility. It is not true, however, that his critical genealogy is directed exclusively against libertarianism and its metaphysically extravagant claims. On the contrary, as Williams makes clear, most compatibilists are also 'wedded' to M-responsibility (Williams 1985/1995, 7, 19; 1995b, 578). The question arises, therefore, what is the

[16] On the Williams–Nietzsche relationship see Clark (2001), and (the contrasting views of) Leiter (2022).

[17] And see, more generally, Williams (1993, chap. 1).

[18] This aspect of Williams's genealogical critique is discussed in more detail in Russell (2022b).

[19] Among the universal materials of responsibility that Williams identifies are reactive attitudes (Williams 1985/2011, 41–4). The point that Williams would emphasize, in relation to reactive attitudes, is that they vary a great deal, depending on our particular ethical culture. The tendency of 'morality' is to reduce and impoverish the available range of such reactions, with a heavy emphasis on 'blame' and 'guilt' (Williams 1985/2011, 197, 212; 1993, chap. 4).

significance of Williams's genealogical critique of M-responsibility for Strawson's naturalistic account of D-responsibility?

C11S4

4. The Basic Opposition

C11P21 It is clear that if Williams's critique of M-responsibility was targeted only against (libertarian) D*-responsibility then there would be no conflict between his critique and Strawson's naturalism, since Strawson also rejects D*-responsibility. However, as we have noted, Williams argues that there are many compatibilists who are comfortable members of the M-responsibility family. Given this, it is possible to reject D*-responsibility without rejecting M-responsibility. With regard to Strawson's naturalism, we need to ask if he takes his naturalistic defence of D-responsibility (detached from 'the panicky metaphysics of libertarianism'), as still satisfying the aims and assumptions of morality and M-responsibility? If that is the case, then there would be a direct opposition between the views of Strawson and Williams (despite their shared scepticism about D*-responsibility).

C11P22 Is there any evidence that Strawson's naturalist arguments should be read as supportive of M-responsibility? One reason for reading Strawson this way is that this is how some of his most prominent followers have presented and advanced his views. A notable example of this is found in R. Jay Wallace's *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments* (1994). In this work Wallace defends and elaborates on a (neo-Strawsonian) naturalist account of moral responsibility, one that combines a Strawsonian account of holding responsible with a Kantian theory of moral agency (or rational self-control). Drawing on materials found in 'Freedom and Resentment', Wallace defends a 'narrower' interpretation of moral responsibility, where 'the basic stance of holding someone morally responsible involves a susceptibility to reactive attitudes [i.e. negative reactive attitudes such as resentment, indignation and guilt] if the person breaches moral obligations we accept' (Wallace 1994, 66; see also 29–33). Wallace goes on to point out, rightly, that his (narrower) construal of the Strawsonian view is consistent with the essentials of the 'morality system' and its (distinctive) understanding of M-responsibility (Wallace 1994, 39–40, 64–6). Where Wallace diverges from Strawson, apart from his narrower interpretation of reactive attitudes, is that he rejects the suggestion that M-responsibility (as he presents it) is a universal or 'inescapable' feature of human nature or society.[20] It is, Wallace suggests, 'at least conceivable that there might be cultures whose members do not have the stance of holding people to expectations in their repertoire' (Wallace 1994, 38–9, 64–5).[21]

[20] See Strawson (1962/2013, 71–3, 81; 1985, 32–39, 41).

[21] This is not, of course, a minor deviation from the original Strawsonian programme. Suffice it to say that if we assume, with Wallace, that the Strawsonian programme should be (narrowly) construed

C11P23 On the sort of 'modified reading' of Strawson that Wallace proposes, Strawson's concept of D-responsibility more or less converges with M-responsibility. More generally, Strawson's arguments are understood to be drawing on and defending the morality system by placing its (distinct) conception of moral responsibility on naturalistic foundations. How credible is this reading of Strawson?[22] There is certainly much in Strawson's discussion that lends itself to this interpretation. An important feature of Strawson's system is the emphasis that he places on our concerns with 'quality of will' (Strawson 1962/2013, 65, 68, 73, 80). An agent's quality of will is assessed in relation to the relevant 'moral demands' and 'obligations' that they are subject to and expected to comply with (Strawson 1962/2013, 74; see also 1961/1974, 30–3, 35–8). As Strawson sees it, any functioning human society requires a system of 'socially sanctioned' demands or rules such that 'the generality of those subject to moral demands must genuinely recognize some obligations under the system of demands' (Strawson 1961/1974, 36–7, Strawson's emphasis).[23] Consistent with the orientation of M-responsibility, Strawson places heavy emphasis on 'negative' moral emotions, such as blame, moral condemnation, indignation, and guilt (Strawson 1962/2013, 63, 64, 65, 74, 79, 80–1). He also ties these (negative) moral emotions to our retributive dispositions and propensities. Punishment and our willingness to 'acquiesce' to the suffering of the offender are, Strawson maintains, 'all of a piece with this whole range of attitudes' (Strawson 1962/2013, 80). Clearly, then, on this account responsibility and retribution are tightly woven together and part of our natural, universal human psychology.

C11P24 Perhaps the most striking evidence that Strawson does not share Williams's sceptical attitude with regard to M-responsibility is that he expresses few if any doubts about the conceptual apparatus involved, much less shows any general discomfort with our 'ordinary' moral concepts and practices. Strawson does express doubts about D*-responsibility and accepts that notions of this kind may 'infect' our 'ordinary concept'. To this extent, he allows that confusions of this kind may have 'naturally or historically' gathered around our ordinary concept (Strawson 1980, 265). He insists, nevertheless, that 'the lineaments of such a concept . . . [should] be drawn exclusively from its use, from our ordinary *practice*' (Strawson 1980, 265, Strawson's emphasis). This concept, which is built

in terms of M-responsibility, and we also accept, with Wallace (and Williams), that M-responsibility is a local, contingent cultural achievement, then key elements of the original Strawsonian programme collapse. For a more detailed discussion of this see Russell (2013/2017).

[22] As I explain below, even if this a reasonable *interpretation*, it still may not be the best way to advance or develop Strawson's arguments from a *critical* perspective. It may be that the best way to advance Strawson's naturalistic programme is to move it in the *opposite* direction—i.e. *away* from the morality system.

[23] Strawson acknowledges that the specific demands in question may well vary from one community to another. Such variation, however, should not be exaggerated. 'It is important to recognize', he says, 'that certain human interests are so fundamental and so general that they must be acknowledged in some form and to some degree in any conceivable moral community'.

around the 'complicated web of attitudes and feelings' that he describes, forms 'an essential part of moral life as we know it' (Strawson 1962/2013, 80). Understood this way, our 'ordinary concept' is not only unproblematic, it is indispensable to human existence. All this suggests that Strawson's arguments are not unfriendly to 'the morality system' and M-responsibility. If this is correct, then Strawson's naturalistic vindication of D-responsibility may be interpreted as a vindication of M-responsibility, unencumbered by the obscure and incoherent metaphysical baggage of D*-responsibility. Clearly, however, this reading would return us to a direct *opposition* between Strawson and Williams on this subject.

C11S5

5. The Case for Reconciliation

C11P25 While there is some basis for reading Strawson as a proponent of 'morality', there are several considerations that tell against it.

C11P26 (1) Consider, first, the issue of freedom. In 'Freedom and Resentment' Strawson says very little about the problem of freedom as it concerns moral responsibility. Although he makes a few passing remarks about it the focus of his attention lies elsewhere, with his account of the reactive attitudes and excusing considerations.[24] Nor does he attach much importance to the debate about 'alternate possibilities' or the requirement that the responsible agent 'could have acted otherwise', even though this is a topic that has dominated much of the debate. To the extent that Strawson has anything to say about this matter, he suggests that it can be easily interpreted within the framework of various excusing considerations of a more particular kind, unrelated to determinism.[25] Beyond this, Strawson also makes no effort to provide for forms of 'self-creation' of any kind.[26] Strawson, like Williams, is entirely satisfied with the mundane, familiar materials of human agency

[24] For Strawson's remarks relating to freedom in 'Freedom and Resentment' (1962/2013, 64, 65, 78, 81; also 1985, 32, 40–1; 1992, 133–42). See also Strawson (1962/2013, 80).

[25] This response is implicit in his (cursory) remarks in 'Freedom and Resentment' (1962/2013, 68). In his later writings, coming after 'Freedom and Resentment', Strawson does say a bit more about this issue in the context of responding to several of his critics. Ayer argues, for example, that the thesis of determinism implies that no agent could have acted otherwise and that this implies that agents lack the sort of freedom required for desert (Ayer 1980, 6–9; Strawson 1980, 261–2). Strawson's basic reply to this line of criticism is to deny that the ordinary or common moral requirement that an agent could have acted otherwise, concerning '*certain specific kinds of natural impediments*', is equivalent to a more general requirement concerning the absence of sufficient natural impediments '*of any kind whatsoever*' (Strawson 1983/2011, 150; 1992, 136–7). In general, Strawson aims to *deflate* this whole issue, while adopting a familiar (classical) compatibilist line on it. For a helpful analysis of Strawson's later comments on this issue, including interesting criticism coming from Rajendra Prasad (1995), see De Mesel (2022).

[26] Strawson's lack of concern with this issue contrasts sharply not only with libertarians (who aim to 'deepen' moral freedom in these terms) but also with both sceptics and other compatibilists. See, e.g., Dennett (1984, chap. 4) and G. Strawson (1994/2013).

and moral psychology, such as belief, desire, intention, and choice. With regard to familiar incompatibilist (i.e. 'Pessimist') concerns about 'conditioning' and 'manipulation', Strawson is casually dismissive of sceptical objections developed along these lines. 'We can', he says, 'cheerfully acknowledge that conditioning by reinforcement and its contrary is, and always has been, in full operation upon us anyway; though not, mercifully, under the direction of omnipotent authority'.[27] None of this is what we should expect from someone who aims to defend a conception of M-responsibility. It suggests that Strawson believes that D-responsibility need *not* meet the standards of morality and M-responsibility. Contrary to Ayer and others, Strawson is arguing that (moral) desert should not be interpreted in terms of M-responsibility and the assumptions and aspirations that it rests on—not the least because this only encourages the 'ultimately unintelligible' D*-conceptions, which then leads on to undiluted scepticism (Strawson 1980, 264–5; 1992, 133; 1998, 261).

C11P27 (2) Closely related to Strawson's lack of interest in 'refining' or 'deepening' our concept of freedom is his attitude to the issue of moral luck and an agent's history. In 'Freedom and Resentment' he does mention the problem of an agent's 'formative circumstances', which may be unfortunate. The relevance of this, according to Strawson, is limited to the way in which it may indicate that the agent's ability to effectively participate in the moral community is somehow damaged or impaired (i.e. on analogy with cases of mental illness or immaturity) (Strawson 1962/2013, 66–7). That is to say, agential history (e.g. childhood deprivation) serves as an exempting condition only in so far as it provides evidence of impaired moral competence.[28] Being determined is not, by itself, a relevant exempting consideration.

C11P28 In *Scepticism and Naturalism* Strawson mentions Thomas Nagel's (admirable) paper 'Moral Luck' and its concluding worry that if we see agents and their actions as simply part of the natural causal order 'then the veil of illusion cast over them by moral attitudes and reactions must, or should, slip away' (Strawson 1985, 32). This sort of (Pessimistic) worry encourages theories of self-determination (i.e. D* views) that are not only unintelligible, they are, Strawson claims, misguided because they incorrectly assume that we can be 'reasoned out' of our moral reactive attitudes by sceptical reflections of this kind. At no point, however, does Strawson engage with the sort of specific worries about luck that Nagel mentions, relating to the limits on our forms of self-control or the circumstances of (moral) choice that we may confront in life. Those who are committed to M-responsibility cannot be so easily satisfied with a response that simply *ignores*

[27] Strawson (1980, 264). Contrast Ayer's objection to Strawson's position: 'let us suppose that a theory of conditioning were developed . . .' (Ayer 1980, 9). See also Strawson's (unconcerned) remarks concerning the suggestion 'that a multitude of influences in the agent's past . . . made the agent just what he currently is' (Strawson 1998, 261).

[28] Wallace pursues and further develops this line of reasoning in *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments* (1994, 166, 214, 231–5).

the concerns being raised.[29] The general stance that Strawson takes with respect to issues about luck and fate (or agential history) is that sceptical concerns of this kind are a clear case of philosophical extravagance and excessive over-intellectualization of moral life and practice. Our actual practices, Strawson maintains, avoid all this and we should not attempt to cater to it (Strawson 1980, 265).

C11P29 (3) For the morality system, in its purest Kantian form, the relationship between blame and retribution is tight. Blame has 'positive' retributive force, whereby justified blame implies an *obligation* to punish the wrongdoer.[30] On this view, *justice* demands that those who violate their obligations receive a due measure of retribution (i.e. imposed suffering or pain of some kind). Strawson shows no inclination to endorse any such view. Although Strawson insists that justified punishment needs to be deserved and properly supported by (backward-looking) considerations relating to the (intentional) violation of moral norms, he also emphasizes the importance of 'social utility' as a check or constraint on such practices (Strawson 1962/2013, 80).[31] Strawson in no way endorses any form of 'positive' or 'pure' retributivism on the basis of his naturalistic arguments (e.g. in contrast with Mackie). Clearly, then, while D-responsibility, as Strawson presents it, denies that justified punishment can be understood 'in terms of social utility alone' (i.e. contrary to U-conceptions), there is no evidence that he accepts principles of positive retribution of the sort associated with 'morality' and M-responsibility.

C11P30 (4) In the closing paragraphs of 'Freedom and Resentment' Strawson turns his attention to the relevance of moral variation and relativism for his account of the reactive attitudes. He begins by noting that, with regard to the 'network of human attitudes' which he has been describing, there is much greater 'historical and anthropological awareness of the great variety of forms which [they] may take at different times and in different cultures'. He continues:

C11P31 > This makes one rightly chary of claiming as essential features of the concept of morality in general, forms of these attitudes which may have a local and temporary prominence. No doubt to some extent my own descriptions of

[29] This is true not only of Nagel but is also evident in Watson's (mostly sympathetic) discussion of Strawson's views (Watson, 1987/2013).

[30] A clear example of M-responsibility understood this way is presented in G. Strawson (1994/2013). See, in particular, his account of the relationship between 'true moral responsibility' and justified punishment as it concerns 'the story of heaven and hell' (366–7). A similar view is presented by J. L. Mackie (1982/1985). Mackie argues that 'the principle of positive retributivism' or 'retaliation' is essential to our reactive attitudes and ordinary moral thinking. According to Mackie, we should not aim to justify this connection between our reactive attitudes and positive retribution but rather *explain* it in biological, evolutionary terms.

[31] It may be argued that Strawson's (brief) views concerning punishment and retribution are suggestive of a 'mixed' or teleological-retributivist view, as developed and articulated by Hart (1959/1968). (There are some strong affinities between Hart's and Strawson's views relating to responsibility and punishment, especially as this relates to their shared aim of preserving a robust role for the concept of desert.)

> human attitudes have reflected local and temporary features of our own culture. But an awareness of variety of forms should not prevent us from acknowledging also that in the absence of *any* forms of these attitudes it is doubtful whether *we* should have any thing that we could find intelligible as a system of human relationships, as human society.
>
> (Strawson 1962/2013, 82, Strawson's emphasis)

The fundamental point that Strawson is insisting on here is that underneath the considerable diversity and variations of forms of moral life there remains something constant and universal that unifies them. Any functioning human society requires reactive attitudes, in *some* form or other, to support and sustain the moral norms and expectations that bind that community together (Strawson 1985, 41, 46–7). While we should not assume that our own (local) conceptions are universal, we should not conclude from this that there are no relevant universal or constant features for us to identify and describe.

How does Strawson's concession regarding the limits of his own descriptions and interpretation of the reactive attitudes relate to 'morality' and M-responsibility? From the genealogical perspective, Strawson's remarks serve to show that the 'local and temporary features of our culture' take the particular form of 'morality' and its accompanying view of 'responsibility' and 'blame'. Strawson's description of our reactive attitudes no doubt reflects these 'local' prejudices—but this *particular form* of moral life is not what he is concerned to secure against sceptical critique. His fundamental concerns lie deeper than this, with the claim that any recognizable, intelligible form of human ethical life still requires *some form* of these attitudes, even if they take a different form than 'morality' suggests.

Read this way, Strawson's naturalism can allow for a considerable degree of pluralism about how we might interpret the concept of responsibility (i.e. consistent with Williams's observations). It is not so liberal, however, as to allow for the *complete absence* of reactive attitudes in human life (e.g. as advocated by U-conceptions). According to this reading, Strawson does not have any ambition to vindicate (or discredit) M-responsibility by means of his naturalistic arguments. His naturalistic arguments are targeted against the sceptic about D-responsibility. On the broader reading, therefore, it is essential that these targets be distinguished, since it is possible to reject M-responsibility without rejecting D-responsibility (as we find in Williams's account).

Clearly the above considerations suggest a very different understanding of the Strawson–Williams relationship on this subject. Granted that Strawson's naturalistic arguments do not aim to vindicate M-responsibility but only D-responsibility, more broadly understood, there is no direct opposition or conflict between their views. Both reject U-responsibility as an inadequate account of moral responsibility on the ground that they fail to capture our universal and essential concern with desert (as explained in terms of backward-looking

considerations and the emotional responses that this involves). Both also reject D*-responsibility as an incoherent and unintelligible effort to capture the relevant features of desert that we are concerned with. From Williams's genealogical perspective, Strawson is still not sceptical *enough* (i.e. in relation to M-responsibility). This gap between them does not, however, discredit Strawson's core naturalistic claims understood in broad terms. When Strawson is read in broad terms his arguments serve neither to vindicate nor discredit M-responsibility. While he may present the case for D-responsibility in terms that draw on the conceptual apparatus of 'morality'—consistent with 'local and temporary features of our own culture'—it is not his concern to show that D-responsibility must take this particular form or satisfy its assumptions and aspirations.

C11S6

6. The Limits of Reconciliation

C11P37 It is evident that there are two quite different ways of reading Strawson's 'Freedom and Resentment', depending on how we understand the relationship between D-responsibility and M-responsibility in this context. On the narrow understanding, Strawson's aim to secure D-responsibility involves defeating scepticism about M-responsibility (i.e. D-responsibility and M-responsibility are not distinguished). Strawson is read as employing the psychological materials provided by his naturalistic descriptions in a way that will satisfy the aims and assumptions of M-responsibility within compatibilist constraints (i.e. without falling back on D*-conceptions). Followers of Strawson, such as Wallace, have further developed and advanced this way of defending his naturalistic programme.

C11P38 The alternative way of reading 'Freedom and Resentment' accepts that he is trying to provide an account of moral responsibility that falls between the inadequate account of U-responsibility and the incoherent account of D*-responsibility but rejects the (narrow) suggestion that this should be understood in terms of accepting or endorsing the various assumptions and aspirations of M-responsibility. On the broader reading, Strawson's naturalist argument may be formulated and presented in terms of the conceptual apparatus of 'morality' but he (explicitly) allows for variations or differences in cultural forms of reactive attitudes that do not conform to the model of M-responsibility. Strawson's broad naturalism, uncoupled from M-responsibility, is entirely consistent with the naturalistic presuppositions of Williams's *vindicatory* genealogy of moral responsibility.

C11P39 Although the broad interpretation certainly brings Strawson and Williams closer together on this subject, the possibilities for a complete 'reconciliation' should not be exaggerated. There remain substantial points of divergence, even on the broad account of Strawson's naturalism. In the first place, as already emphasized, although the broad interpretation does not take Strawson to be employing

naturalistic arguments in defence of M-responsibility, it does not take him to be a sceptic about M-responsibility either. This is an important difference, since scepticism about 'morality' and M-responsibility is central to the negative aspect of Williams's genealogical account. For Williams there is no prospect of sustaining M-responsibility once its 'illusions' and 'fantasies' are exposed through genealogical reflections and observations. This point of divergence is connected to two other significant differences between Strawson and Williams on the issue of moral responsibility.

C11P40 One obvious feature of Strawson's discussion of this issue is that he regards his naturalistic account of responsibility as being reliably descriptive of our (current) 'ordinary practice' (Strawson 1980, 265). His account is not intended to be in any way 'revisionary'. This way of presenting his views in 'Freedom and Resentment' reflects his preference for 'descriptive' over 'revisionary' metaphysics. Strawson first introduced this distinction in *Individuals*, published three years before 'Freedom and Resentment'.[32] Descriptive metaphysics, he says, 'is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world, revisionary metaphysics is concerned to produce a better structure' (Strawson 1959, 9). Unlike its revisionary counterpart, descriptive metaphysics does not aim to produce conceptual change. There is 'a massive core of human thinking which has no history . . . there are categories and concepts which, in their most fundamental character, change not at all' (Strawson 1959, 10). It is this same 'descriptive' orientation that informs 'Freedom and Resentment'. Strawson's naturalism aims to uncover and reveal the essential, universal features of our human psychology and conceptual repertoire as manifest in our attitudes and practices related to moral responsibility. Although there are 'local and temporary' variations in our moral sentiments and reactive attitudes, the existence and influence of some form of these attitudes, Strawson argues, 'remains relatively constant' (Strawson 1962/2013, 82; 1985, 47–9; 1980, 265). The variation and genealogy of the particular concepts involved is no part of his concern—even less is any effort to revise or reform our current (or local) ways of thinking about ethical life.

C11P41 Williams accepts that there are 'universal and unifying' features to be found in any conception of moral responsibility (*qua* D-responsibility) and also accepts that reactive attitudes of some kind are essential to this (Williams 1985/2011, 40–4; 1993, 55–6). This is not, however, the focus of his own concerns and interest. On the contrary, it is precisely cultural variation and genealogy—especially as this relates to 'morality' and M-responsibility—that he is mainly concerned to explain and describe. His negative genealogy, as targeted against

[32] Although Williams never directly engages with Strawson on the issue of moral responsibility, he did publish a lengthy review of Strawson's *Individuals*. Williams's remarks concerning Strawson's views on 'descriptive metaphysics' are brief, but he describes the questions raised as of 'great importance' (Williams 1961, 310).

'morality' and M-responsibility, has two especially important tasks. The first is that it makes clear that 'morality' and its associated conceptions of responsibility and blame, although deeply embedded in our current (modern) forms of ethical thought and practice, have no claim to being universal or inescapable features of human ethical life.[33] Second, when we compare our own views to alternative conceptions and practices, as presented in history and literature (e.g. via the Greeks), we come to recognize that much of our own outlook is untruthful and based on illusion and self-deception (Williams 1993, chap. 1). Taken together, these two components of Williams's negative genealogy serve to discredit any *naturalistic* defence of M-responsibility (i.e. developed along narrow lines).[34]

C11P42 Williams, in contrast with Strawson, emphasizes that the compatibilism that he defends in no way 'leaves everything more or less where it was' (Williams 1985/1995, 19–20; 1986/2014, 264–5; 1995b, 578).[35] In particular, once we abandon the illusions and ideals attached to M-responsibility we will 'need to recast our ethical conceptions' (Williams 1985/1995, 19). We should not expect, in light of these genealogical reflections and observations, that we will be in any position 'to keep the morality system in adequate business' (Williams 1985/1995, 19). It is evident, therefore, that in contrast with Strawson's neo-Wittgensteinian 'quietism', Williams is fully committed to a 'revisionary' programme. There is nothing conservative or complacent about Williams's attitude to our existing (modern) ethical ideas. In this his concerns contrast sharply with Strawson's general comfort with the current status quo.[36]

C11P43 Along with what we may describe as Strawson's 'conservative bias', there is an accompanying commitment to vindicating 'optimism' (Strawson 1962/2013, 82). The basis for Strawson's optimism is that the naturalist approach that he advocates serves to defeat the threat of scepticism about moral responsibility. On the narrow interpretation, defeating scepticism about D-responsibility involves defeating scepticism about M-responsibility (since, on this view, there is no distinction to be drawn between them). On the broad interpretation, however, defeating scepticism about D-responsibility does not imply or require defeating scepticism about M-responsibility. According to the broad view, D-responsibility

[33] As already noted, this is a genealogical point that even some adherents of 'morality' accept (e.g. Wallace).

[34] In general, Williams's negative genealogy is developed with a view to exposing the forms of illusion and self-deception that 'morality' and 'progressivism' encourages. This is why, following Nietzsche, he describes his genealogical investigations as 'untimely' (Williams 1993, 4).

[35] See also Williams's remarks in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985/2011, 166, 177), and 'Making Ends Meet' (1986, 207).

[36] In conversation with Bryan Magee, Strawson denies being 'conservative' in any sense that implies 'resistance to change' (Magee 1971, 158–9). What he is resistant to, he says, is 'ineffective philosophical dreaming'. However, while it is true that Strawson allows for the possibility of revision and criticism *internal* to 'the web of attitudes and feelings' he is describing, he expresses no dissatisfaction with our existing notions and practices—much less does he challenge or question them. It is here that the contrast with Williams is especially sharp and clear.

without M-responsibility still supports optimism. The relevant source of pessimistic concern about scepticism, Strawson maintains, rests with its bleak and inhuman implications leading to a universal 'objective stance'. All this is still avoided on the D-conception, even if the requirements of M-responsibility are not satisfied. All that is lost, according to Strawson, is the obscure and unintelligible notion of 'ultimate freedom' (e.g. as associated with D* conceptions), which is not anything that we have reason to care about or value (Strawson 1980, 265).

C11P44 Williams does not share or endorse any sort of unqualified 'optimistic' stance with respect to D-responsibility of the kind that his own vindicatory genealogy describes. On the contrary, there are important and significant sources of 'pessimism' that Williams is concerned with and identifies. When our concept of responsibility dispenses with the illusions and fantasies that 'morality' encourages, we need to face or acknowledge some troubling and disturbing truths about the human ethical predicament—in particular, our exposure to luck and fate. These are truths that 'morality' seeks to deny or conceal from us. Contrary to the optimistic and complacent tone of Strawson's naturalistic arguments in 'Freedom and Resentment', defeating scepticism (*qua* D-responsibility) does not serve to deliver undiluted 'good news'.[37] One of the benefits of turning back to the Greeks and ancient tragedy—as Williams's genealogical methods suggest we should do—is that we will find that they were more *truthful* about such matters and less disposed to self-deception.

C11P45 For Williams it is essential that we carefully distinguish D-responsibility from M-responsibility, since he is sceptical about the latter but not the former. Strawson's naturalism, as we have noted, leaves it unclear how he understands the relationship between these two (distinct) concepts of responsibility. One reason that this matters, as Williams emphasizes throughout his writings on this subject, is that 'morality' and M-responsibility carry 'optimistic' baggage that is not only untruthful but that we are better off without. Separating D-responsibility and M- responsibility is not just a matter of getting rid of 'the panicky metaphysics of libertarianism', since many (most) compatibilists also aspire to satisfy the assumptions and aspirations of 'morality'.[38] What we need, Williams argues, is a compatibilism that does not aim to deliver the optimistic good news' that the morality system is committed to.

C11P46 When we reflect truthfully on our situation and predicament as human agents in this world we must acknowledge, with the Greek tragedians, that significant forms of fate and luck are intertwined with the exercise of human (moral) agency. There are, for example, significant limits to our powers or abilities to shape our

[37] 'Philosophy, and in particular moral philosophy, is still deeply attached to giving good news' (Williams 1996/2006, 49).

[38] One notable exception to this is Hume who, as Williams points out, shows 'striking resistance to some central tenets of . . . "morality"' (Williams 1985/1995, 20 n.12). For a more detailed examination of Hume's compatibilist views in relation to this matter see Russell (1995, esp. chaps. 6–9).

own motivations and character. We are certainly not 'self-creators' in these (ultimate or absolute) terms. There are similar limits to our control over the (specific) ethical choices that we must face and confront. Nor do we have complete control over the consequences that may flow from our action even when these consequences may have obvious, and perhaps dramatic, ethical significance. There is, in short, no perfect or ideal equality of moral opportunity. The aspiration to 'ultimate' or 'final' control over the particular trajectories that our ethical lives may take is—however attractive or consoling as a self-image—still a delusion. We cannot, therefore, hope to secure an ethical world that is so 'pure' and 'untainted' by contingency and luck that we preserve absolute fairness all the way down.[39]

C11P47 The form of D-responsibility that Williams describes rejects or dispenses with these optimistic assumptions and aspirations of morality. This has, however, pessimistic implications of a distinct kind. The source of pessimism operating here is not scepticism about (moral) responsibility but, on the contrary, an acceptance that responsible moral agency is vulnerable to luck, contingency, and the limits of control. Strawson, unlike Williams, shows no obvious sign of being troubled or disturbed by pessimistic reflections of this kind. Along with his conservative bias he retains an easy optimism which the broad interpretation of D-responsibility cannot support or sustain.[40]

C11S7

7. The Limits of Strawson's Naturalism

C11P48 We now have before us two quite different interpretations of Strawson's core intentions in 'Freedom and Resentment'. Which of them is the most accurate? Given the (sparse) evidence available, we can conclude only that Strawson's position in 'Freedom and Resentment' is *indeterminate* between these two readings, as a good case can be made for each of them. What really matters here, however, is not which way we interpret Strawson but rather what the *critical significance* of these two interpretations comes to. Let us consider, first, the narrow account. If Strawson is advancing his naturalistic arguments with a view to defeating or discrediting scepticism about M-responsibility then, for reasons already mentioned, his project fails. It fails, most importantly, because it does not significantly engage with or even address concerns about luck, history and fate—as Watson (1987/2013) and others have pointed out.[41] Nor is it obvious that Strawson's naturalistic arguments can be modified or expanded in a way that

[39] Perhaps the most influential contemporary statement of this outlook (i.e. the perspective of 'morality') is presented in Nagel (1976/2013).

[40] For an exploration of the pessimistic implications of this conception of D-responsibility, separated from optimistic aspirations of M-responsibility, see Russell (2000/2017, 2008/2017, 2017a, 2022a).

[41] This line of criticism is, of course, central to Williams's genealogical critique.

convincingly meets these (sceptical) objections.[42] It may be argued, on this basis, that the broad account offers us a more plausible way of reading Strawson's naturalistic arguments.

C11P49 The broad account, as we have noted, encounters its own difficulties. When we abandon M-responsibility and embrace a conception of D-responsibility that is uncoupled from M-responsibility, this will not, as Williams points out, 'leave everything where it was'. Moreover, accepting a conception of D-responsibility detached from the metaphysical and conceptual baggage of M-responsibility cannot secure any sort of unqualified optimism. Conceptions of D-responsibility, so understood, bring with them reflections about the limits of human agency and the way in which fate and luck are infused into human ethical life. Strawson's presentation of his naturalist arguments suggests that he aims to dismiss or minimize (or simply ignore) the significance of all this.[43]

C11P50 Perhaps the most important limitation to be found in the central argument of Strawson's 'Freedom and Resentment' concerns its basic understanding of the free will problem itself. Here the contrast with Williams is, perhaps, especially significant. Strawson presents his case for naturalism about moral responsibility squarely within the framework of the opposition between compatibilists and incompatibilists (i.e. Optimists and Pessimists). This is the crucial philosophical fault line that he is concerned with. In respect of this, although he seeks some sort of 'reconciliation' between the two sides, he comes down decisively on the side of compatibilism (i.e. the side of 'Optimism' suitably modified). In taking this stance, however, Strawson's specific commitments in relation to 'the morality system' remain, as we noted, undecided or indeterminate. This leaves the crucial question unanswered: Does Strawson's understanding of our 'ordinary concept' of moral responsibility concern M-responsibility or not? Until these matters are clarified and explained, it remains unclear what the actual *significance* of Strawson's proposed reconciliation comes to.

C11P51 For the genealogical account, as Williams presents it, the fundamental philosophical fault line that is relevant here falls not between compatibilism and incompatibilism, it falls between those who accept and those who reject the aims and assumptions of the morality system. This genealogical perspective

[42] The most obvious example of such a neo-Strawsonian project, as mentioned above, is Wallace's *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments* (1994). Doubts about this project are presented in Russell (2011/2017, 2013/2017).

[43] It might be argued that we are vulnerable or prone to this form of 'pessimism' only as long as we continue to harbour the (optimistic) illusion about 'absolute fairness' and 'the purity of morality'. Once freed from this illusion, the critic may argue, any lingering pessimism should evaporate. But this need not be the case. Even when such illusions are thoroughly discredited and/or shown to be incoherent, confronting the limits of human agency, and how this influences the trajectories of our ethical lives, remains a (reasonable) basis for being 'troubled' or 'disconcerted'. Although some may claim to face this situation with complete tranquillity, this (optimistic) attitude may be taken as a sign of evasion or as a failure to sufficiently reflect on our ethical predicament. On the analogy between mortality and human agency (as both concern the issue of finitude) see Russell (2000/2017, 202–4).

suggests a very different picture of the free will problem from the one that Strawson presents. There is a free will problem for us (now), according to the genealogical account, because we (moderns) are committed to the illusions and fantasies of the morality system.[44] This, as we have pointed out, is true not just of libertarians but also of compatibilists and sceptics.[45] What all these parties share is an optimistic view—fundamental to 'morality'—that ethical life can and must be pure and untainted in these terms. If this ideal cannot be met, then our ethical world will collapse in upon itself. There is no credible 'solution' to the free will problem as long as we share the faulty views and ideals of 'morality'.[46] Naturalist observations and considerations of the general kind that Strawson draws attention to may well serve as the relevant *platform* on which the free will problem as we now confront it has *arisen*. By themselves, however, the naturalist claims that Strawson advances cannot effectively describe or remove our current confusions, nor identify our (viable future) options, without the resources of genealogical reflection and historical understanding.[47]

C11P52 What is the significance of this genealogical interpretation of the free will problem for Strawson's naturalist project? A narrow reading of Strawson's arguments suggests that he does not reject the assumptions and aspirations of 'morality' and that he endorses an understanding of the free will problem in these terms (i.e. with regard to the sceptical threat to M-responsibility). If this is his project then genealogical considerations (e.g. of the kind that Williams describes) suggest that it fails. On a broader reading, Strawson is no more concerned to 'solve' the free will problem than Williams is. The fundamental point that Strawson (read this way) and Williams converge on is that we can vindicate robust forms of moral responsibility (*qua* D-responsibility) without accepting the task of defeating scepticism about M-responsibility. Nevertheless, for reasons that Williams makes clear in *Shame and Necessity* and other related contributions, when we leave behind the aims and assumptions of 'morality', with a view to making sense of our ethical lives in a more truthful manner, we (moderns) will need to 'recast our ethical conceptions', particularly as this concerns responsibility

[44] Williams employs the analogy of the problem of evil, since it is a problem 'only for those who expect the world to be good'. Similarly, 'there is a problem of free will only for those who think that the notion of the voluntary can be metaphysically deepened' (Williams 1993, 68).

[45] Even the sceptic, working within this framework, assumes that where M-responsibility is not satisfied there is no 'true' or 'genuine' responsibility. This conclusion, it may be argued, leaves the sceptic wholly complicit in the distortions and self-deceptions of 'morality'.

[46] In especially revealing remarks about his core philosophical concerns and aims, Williams suggests that they have been concentrated on making '*some* sense of the ethical as opposed to throwing out the whole thing because you can't have an idealized version of it' (Williams 2002/2009, 203). This is, in nutshell, the essence of his objection to scepticism as generated by 'morality'.

[47] The importance of historical understanding and cultural sensitivity for philosophy—particularly as it concerns ethics—is a central theme in a number of Williams's writings. See, e.g. Williams (1991/1995, 2000/2006).

and blame. This is a task that Strawsonian naturalism cannot itself help us with. For this task we need to turn to the resources of genealogy.[48]

C11S8

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