P. F. Strawson's Consequentialism_McGeer

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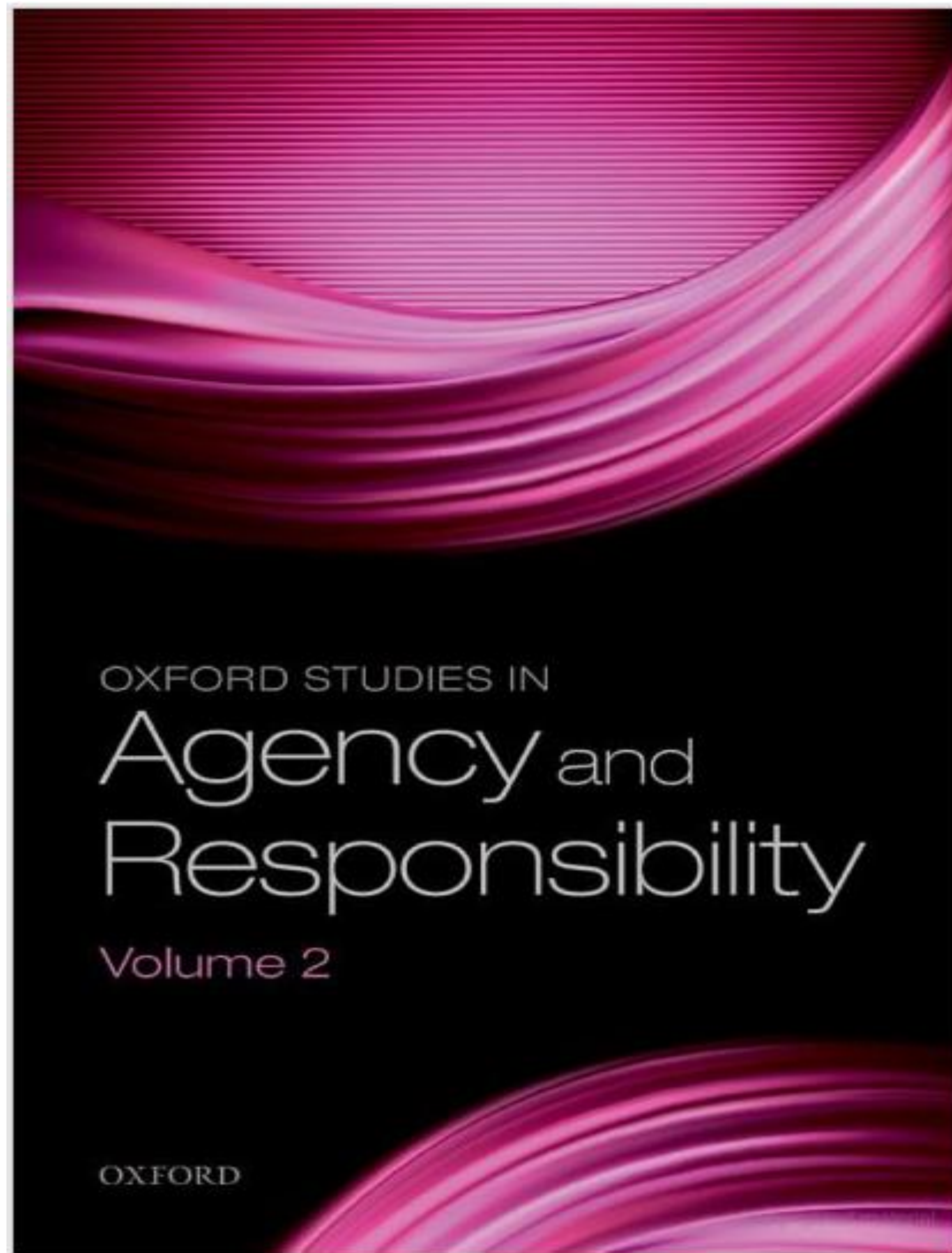

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Editors' Introduction

David Shoemaker and Neal A. Tognazzini

From the vantage point of twenty-first-century moral philosophy, it is difficult to imagine that there was ever a time when a respected philosopher could sincerely say that "talk of the moral sentiments has fallen out of favour," or a time when the only live options for addressing the problem of free will were either "obscure and panicky metaphysics" or else an appeal to "the efficacy of [praise and blame] in regulating behavior in socially desirable ways." But this sort of philosophical climate is difficult to imagine for us today for the same reason that it is difficult to imagine metaphysics without talk of possible worlds, or language without the notion of rigid designation: the influence of figures like Saul Kripke, David Lewis, and P. F. Strawson was a sort of philosophical cosmic background radiation permeating our own education. In large part due to Strawson's essay, "Freedom and Resentment" (originally published in 1962), talk of the moral sentiments is not only back in favor, but those sentiments are also widely thought to be central to an adequate understanding of moral responsibility, blame, desert, interpersonal relationships, and perhaps even morality more generally. Very few philosophical essays have had such an impact.

It thus seemed fitting, as the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of "Freedom and Resentment" arrived in 2012, to honor its impact with a conference. Hosted by the philosophy department at The College of William & Mary in September 2012, the two-day conference featured presentations by a wide variety of philosophers whose own work has been shaped and informed in some way by Strawson, and who prepared new work for the occasion on Strawson's essay or Strawsonian themes. Participants included Lucy Allais, Laura Ekstrom, John Martin Fischer, Bennett Helm, Pamela Hieronymi, Margaret Holmgren, Jeanette Kennett, Adrienne Martin, Victoria McGeer, Dana Nelkin, Paul Russell, T. M. Scanlon, David Shoemaker, Dan Speak, Galen Strawson, R. Jay Wallace, and Gary Watson. The quality of the presentations and the amount of general interest in the conference seemed to warrant finding a venue for publication, and there is no place more suitable than *Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility.*

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Seven of the ten essays collected in this special volume derive from presentations at the anniversary conference, but all ten essays are clearly indebted to Strawson's work and explore themes from his pioneering essay. Aside from a gracious and personal introduction by Galen Strawson (chapter 1), the contributions fall thematically into three rough groupings, which we have used to organize the volume. The first group comprises essays that are primarily (though of course not exclusively) interpretive, attempts to understand the details of Strawson's essay and the impact it has had (or should have had). Its influence is partly due to its rich and suggestive arguments and observations, but also undoubtedly due in part to how maddeningly difficult those arguments and observations are to pin down. Lucy Allais is surely right when she says, in her contribution to this volume, that "Freedom and Resentment" is "a really fascinating, deep, subtle, incredibly important and sometimes really quite annoying paper." The essays by Gary Watson, Lucy Allais, Victoria McGeer, and John Martin Fischer all attempt, in their own way, to help clear up some of the provocative but elusive aspects of Strawson's essay.

Watson sets the stage by homing in on (what he takes to be) the distinctive insights of Strawson's paper, and then fleshes them out in the context of more recent criticism. Allais acknowledges that Strawson's article seems at once Humean and also Kantian, and she argues in particular that reading Strawson in light of Kant's project in the first *Critique* bears considerable fruit when it comes to understanding the reactive attitudes in general, and forgiveness in particular. McGeer argues that, despite Strawson's scorn for what he calls "one-eyed utilitarianism," his project actually contains a deep consequentialist element, one that is independently attractive. And finally, Fischer provides a detailed exposition of Strawson's treatment of excuses, and mounts a spirited challenge to what he calls Strawson's (attempted) "extreme sequestration of metaphysics."

The essays in the second group, by R. Jay Wallace and Michelle Mason, "zoom out" a bit from exegetical details and critically examine one of Strawson's central contentions: that there is an intimate and perhaps constitutive connection between experiencing the reactive attitudes, on the one hand, and being involved in genuine interpersonal relationships, on the other. In his essay, Wallace considers reasons to worry about the alleged connection, and ultimately argues that appealing to a relational interpretation of moral requirements in general can help to ease the worries. Mason, on the other hand, explores the tension in Strawson's joint claims that although we can sometimes adopt the objective attitude toward others for strategic purposes, a thoroughgoing objectivity of attitude toward someone is incompatible with a genuine relationship with that person. Mason attempts

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to resolve the tension by looking carefully at the ways of relating that are put in jeopardy by adopting the objective attitude.

Finally, the contributions from Margaret Holmgren, Bennett Helm, and Andrew Eshleman all explore Strawsonian themes that go somewhat beyond the issues that Strawson himself treats in his essay. Holmgren focuses on forgiveness, and argues that unconditional forgiveness and respect serve as a more appropriate ground for our responsibility practices than do the seemingly retributive reactive attitudes of resentment and indignation. Helm focuses on trust, arguing that it is a reactive attitude of central importance and that acknowledging this fact can actually help to deepen our understanding of the nature of the reactive attitudes. And Eshleman focuses on praise and gratitude, arguing that praise is a response to reasons of a fundamentally different sort from those to which blame is sensitive. Eshleman argues that this insight, when taken together with a Strawsonian approach to discerning the conditions of responsibility, leads to a deeper understanding of the possibilities of moral agency.

Taken together, these ten essays not only represent exciting new work on agency and responsibility, but they also testify, once again, to the enduring legacy of "Freedom and Resentment." It's a rich and powerful essay, and its insights continue to resound throughout moral philosophy.

1
Freedom and the Self
Feeling and Belief

Galen Strawson

I can't think of a better tribute to P. F. Strawson's paper 'Freedom and Resentment' than this conference. I'm very glad to be part of it, and I'm most grateful to the organizers for giving me this opportunity to welcome you.

I.

Not long ago, in a review of Stephen Darwall's book *The Second-Person Standpoint* in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Philip Pettit (2007) suggested that 'Freedom and Resentment' was 'perhaps the most influential philosophical paper of the twentieth century'. That's a claim that may certainly be questioned—even after one narrows the field to analytic philosophy, narrows it again to 'practical philosophy', in the largest sense of the term, and recalls that one can't reduce influence to numbers of citations. If, however, one makes another needed distinction—between good and bad, helpful and unhelpful philosophical influence—'Freedom and Resentment' is likely to come out pretty near the top of the good list.

I leave that as a subject for debate. I remember Jerry Cohen, surveying the present-day philosophical scene and wondering cheerfully what would survive of it in a hundred years. He thought perhaps Derek Parfit's work on personal identity would survive, but he wasn't clear anything else would. I think he might plausibly have added 'Freedom and Resentment'.

I'd always thought that the paper was so-called partly as a pointed response to R. M. Hare's *Freedom and Reason*, but I looked up Hare's book the other day and realized that this can't be right, because *Freedom and Reason* was published in 1963, and 'Freedom and Resentment' was a lecture originally delivered to the British Academy in 1961. So perhaps it was the other way round.

Either way, the contrast between reason and resentment remains (even when the word 'reason' is used to mean something like 'moral reasoning in the style of R. M. Hare'), and a large part of what Strawson was trying to do in the paper, in the rather weird local ethical climate that then prevailed in Oxford, which was due largely to the presence of Hare and Stuart Hampshire, and which also hung over parts of the North American continent, was 'to keep before our minds', or rather, perhaps, to put back before our minds, 'something it is easy to forget when we are engaged in philosophy, especially in our cool, contemporary style, viz. what it is actually like to be involved in ordinary interpersonal relationships, ranging from the most intimate to the most casual' (1962: 77).

This Strawson did, to great effect. He had a strong local ally, in this enterprise, in Iris Murdoch (see e.g. Murdoch 1964, 1970). They worked entirely independently, and went about things in rather different ways, but both made crucial observations about the extent to which beliefs about the world that we take to be straightforwardly factual may be rooted in—constitutively dependent on—emotions in ways that are entirely hidden from us—at least until we reflect. Hume made a key point in Section 8 of his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 'Of Liberty and Necessity', when he wrote that belief in 'a real distinction between vice and virtue' is 'founded in the natural sentiments of the human mind and [is] not to be controlled by any philosophical theory or speculation whatsoever' (§8.35). It's particularly striking, though, when the seeming certainty of a specific belief is traced down to a specific set of emotional roots, in the way in which, in 'Freedom and Resentment', the commitment to belief in the ordinary, strong notion of free will is traced down to roots in the 'personal-reactive attitudes'. It's even more striking when the standard conception of the relation between the belief and the emotions is simply reversed, and we're told that it's not true that the emotions depend on the beliefs, because it's exactly the other way round. Such reversals are the stuff of aphorism, but aphorisms tend to decay rapidly when expanded beyond a single sentence, and it's exciting when such a reversal is sustained in the way that it is in 'Freedom and Resentment'.

II.

I intended to give a paper to this meeting, but found I didn't have one, because my views on freedom and resentment—on 'Freedom and Resentment'—hadn't significantly changed since I published *Freedom and Belief* in 1986. I'm still inclined to disagree with 'Freedom and Resentment'

on certain points, in spite of the value of the whole. So (for example) I still think that working to give up the ordinary strong belief in free will, in such a way as to resile from the natural human commitment to the personal reactive attitudes, is a possible and genuine project, even if it can be undertaken only indirectly; and I still think that such an attempt can be justified—or even forced on someone—by something like a desire to believe the truth. So I disagree with Strawson when he says that if we could choose between retaining and abandoning the reactive attitudes, 'we could choose rationally only in the light of the gains and losses to human life', and that 'the truth of falsity of a general thesis of determinism could not bear on the rationality of *this* choice' (1962: 83).

More fundamentally, perhaps, I disagree with Strawson's account of the fundamental root of our everyday belief in 'strong', radical, 'buck-stopping' free will. I still think that this belief is more deeply grounded in one's experience of one's own agency than in one's reactive attitudes to others. I think, accordingly, that a fully self-conscious rational agent engaged in action could possibly lack the interpersonal reactive attitudes and still have the sense of absolute freedom that is encountered in the experience of choice. I'm not convinced by any of the arguments that have been made, directly or indirectly—by Fichte, Hegel, many Phenomenologists, Wittgenstein, Strawson in *Individuals*, and many others—for the thesis that one can grasp oneself fully as a person or rational agent or locus of consciousness only if one also grasps others in this way.

Here differences of individual temperament, rather than rational considerations, may weigh heavily in philosophical judgement, and the route laid down by temperament may be indirect. Some philosophers may begin with an intensely individualistic conception of the human condition, of a sort that might be loosely called 'solipsistic', and then, reacting (overreacting) against their younger selves, go too far in the other direction. (Fichte and Husserl are, perhaps, examples of this.) But whatever the route, I see no reason to doubt the testimony of Ronald, 'an intelligent young autistic adult' (Hobson 1993: 3), who had a perfectly adequate sense of himself as a self-conscious, self-determining agent, as a boy, although

> I really didn't know there were people until I was seven years old. I then suddenly realized that there were people. But not like you do. I still have to remind myself that there are people. . . . I never could have a friend. I really don't know what to do with other people, really (Cohen 1980: 388).

When Lee and Hobson administered Damon and Hart's self-understanding interview to two groups of children and adolescents, an autistic group and a non-autistic mentally retarded group matched for age and verbal ability, they predicted that 'participants with autism would show a relative dearth

of . . . self-concepts . . . in their talk about themselves'. Their prediction was not borne out. Although they found a 'significant group difference in the number and quality of statements that fell into the *social* category of self-concept', they found, contrary to their expectations (but not mine), 'no group difference in the *number* of statements that fell into the psychological category'. Nor did participants with autism 'make significantly fewer references to emotional states [although] the quality of such references was restricted' (Hobson and Lee 1998: 1131, 1139). More work needs to be done on these kinds of cases, but I can see no very good reason to suppose that a sense of being free and radically self-determining in action is essentially tied to susceptibility to the essentially interpersonal reactive attitudes, or indeed to ordinarily strong awareness of moral issues, however intimately the two things are connected in most of us in everyday life (see Strawson 1986: 114–15 (2nd edition 2010: 98–9)).

On another point, I don't think that to abandon the participant reactive attitude to someone for a time, adopting instead what Strawson calls the 'objective attitude', need be to cease to treat them fully as a human being during that time. A readiness to do this can be a part—a necessary part—of recognizing, precisely, someone's humanity. The participant attitude, in other words, fully includes such temporary adoptions of the objective attitude. These are in fact special modes of the participant attitude, crucial modes whose availability is indispensable in any ordinary sustained human relationship.

Strawson can certainly acknowledge this. He grants that the personal-reactive attitude and the objective attitude are not mutually exclusive, only profoundly opposed, so it's really only a point about emphasis. In particular, he writes that

> we *can* sometimes look with something like the same [objective-attitude] eye on the behaviour of the normal and the mature. We *have* this resource and can sometimes use it: as a refuge, say, from the strains of involvement; or as an aid to policy; or simply out of intellectual curiosity. Being human, we cannot, in the normal case, do this for long, or altogether. If the strains of involvement, say, continue to be too great, then we have to do something else—like severing a relationship. But what is above all interesting is the tension there is, in us, between the participant attitude and the objective attitude. One is tempted to say: between our humanity and our intelligence. But to say this would be to distort both notions (1962: 80).

I realized yesterday that I was 8 or 9 when my father wrote 'Freedom and Resentment' and that—as a very turbulent child—I may have contributed to his appreciation of the importance of the objective attitude. The realization gave new colour to the passage in which he writes, of the participant and objective attitudes, that

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> parents and others concerned with the care and upbringing of young children cannot have to their charges either kind of attitude in a pure or unqualified form. They are dealing with creatures who are potentially and increasingly capable both of holding, and being objects of, the full range of human and moral attitudes, but are not yet truly capable of either. The treatment of such creatures . . . must therefore represent a kind of compromise (1962: 88).

III.

I'd like to say one more thing about the principal strategy of 'Freedom and Resentment' before the main programme of talks begins—where by 'the principal strategy' I mean the strategy of taking certain beliefs on the one hand, and certain natural emotional attitudes on the other hand, and questioning the everyday understanding of the relation between them. In 'Freedom and Resentment', of course, the suggestion is that the relation is one of dependence—of proper grounding, or appropriateness, something like that—and the proposal, as already remarked, is that our standard understanding of the relation gets things the wrong way round. It's not as if we can first establish that people have free will as ordinarily and strongly conceived of, when we consider them completely independently of the personal-reactive attitudes we naturally have to them, and can then explain why the personal-reactive attitudes are fully appropriate or justified by reference to the fact that people possess this property of free will quite independently of the existence of the attitudes. According to 'Freedom and Resentment', it's the other way round: the belief in metaphysically strong—heavy—free will, along with its appropriateness, is essentially grounded in the existence of personal-reactive attitudes and emotions which are fundamental to human being, and it may not have—and in any case doesn't need—any further grounding.

I think there may be another interesting case of this, which I consider in a paper called 'Episodic Ethics' (2007) under the heading of the 'Emotional Priority Thesis'. I'll sketch it briefly, because of the contrast it provides, and because it may suggest further possible applications of the general strategy of 'Freedom and Resentment'. And here you'll have to allow me to talk of 'the self' as something distinct from the human being considered as a whole; to talk, in particular, of the self as something which may be thought not to have the same persistence conditions as the whole human being. I think good reasons can be given for talking of the self as something distinct from the whole human being, but I won't go into them now. Let me instead quote one of my favourite remarks by Henry James, which is a very

good illustration of the possible difference of attitude that one may have to oneself when considering oneself as a self and when considering oneself as a whole human being. It comes from a late letter, in which, referring to one of his earlier works, James writes, somewhat facetiously, but nonetheless sincerely, that

> I think of . . . the masterpiece in question . . . as the work of quite another person than myself . . . a rich . . . relation, say, who . . . suffers me still to claim a shy fourth cousinship (1915: 562–3).

This clearly reveals the sense in which, when one thinks of oneself as a self, or as a person in the special but familiar sense in which James here uses the word 'person', one may not think that one has the same persistence (identity) conditions as those which one knows oneself to have when one considers oneself as a human being.

This is not to say that everyone feels that their persistence as a self is less robust than their persistence as a human being. Some take their existence as a stably persisting self to be as evident a fact as their possession of free will of a kind that fully justifies (and doesn't in any way depend on) emotions of resentment and gratitude and institutions of punishment and reward. For such people, the seeming fact—the felt fact—that one is a persisting self can explain—and perhaps justify—a great arc of self-concerned feelings and emotional attitudes, including feelings of intense embarrassment, resentment, remorse, guilt, responsibility, and so on. The direction of dependence seems clear: the self exists, and persists, therefore I naturally and reasonably experience these sorts of feelings and attitudes.

And yet, when we consider the complexities of conscience and moral emotion specifically as they relate to a person's past, and specifically as they are manifested in feelings of the sort just listed, I think we may again be in danger, as theorists, of getting things the wrong way round—exactly the wrong way round. It may seem to us that these feelings depend essentially on a belief in the persisting self which has some independent and fundamental grounding in some primitive fact—the primitive fact of the existence and persistence of one's self, no less. But the true dependence—priority—may run the other way. The grounds of the pricks of conscience, the 'agenbite of inwit' (the re-bite—re-morse—of conscience), the feelings of responsibility or guilt or loss of face, are ancient. I think that there is a respect in which they predate (perhaps in some prototype version) any fully explicit sense of having or being a persisting self: both phylogenetically and ontogenetically. They are to that extent independent of—prior to—any explicit sense of self, and can exist and operate without it. Rather than being essentially

dependent on belief in a persisting self, which is after all something that can exist only in creatures like ourselves that have evolved into fully fledged concept-exercising self-consciousness, they are among the deep foundations of this belief.

On this view, then, there are certain moral emotions that do not in their basic forms presuppose any explicit conception of oneself as a persisting self, although we tend to conceptualize them in ways that make it seem obvious—even analytic—that they do. In reality, things are the other way round. Independently and phylogenetically grounded feelings of guilt—vividly exhibited in some form, it seems to me, in chimpanzee behaviour—are among the many things that found and nourish belief in a persisting self. Belief in the persisting self is not the necessary ground of the feelings it seems to be the ground of. It is, rather, grounded in them—in those who have it at all. If someone says that a genuine feeling of guilt conceptually requires a fully conceptually articulated sense of self of a sort available to us but not to chimpanzees, I'll happily talk of 'proto-guilt', and maintain my position.

I say that the feeling of responsibility *can* be salient and vivid among the things that feed into belief in a persisting self, not that it always is, because I see no reason why someone shouldn't have an intense and emotionally grounded sense of himself as a persisting self and yet be frighteningly lacking in a proper sense of responsibility. So too, and conversely, a person can have a clear and robust sense of responsibility for the past doings of the human being she is, a sense of responsibility securely held in place by her awareness of others' natural conception of her as a persisting person, and her awareness of their expectations with regard to her, without in fact having any significant sense of herself as having or being a persisting self. This is how it is for me.

At this point you may want to say that to have such a sense of responsibility *just is* to have a sense of yourself as a persisting self in a sufficient sense. This is a reasonable suggestion, although I think that it's important to resist it. It's arguable, furthermore, that the thesis that the sense of self is grounded fundamentally in emotion applies quite generally, not just in the case in which someone experiences themselves as having (or being) a *persisting* self. On this view the concept or thought-element SELF or I that is so central to our lives is founded entirely on emotion, and has no other solid foundation—not even in the fact of our single embodiment. And here there is a connection to Locke's much misunderstood account of personal identity—his idea that it is 'concernment' that is fundamentally constitutive of a sense of self. On Locke's view, the only parts of your past as a persisting human subject of experience that form part of your personal identity (i.e. your present overall moral and legal accountability, your present forensic

condition) are those parts with which you still feel concerned, emotionally involved.[1]

It may be that the connection between belief in a persisting self and certain emotions isn't as tight as the connection between belief in free will and the reactive attitudes. Even so, the parallel seems clear. In the free will case, too, the interpersonal reactive attitudes clearly precede any clear and explicit formation of an ordinary strong belief in free will, both phylogenetically and ontogenetically. No doubt there are other connections of this kind that deserve further investigation.

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[1] Locke famously says that it is 'consciousness', in his special sense of the term, that 'makes personal identity'. The most crucial thing about consciousness, however, is that it is on his view both necessary and sufficient for concernment. See Strawson 2011.

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