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Blaming from Inside the Birdcage: Strawsonian Accounts of Blame and Feminist Care Ethics

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Abstract

This article notices a trend in work done by philosophers who build on P. F. Strawson's account of the reactive attitudes; it looks as though philosophers supplement Strawson with (or claim that Strawson has underlying commitments to) a more robust ethical program in order to address questions concerning the moral appropriateness of the reactive attitudes. I argue feminist care ethics can serve as a promising moral supplement to Strawson. Then, I diagnose a problem in Strawson—namely, the assumption that members of moral communities will express all three kinds of reactive attitudes (toward the self, directly toward others, and indirectly on behalf of others). Once we consider these three expressions from a feminist perspective, it becomes clear that while some may express indignation on behalf of others and guilt toward themselves, many will not express resentment directly toward others for good reasons under oppressive conditions.

Keywords: moral blame, Strawson, reactive attitudes, feminist care ethics, oppression

In *Blame: Its Nature and Norms*, D. Justin Coates and Neal Tognazzini deem “Freedom and Resentment,” by P. F. Strawson, “the founding document of contemporary work on blame” (2013, 5). Strawsonian views have the following advantage: these views do not neglect the emotive aspects of blame. Instead, views inspired by Strawson make negative emotions like guilt, resentment, and indignation central to understanding our blaming practices. Though this is the case, upon returning to Strawson, I argue his approach is not well equipped to make sense of the negative emotions present in blaming practices that occur in moral communities operating under oppressive conditions. When considering our negative reactive attitudes, it is crucial to consider how oppressive power dynamics shape these attitudes and reactions.

I join Marilyn Frye in thinking about oppression in the following way: “The experience of oppressed people is that the living of one’s life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable,

but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction” (Frye 1983, 4).¹ Because Strawson does not consider how reactive attitudes operate in oppressive contexts, I argue accounts of blame should take seriously the central role of the negative emotions in our moral lives *and* the power dynamics present in moral communities, with specific emphasis on how experiences of oppression impact how we blame ourselves and others. This requires saying more than Strawson does about how and why members of moral communities may become critical of some deployments of the reactive attitudes, despite their own reliance on these reactive attitudes.

This article proceeds in five parts. Section 1 reviews the main ideas in Strawson’s “Freedom and Resentment.” In section 2, I consider some accounts of blame inspired by Strawson. Section 3 notices a general trend in work done by philosophers who build on Strawson; it looks as though philosophers supplement Strawson with (or claim that Strawson has underlying commitments to) a more robust ethical program in order to address questions concerning the moral appropriateness of the reactive attitudes. Strawson claims these attitudes, including guilt, resentment, indignation, gratitude, and other practices that express praise and blame, are inescapably human. This, however, does not yet show that these attitudes are *morally appropriate*, which is why Strawson seems to need some kind of moral supplement. In section 4, I argue that a feminist care ethics can serve as a promising moral supplement to Strawson given the importance both approaches assign to interpersonal relationships, the participant attitude, and practices of holding ourselves and each other responsible in an inescapably social world. Then, the final section relies on Frye and Bartky to diagnose a problem in Strawson—namely, the assumption that members of moral communities will express all three kinds of

¹ Frye’s definition of oppression is not the only one worth consulting, but I find her definition instructive because she provides such an accessible and accurate image—viz., the bird cage. On her view, one cannot extract a practice or reaction and analyze it independent of the larger social structure within which it exists. This is also true of my analysis of the reactive attitudes in Strawson. We should consider how these reactive attitudes operate within larger networks of oppression. In her recently published *Think like a Feminist: The Philosophy behind the Revolution*, Carol Hay also affirms the value of Frye’s image of the birdcage as “the best way to wrap your head around the structural and systemic nature of oppression” (2020, 33). For some additional feminist accounts of oppression see Iris Young’s (1990) “Five Faces of Oppression,” Sandra Bartky’s (1990) “On Psychological Oppression,” Ann Cudd’s (2006) *Analyzing Oppression*, and Kristie Dotson’s (2014) “Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression.”

reactive attitudes (toward the self, directly toward others, and indirectly on behalf of others). Once we consider these three expressions from a feminist perspective, it becomes clear that while some may express indignation on behalf of others and guilt toward themselves, many will not express resentment directly for good reasons—for example, a diminished sense of self-worth, the likely failure on the part of privileged others to take the expression of resentment seriously, or fear that the expression of resentment will lead to backlash or danger under oppressive conditions. I conclude by emphasizing the importance of accounts of blame that have the potential to dismantle oppressive practices and institutions, and I specifically point to the importance of Michelle Ciurria’s (2020) account of “emancipatory blame” in the recently published “The Mysterious Case of the Missing Perpetrators: How the Privileged Escape Blame and Accountability.”

Section 1: Strawson’s “Freedom and Resentment”

Strawson (2008, 1) begins by noting there are those philosophers who “say they do not know what the thesis of determinism is. Others say, or imply, that they do know what it is.” Among those who claim they know something about the thesis of determinism, Strawson identifies two main camps—the pessimists and the optimists.² The pessimists doubt “the practices of punishing and blaming, of expressing moral condemnation and approval” have any justification if determinism is shown to be true (Strawson 2008, 1). How could these practices make sense if it was shown to be true that moral agents do not have any control over their actions? The optimists, who he says operate on the basis of a “one-eyed utilitarianism,” claim that, even if the thesis of determinism was shown to be true, practices of blaming, praising, and holding responsible would still have value, as these practices can be used to control populations and maintain order in society (Strawson 2008, 25). Strawson locates himself in the first category introduced, those who do not know what the thesis of determinism is. Yet, he sees value in trying to reconcile these two camps, though he recognizes that in trying to do so, his account “is likely to seem wrongheaded to everyone” (2).

Following his distinction between the pessimists and the optimists, Strawson stages a dialogue between these parties, noting how each would respond when challenged. The pessimist and optimist continue until they arrive at the following

² Strawson (2008, 1) also notes a third possible stance, that of the “genuine moral skeptic” who thinks that “the notions of moral guilt, of blame, of moral responsibility are inherently confused and that we can see this to be so if we consider the consequences either of the truth of determinism or of its falsity. The holders of this opinion agree with the pessimists that these notions lack application if determinism is true, and add simply that they also lack it if determinism is false.”

stalemate: the optimist claims that, given the facts as we know them, the truth of determinism would not render our practices of moral praise and blame useless because these practices could still be used for the purposes of social control, cooperation, and organization. The pessimist, still desiring more, claims that this description fails to capture something crucial about these practices as *moral* practices (Strawson 2008, 4). The pessimist hence draws the conclusion that the facts as we know them suggest there is no such thing as moral responsibility. Strawson calls attention to a kind of practice previously neglected by both camps as an intervention into this debate which might give “the optimist something more to say” (4).

Strawson notices the debate heretofore has assumed an objective stance toward the practices and agents under discussion. Both the pessimist and the optimist started from a position that assumed it was possible to debate the value of moral practices from a distance, or removed from their own lived experiences of these practices. Strawson (2008, 5) writes, “I want to speak, at least at first, of something else: of the non-detached attitudes and reactions of people directly involved in transactions with each other; of the attitudes and reactions of offended parties and beneficiaries; of such things as gratitude, resentment, forgiveness, love, and hurt feelings.” So, instead of entering the debate by immediately appealing to an abstract category such as *blameworthiness*, which the pessimist would claim depends on the falsity of determinism, Strawson shifts the gaze to our everyday reactions toward ourselves and each other. This shift to our experiences of and participation in moral practices invites us to begin from the participant stance. As one might imagine, this approach comes with its own set of difficulties:

What I have to say consists largely of commonplaces. So my language, like that of commonplaces generally, will be quite unscientific and imprecise. The central commonplace that I want to insist on is 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. I can give no simple description of the field of phenomena at the centre of which stands this commonplace truth; for the field is too complex. (Strawson 2008, 5)

Strawson warns that when attempting to talk about our relationships, he will not simplify complicated practices for the purpose of false precision. Strawson notes there are a number of ways of talking about these commonplaces that invoke concepts like self-respect, human dignity, the need for love, and so forth, but he considers this “jargon” useful only insofar as it helps to “emphasize how much we actually mind, how much it matters to us, whether the actions of other people—and

particularly of *some* other people—reflect attitudes towards us of goodwill, affection, or esteem on the one hand or contempt, indifference, or malevolence on the other” (2008, 5).

Instead of beginning by positing some inherent human quality like dignity or free will, Strawson points to a collection of ambiguous attitudes and reactions upon which we place great importance for establishing and maintaining our interpersonal relationships and moral norms. It becomes clear that we expect a basic amount of goodwill from those with whom we share a moral community, and we react negatively when we feel that this minimal amount of goodwill has not been satisfied (2008, 7). “Goodwill,” as described by Strawson, means something along the lines of “due moral regard” or “recognition of basic moral standing” between members of a shared moral community.

Moving forward, Strawson refers to these attitudes and practices as reactive attitudes and gives us a rough sketch of what he has in mind, mentioning attitudes like guilt, resentment, indignation, gratitude, and forgiveness. Referring to resentment and gratitude, Strawson explains:

If someone treads on my hand accidentally, while trying to help me, the pain may be no less acute than if he treads on it in contemptuous disregard of my existence or with a malevolent wish to injure me. But I shall generally feel in the second case a kind and degree of resentment that I shall not feel in the first. If someone’s actions help me to some benefit I desire, then I am benefited in any case; but if he intended them so to benefit me because of his general goodwill towards me, I shall reasonably feel a gratitude which I should not feel at all if the benefit was an incidental consequence, unintended or even regretted by him, of some plan of action with a different aim. (2008, 6)

It is not difficult to imagine additional examples of the kind mentioned by Strawson; in fact, our ability to quickly call to mind many examples supports Strawson’s thesis. Consider how often people feel slighted when a friend or partner fails to call or text back in a reasonable amount of time about something important. Upon learning this person dealt with an emergency at work, resentment usually dissipates. But if the friend or partner simply fails to care enough to call or text back, resentment often lingers, even grows.

Given how easy it is to call to mind everyday examples of what Strawson calls the reactive attitudes, it makes less sense to begin to understand blame by trying to objectively isolate and determine which kinds of actions or people are inherently blameworthy. Instead, as we see with the examples mentioned above, the same action carried out by the same person changes radically based on the attitude

expressed by the action. We largely react to the expression of this attitude, not the action or person as such. This observation leads Strawson to note that there will be cases when we react to a perceived slight because we assume that someone's action expressed ill will, but learn this was not true for one of two reasons—either due to details about the situation or the action that were not clear (the presence of coercion or emergency, for example) or because the person lacks the capacity to express such an attitude or perceive the basic demand for goodwill toward others (children, for example).

In “Responsibility and the Limits of Evil: Variations on a Strawsonian Theme,” Gary Watson supplies helpful language for these two kinds. He calls pleas of the first kind “excusing” conditions and pleas of the second kind “exempting” conditions (Watson 1987, 259–60). We may excuse a friend who lashes out at us once we learn she was not acting like herself due to some kind of emergency or tragedy, like losing her job or learning she has cancer. Under normal circumstances, we expect this friend to treat us with a minimal amount of goodwill, but we excuse her given the impact this stressful or life-changing information has had. If, however, our four-year-old niece screams at us for failing to pay enough attention to her rather than her brother, we typically see her as morally exempt; though we may attempt to educate her in that moment, we do not think her action amounted to a moral failure deserving of a reactive attitude like resentment.³

Strawson's approach to the question of responsibility, including practices of praising and blaming, then, does not assume virtuous or vicious intent is easily detectable. When we express a reactive attitude like resentment and blame someone for a perceived harm, it is always possible the person has a valid excuse or may be exempt. Interpersonal interactions are rarely transparent; this, in turn, suggests the meaning of responsibility, including the practice of blaming, will require knowing something about the motivations, intentions, social situation, and capacities, at least, of those blamed.

Importantly, Strawson does not dismiss the objective stance altogether. He explains we are able to take this detached, scientific attitude toward ourselves and others, especially those who are “partially or wholly inhibited by abnormalities or by immaturity”:

To adopt the objective attitude to another human being is to see him, perhaps, as an object of social policy; as a subject for what, in a wide range of sense, might be called treatment; as something certainly to

³ Granted, spending time with children can be frustrating and anger-inducing for lots of reasons, but not typically because we expect them to treat us as members of a shared moral community—at least, not yet.

be taken account, perhaps precautionary account, of; to be managed or handled or cured or trained; perhaps simply to be avoided, though this gerundive is not peculiar to cases of objectivity of attitude. (Strawson 2008, 9)⁴

Strawson adds that, though we may take the objective attitude most often toward those who are at least partially exempt from our reactive attitudes, such as children, we also may take this stance toward those who are full members of our moral community as a kind of “refuge” (2008, 10). Consider deciding to take the objective attitude toward your sibling given something they did or failed to do in order to prevent yourself from feeling increased stress on an already difficult day. This is one way that a temporary deployment of the objective attitude may serve as a refuge. Strawson makes this point with the following caveat though: we cannot maintain this stance for long periods of time. Instead, the desire to continue to view another member of the moral community, such as a partner or friend or coworker, this way usually suggests the relationship has been or should be altered or severed in some significant way. Though as humans we are able to take an objective stance toward ourselves and others for various reasons, this attitude is not instructive regarding responsibility because our practices of holding one another responsible require the opposing stance, the participant attitude.

Because Strawson approaches the question of responsibility by beginning with our participant, interpersonal expectations of and reactions to each other, he explains reactive attitudes can be expressed in three interconnected ways: (1) toward the self, (2) directly toward others, or (3) indirectly on behalf of others (2008, 16). As an example of a self-directed reactive attitude, he offers guilt. Resentment is an example of a reactive attitude expressed directly; indignation is expressed on behalf of another. Strawson explains:

⁴ Given the many abuses of those considered “abnormal” or “immature” throughout history, I bristle each time I read this passage. Yet, Strawson’s observations regarding the fact that we can take the objective attitude toward ourselves and others serves as a good reminder to do so with caution and care. There is a big difference between taking the objective attitude for the purpose of encouraging healthy blood pressure and taking the objective attitude for the purpose of “correcting” a perceived abnormality like “homosexuality” or “hysteria.” Further, Strawson’s point is that, as humans, we begin from our interpersonal engagements and the participant attitude. For humans, the objective attitude is a suspension of the more common and primary attitude, the participant attitude.

All these three types of attitude are humanly connected. One who manifested the personal reactive attitudes in a high degree but showed no inclination at all to their vicarious analogues would appear as an abnormal case of moral egocentricity, as a kind of moral solipsist. . . . In general, though within varying limits, we demand of others for others, as well as of ourselves for others, something of the regard which we demand of others for ourselves. Can we imagine, besides that of the moral solipsist, any other case of one or two of these three types of attitude being fully developed, but quite unaccompanied by any trace, however slight, of the remaining two or one? If we can, then we imagine something far below or far above the level of our common humanity—a moral idiot or a saint. For all these types of attitude alike have common roots in our human nature and our membership of human communities. (2008, 16–17)

Keeping in mind Strawson’s warning about the imprecision of language given the topic, a basic sketch has become clear enough. Instead of trying to uncover the meaning and limitations of responsibility by taking the objective attitude that argues on the basis of detached concepts, Strawson starts with engaged practices of responsibility. He notices that practices of holding ourselves and each other responsible stem from the expectation we have for a minimal amount of goodwill from others in our moral communities and the subsequent moral demand others treat us with this minimal amount of goodwill. Watson introduces language that helps to summarize this dynamic within the moral community:

What is fresh in “Freedom and Resentment,” as I read it, are two related ideas: that our sense of ourselves and one another as morally responsible agents and (accordingly) as morally responsible to one another is integral to (“given with”) human sociality itself, and that attempts to ground “responsibility practices” in some reality external to human nature are misguided. Strawson identifies two components of human sociality as crucial here. First, we care deeply (and “for its own sake”) about how people regard one another. Second, this concern manifests itself in a demand or expectation to be treated with regard and good will. Following Strawson, let’s call these the basic concern and the basic demand respectively. (2014, 17)

When we perceive someone has not met our basic demand for goodwill, we react because we care. The reactive attitudes, like resentment and indignation, arise as a result of a perceived slight, which often has more to do with what we assume were

the motivations accompanying an action—for example, I react to the carelessness of someone who steps on my foot because I see them as acting as if I do not matter. Upon expressing a reactive attitude, it may become clear the offending person either had a good excuse or is exempt from understanding the basic demand for goodwill between moral community members. If we try to imagine humanity without the susceptibility to reactive attitudes and practices of blaming and praising, it seems like we have imagined something too far from how we behave in our everyday engagements with each other. The fact that the reactive attitudes seem inescapable, though, does not yet amount to a claim that these attitudes are morally appropriate.

Section 2: Contemporary Accounts of Blame Inspired by Strawson

Though Strawson does not refer to blame specifically as a reactive attitude, he makes it clear we express reactive attitudes like guilt, resentment, and indignation when we blame ourselves and others. Blaming and praising are described, respectively, as ways we either hold others responsible for perceived slights or recognize others for moral accomplishments.

In a collection devoted to the work of T. M. Scanlon, R. Jay Wallace offers an account of blame inspired by Strawson’s discussion of the reactive attitudes. Wallace (2011, 349) challenges Scanlon’s relational model of blame, claiming that it “leaves the blame out of blame” insofar as it neglects the reactive attitudes. In his earlier work, Wallace defines blame as the following:

I propose that blame involves a susceptibility to the reactive emotions, and that the responses of moral sanction serve to express these emotions. Because of the connection of the reactive emotions with expectations, this account makes sense of the backward-looking character of blame and moral sanction, which are essentially reactions to a moral wrong. (Wallace 1994, 11)

Wallace criticizes the nonaffective dimension of Scanlon’s relational view. According to Wallace, Scanlon’s descriptions of how blame operates in relationships are stripped of crucial emotive elements. Scanlon leaves room in his account for the appropriateness of experiencing emotions but does not consider this a necessary or defining feature of blame. In contrast, Wallace asks readers to imagine what it means to be a good friend. He claims that friendship includes actively caring for others in ways that express this care through emotions (2011, 356).

By way of focusing on the centrality of the reactive attitudes like resentment, indignation, and guilt, Wallace addresses what we might refer to as the

phenomenology of blame, or what it feels like to blame ourselves and others.⁵ If we fail to consider the emotional aspects of blame, we risk misunderstanding how we actually blame ourselves and others. Wallace offers the following instructive analogy:

Take the case of artistic or intellectual pursuits, such as opera or philosophy. To acknowledge that these are valuable activities is, among other things, to acknowledge that there is reason to support them, to engage in them oneself if one has the requisite talents and interests, to learn about them and try to understand them, and so on. But one can acknowledge all these things without actually valuing opera or philosophy oneself. There is an additional quality of emotional engagement that characterizes the attitudes of people who genuinely value these pursuits; they take a real interest in them, care about whether they are in a good or a bad way, become excited when there are opportunities to engage in activities related to these pursuits, and are subject to distress when opportunities of this kind are lacking. (2011, 367)

Wallace's account of blame draws on Strawson's observation that the participant attitude includes expressions of reactive attitudes, hurt feelings, and the expectation that people care about themselves and each other as members of moral communities.

Victoria McGeer shares Wallace's concern that some influential approaches have neglected important emotional aspects of blame. She calls this "sanitizing blame" and writes:

⁵ In his book, *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments*, R. Jay Wallace argues for a narrow interpretation of the reactive attitudes, limiting his discussion to resentment, indignation, and guilt. Regarding his decision to interpret Strawson narrowly, Wallace (1994, 11) writes: "I therefore follow a different strategy for developing the Strawsonian approach. Instead of interpreting the reactive attitudes simply as those emotions implicated in interpersonal relations, I construe them more narrowly, taking the paradigms to be resentment, indignation, and guilt. Interpreting the reactive emotions in this narrow way permits us to understand how these emotions hang together as a class. The key, I argue, lies in their distinctive connection with expectations. Thus, episodes of guilt, resentment, and indignation are caused by the belief that an expectation to which one holds a person has been breached; the connection with expectations gives the reactive emotions common propositional objects, tying them together as a class."

The broader philosophical project that drives much of this work on blame is therefore one of showing how it can be a normatively acceptable, even valuable response to wrongdoing. I call this the project of “civilizing blame” and agree with moral philosophers that it is an important one to pursue, but not, I claim, at the expense of taking the bile out of blame. In my view, this contravenes a constraint that any satisfactory theory of blame must meet—that is should direct us to a psychologically plausible phenomenon, however unsavory, that answers to our ordinary conception of blame: it satisfies the ordinary connotations for the term, including connotations of resentment and anger and desire for payback. The challenge is to accept this constraint while showing that blame may nevertheless be a normatively fitting response to wrongdoing. (McGeer 2013, 163)

McGeer argues her account of blame can meet this challenge. Drawing on insights from Strawson and interdisciplinary literature in evolutionary biology, cognitive neuroscience, cultural anthropology, and experimental economics, she introduces a naturalist, functionalist account of blame. This account interrogates the role that anger has played in our blaming activities through time. Taking this evolutionary approach allows for McGeer to focus on the functions of anger and blame, rather than fixating on “so-called essential features (features present in every legitimate instance of blame)” like those who so often end up sanitizing blame (2013, 168).

McGeer anticipates and dispenses with the objection that negative emotions like anger are not essential to understanding blame because there are cases of blaming that do not appear to include negative emotions or negative reactive attitudes. She thinks dismissing the role negative emotions play in blame on this basis runs the risk of being too revisionary in search of a difficult- (if not impossible-) to-determine essence and argues, instead, that the fact that there are some exceptional cases of blaming that do not seem to include the presence of negative emotions does not mean these emotions are not crucial to understanding the evolutionary development and functions of blame. McGeer shifts the conversation from asking, “What is blame?” to “What has been the purpose or function of blame?” She arrives at the following basic account of blame:

At the most elemental level, blame is a quasi-autonomous, emotionally mediated response to others that is specifically prompted by, and targeted on, behavior that transgresses personally or socially valued norms. Despite its quasi-autonomous (nonreflective) character, this blaming response has both a backward-looking appraisal dimension and a forward-looking regulative dimension. The backward-looking

appraisal dimension consists in coding—that is, perceiving—others' behavior as (offensively) transgressive; the forward-looking regulative dimension consists in an aggressive (punitive) response aimed and changing or inhibiting such behavior. (McGeer 2013, 172)

This elemental description of blame is just a start for McGeer, though. Next, keeping in mind the challenges she identified at the beginning of the article, McGeer returns to our everyday practices of blame to see if this basic account rings true of these practices. Does blame function in these backward-looking and forward-looking ways? McGeer argues blame does have this structure, though the forward-looking dimension need not take an aggressive or punitive form.

The forward-looking dimension of blame becomes especially clear when we think about blame as a process. Though blame begins as a reaction to a perceived slight, this does not mean we blame indefinitely. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find an account that argued for the normative importance of blame if assigning blame were like identifying and assigning some inherent, static quality. Instead, blame's forward-looking dimension becomes clear when we think about how blame dissipates. McGeer acknowledges this process is not "typically easy or straightforward" but when successful results in "the blamer's mollification, understanding, and even forgiveness" (2013, 175). Further, though she determines that blame is "an evolved reaction to transgressive behavior" (175), she argues that we can build on this to develop practices of blaming based on a "dialogical" rather than punitive structure (184).

Having discussed two accounts of blame that build on themes in Strawson's "Freedom and Resentment"—specifically, his discussion of the reactive attitudes and the attention that he pays to the participant stance—I notice a more general trend in work done on Strawson. Though Strawson claims we would be unrecognizable to ourselves without the reactive attitudes, this does not yet establish these attitudes as normatively valuable.

Section 3: Strawson and Ethics

My aim in this section is to point out a general trend of pairing Strawson with more robust ethical programs as evidence that this looks necessary in order to differentiate between morally appropriate and inappropriate deployments of blame, praise, and the reactive attitudes.

In his attempt to establish an ethics on the basis of the second personal standpoint, Stephen Darwall (2006) claims members of a shared moral community must necessarily recognize one another as free, competent, rational agents. He understands the reactive attitudes as forms of communication between members of a moral community who recognize each other as having shared standing as morally

competent agents. Darwall argues that Kantian contractualist approaches to ethics best capture Strawson's description of the reactive attitudes insofar as to address someone from the second personal standpoint is to already recognize them as members of a shared community who possess the ability to recognize human dignity and the freedom to act in ways that respect this dignity. When one fails to do this, reactive attitudes result. This supplement is necessary because Strawson does not say that members of a shared moral community deserve to be treated with respect or dignity; Strawson says that members of a shared moral community expect to be treated with goodwill. Darwall builds on this, with the help of Kantian contractualist ethics, to claim that to expect that others treat us with respect and to react with resentment if they do not meet this standard is to already assume that members of the moral community are deserving of goodwill given recognition of their standing as morally competent, free, and rational agents.

Taking a different strategy from Darwall, McGeer argues there is an underlying commitment to a broad kind of consequentialism present in "Freedom and Resentment." She acknowledges that, while some features of Strawson's view in "Freedom and Resentment" are widely agreed upon, reading him as a consequentialist is not:

As I read the text there are in fact three mutually reinforcing prongs to Strawson's defence of a robust conception of responsibility in "Freedom and Resentment": his naturalism (by which I mean a resistance to certain metaphysical considerations and/or debates about free will in light of our natural human attitudes and commitments); his pragmatism (by which I mean an emphasis on our everyday attitudes and practices of "holding responsible"); and his consequentialism (which I will elucidate presently). (McGeer 2014, 65)

Though McGeer knows her qualification of Strawson as a kind of consequentialist is not a dominant view among Strawsonian scholars, she returns to Strawson to remind readers he sets out to locate a further and better response for the optimist in the debate on free will and determinism. McGeer (2014, 82) explains, while the "one-eyed utilitarian" mentioned by Strawson may be a direct consequentialist, there is a more complicated and sophisticated position, that of the indirect consequentialist. The indirect consequentialist recognizes sometimes the greatest good is achieved indirectly, by exiting or abandoning a practice.

In order to determine the normative worth, then, of the reactive attitudes, an indirect consequentialist need not go about this by means of strict calculation of what is the neutral good for the moral community or the net worth of good produced by the expressing reactive attitudes: "Reactive attitudes and practices can be

comparatively assessed in light of their aptness for producing a certain good; and it seems clear from what has gone before that the good in question is the good of regulating behaviour by means of developing and/or supporting people's moral understanding" (McGeer 2014, 88). Once we establish that praise, blame, and the reactive attitudes can be compared with each other and with forms of life deprived of these practices, McGeer does not think Strawson's optimist needs additional moral justification beyond the following:

As I read it, the answer implicit in Strawson's response is that it is the kind of good that ought to be self-evident when we contemplate a social life replete with our human form of relationships and commitments, as against one that is stripped of all of that. *Au fond*, it is the kind of good that flows from living our human kind of life according to our nature as normatively responsive creatures. Call it "human flourishing" for want of a better term. Thus, when the pessimist presses her justificatory demand, there seems to be little left to say. (2014, 89–90)

Though McGeer does not supplement Strawson with a more robust ethical program, she argues for his commitment to a broader consequentialism in order to justify an alternative reading of Strawson's "Freedom and Resentment" as already expressing normative views.

Section 4: Strawson and Feminist Care Ethics

Having noticed a more general trend that pairs Strawson with broader ethical programs like Kantian contractualism and consequentialism for the purpose of establishing (or emphasizing) normative commitments in "Freedom and Resentment," this section argues a feminist care ethics can serve as a promising—and until now, neglected—supplement to Strawson.⁶

Since Carol Gilligan's publication of *In a Different Voice* in 1982, there has been an abundance of diverse work which falls broadly under the heading of "care ethics." Importantly, this includes literature criticizing feminist care ethics for initially failing to take an intersectional approach, which considers the nexus of race, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, and age when identifying and addressing oppressive practices. As observed by Andrea D. Green in her essay, "In a Different

⁶ For the purpose of this article, I do not claim feminist care ethics is better suited as a supplement to Strawson's account of the reactive attitudes than the Kantian or consequentialist supplements. While I suspect this may be the case, a defense of this position would require an in-depth comparative analysis of these three approaches.

Room: Toward an African American Woman's Ethic of Care and Justice," "Even if the methodological shift from absolutism to constructivism is accomplished in *In a Different Voice*, the woman's ethos described therein is that of a mainstream White woman's social world and, thus, it cannot adequately capture the social reality of Black or other minority women" (Green 2004, 60). Gilligan acknowledges the color-blind elements of her original work in the forward to *Race-ing Moral Formation: African American Perspectives on Care and Justice*:

I remember the moment—the voice of an African American student electrifying the large lecture hall in the staid Georgian building where I was teaching a class on moral development, his question suddenly illuminating the unspoken: the presupposition that Heinz was White, that if he stole an overpriced drug to save his wife's life, a judge would agree that stealing in this case was the right thing to do. The moral logic was impeccable, but what if Heinz were Black? What would the judge do then? Wouldn't the story change? Wouldn't the conversation with the judge be different? We all knew that it would." (Gilligan and Ward 2004, ix)

With Gilligan's reflections in mind, for the purpose of this article, I rely on Virginia Held's discussion of feminist care ethics in *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*, as this text does an excellent job of consolidating past work for the purpose of correcting for biases, responding to objections, and suggesting future aims.

Held argues feminist care ethics constitutes a paradigm distinct from virtue ethics, deontology, and utilitarianism given the focus on ethical agents as relational and interpersonal:

The ethics of care usually works with a conception of persons as relational rather than the self-sufficient independent individuals of the dominant moral theories. The dominant theories can be interpreted as importing into moral theory a concept of the person developed primarily for liberal, political, and economic theory, seeing the person as a rational, autonomous agent, or a self-interested individual. (2006, 13)

Care ethics explicitly disallows any such interpretation of ethical subjects. Held stresses shared human experiences of vulnerability and care, including childhood and old age, as shared experiences that carry normative force. She claims we are ethical subjects insofar as we are relational subjects constituted by our social dependencies and responsibilities. She acknowledges that not all those working on the ethics of care

are keen on the term “care,” but she clarifies that these approaches are roughly aligned in affording vulnerability, interdependency, and the need for love a kind of significance previously neglected in Western philosophy and ethics (Held 2006, 9).

Specifically, Held (2006, 10–13) cites five distinct features of the ethics of care as a moral theory: (1) the ethics of care recognizes “the compelling moral salience of attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility,” (2) “the ethics of care values emotion rather than rejects it,” (3) “the ethics of care respects rather than removes itself from the claims of particular others with whom we share actual relationships,” (4) the ethics of care “reconceptualizes traditional notions about the public and the private,” including challenging practices of oppression, and (5) the ethics of care “characteristically sees persons as relational and interdependent, morally and epistemologically.”

Having briefly outlined these five features of the ethics of care, Held addresses the objection from those who think that an ethics of care cannot coexist with theories of justice. Held argues that care and justice attend to distinct, but necessarily connected social and political questions; one approach may be more suited than another on a case-by-case basis, and both can inform our moral thinking and practices:

The question remains, however, whether justice should be thought to be incorporated into any ethic of care that will be adequate or whether we should keep the notions of justice and care and their associated ethics conceptually distinct. There is much to be said for recognizing how the ethics of care values interrelatedness and responsiveness to the needs of particular others, how the ethics of justice values fairness and rights, and how these are different emphases. Too much integration will lose sight of these valid differences. (2006, 16)

So, why focus on care as a guiding moral norm? Held (2006, 9) explains, “The concept of care has the advantage of not losing sight of the work involved in caring for people and of not lending itself to the interpretation of morality as ideal but impractical to which advocates of the ethics of care often object. Care is both value and practice.”

This claim that “care is both value and practice” invites us to return to Strawson’s “Freedom and Resentment.” After staging the debate that leads to a stalemate between the pessimist and the optimist on free will and determinism, Strawson pivots away from the detached objective attitude toward the nondetached participant attitude. Instead of continuing to interrogate the meaning and possibility of responsibility in objective terms, Strawson (2008, 6) begins by focusing on how much we care about how others treat us across a range of different kinds of relationships, including our relationships with intimate partners, children, parents,

friends, coworkers, and acquaintances within shared moral communities. On the basis of these relationships, we develop expectations, the most minimal of which is a basic expectation of goodwill from those with whom we share communities. Reactive attitudes arise as a result of failing to meet (guilt, resentment, indignation) or exceeding these expectations (gratitude). As Gary Watson notes:

The starting point of the argument is of course that our practices bottom out in sentiments and concerns, the susceptibility to which defines our sociality. These ground a normative framework, I take it, because sentiments are ways of valuing, and valuing is taking certain considerations as reasons. This stance is implicit in the basic concern to stand in participant relationships of a certain character. It is true that Strawson doesn't explicitly speak of valuing in this connection, but insofar as valuing is implicit in the sentiments and is connected with taking things to be reasons, this seems to me an appropriate construal and also required to make sense of the idea of "internal justification." (2014, 21–22)

Feminist care ethics is compatible with Watson's reading of Strawson given the focus on care as both value and practice. With care ethics, our practices bottom out at caring. Insofar as we are all born into a world that requires others to care for us to ensure our survival, we develop expectations of care that constitute the fabric of our moral communities. If an expectation of care is not met, it is easy to imagine someone expressing what Strawson calls a reactive attitude. In fact, built into the core commitment of feminist care ethics is the claim that emotions are valuable and not to be rejected as irrational. It is possible, then, to consider caring a kind of valuing (as Watson does), implicit within which is a normative commitment to the idea that each of us deserves care or, in the case of Strawson, deserves basic goodwill as members of shared moral communities.

Though the shared focus on interpersonal relationships, the value of emotions, and the inescapability of the social world suggests that feminist care ethics can serve as a solid supplement to "Freedom and Resentment," Held's approach is a promising companion to Strawson for an additional reason. When considering the moral appropriateness of our practices of praising and blaming, along with the moral appropriateness of the reactive attitudes, feminist care ethics has the advantage of evaluating a wide range of practices with the following strong commitment to identifying and eradicating oppressive social practices and institutions in mind:

Instead of seeing the corporate sector, and military strength, and government and law as the most important segments of society

deserving the highest levels of wealth and power, a caring society might see the tasks of bringing up children, educating its members, meeting the needs of all, achieving peace and treasuring the environment, and doing these in the best ways possible to be that to which the greatest social efforts of all should be devoted. One can recognize that something comparable to legal constraints and police enforcement, including at a global level, may always be necessary for special cases, but also that caring societies could greatly decrease the need for them. The social changes a focus on care would require would be as profound as can be imagined. (Held 2006, 19)

Implicit in our concern about ourselves and each other, there is a moral responsibility to care. We need look no further than our practices of caring to arrive at the normative claim that since we are all vulnerable and indebted to the care of others, we ought to care as well. Yet, specifically pairing Strawson with feminist care ethics seems promising for differentiating between morally appropriate and inappropriate practices because this approach explicitly seeks to safeguard against oppressive deployments of praise, blame, and the reactive attitudes. Importantly, though, there is one aspect of Strawson's account that does not pair neatly with the feminist view. I discuss Strawson's assumption regarding the threefold expression of the reactive attitudes in the next and final section of this article.

Section 5: Reactive Attitudes in Oppressive Moral Communities

While I have identified a feminist care ethics as a strong lens through which we can establish normativity in "Freedom and Resentment," the two are not entirely consistent. Specifically, once we revisit Strawson from a feminist perspective, Strawson's earlier claim that the three types of reactive attitudes are interconnected seems wrong. Strawson says the three types of attitudes—namely, those directed at ourselves, like guilt; those directed at others, like resentment; and those directed at others on behalf of others, like indignation—will manifest in each member of a moral community. At first glance, this seems right. Who would feel guilty for harming another but not express resentment if someone harmed them in the same way? It seems like all three types of the reactive attitudes work together to hold ourselves and each other accountable within our moral communities.

Yet, when we consider the manifestation of the reactive attitudes within oppressive moral communities, it is easy to imagine the incongruent expression of these three types of reactive attitudes. Frye reminds readers that experiences of oppression involve the systematic, and often seemingly mundane, production of a double bind:

One of the most characteristic and ubiquitous features of the world as experienced by oppressed people is the double bind—situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation. For example, it is often a requirement upon oppressed people that we smile and be cheerful. If we comply, we signal our docility and our acquiescence in our situation. We need not, then, be taken note of. We acquiesce in being made invisible, in our occupying no space. We participate in our own erasure. On the other hand, anything but the sunniest countenance exposes us to being perceived as mean, bitter, angry or dangerous. This means, at the least, that we may be found “difficult” or unpleasant to work with, which is enough to cost one one’s livelihood; at worst, being seen as mean, bitter, angry or dangerous has been known to result in rape, arrest, beating, and murder. One can only choose to risk one’s preferred form and rate of annihilation. (Frye 1983, 2)

In patriarchal communities, it is not uncommon for oppressed people to blame themselves for failing to live up to patriarchal norms without it being safe or effective to express resentment toward others. This may take the form of “participating in our own erasure” because we do not think ourselves worthy of the same treatment as privileged members of our moral communities. Or we may try to express resentment directly but experience what Frye refers to as a double bind; upon expressing our resentment in response to oppressive treatment, we are deemed “crazy” or “put in our place” and made to feel as though we are in the wrong.

This unearths a tension between Strawson’s description of the reactive attitudes and feminist care ethics. It looks as if members of moral communities who experience oppression may express self-reactive attitudes in excessive ways due to the influence of oppressive norms and institutions, the kind of norms and institutions Held tells us we ought to radically transform.⁷ Further, “Freedom and Resentment”

⁷ I stress this claim in Held’s development of feminist care ethics because feminist philosophers have rightly pointed out that expectations of care often reinforce patriarchal oppression. For example, Kate Manne offers a compelling analysis of how caring expectations reinforce misogyny. She explains, “We can distinguish between a (self-)recognized *human being*—e.g., white men who are otherwise privileged in most if not all major respects—versus a *human giver*, a woman who is held to owe many if not most of her distinctively human capacities to a suitable boy or man, ideally, and his children, as applicable. (Variants may be tolerated to varying degrees; wholesale alternatives or critical stances toward the nuclear heteropatriarchal family, much less so.) A giver is then obligated to offer love, sex, attention, affection, and admiration,

does not offer an account of how members of moral communities might critically evaluate their own expressions of the reactive attitudes. Strawson notes we can be mistaken, and the targets of our reactive attitudes might be excused or exempt. But overall, Strawson's focus is on how entrenched we are in our interpersonal relationships, not on how to best navigate or experience these relationships. With this said, through a process like feminist consciousness raising, one could become aware of just how entrenched they are in their practices and relationships, with the eventual aim of radically reconstructing both for the better.

So, in the case of the person who expresses the self-directed reactive attitude of guilt excessively toward herself, it is possible she may or may not understand her guilt as, at least in part, motivated by patriarchal oppressive norms operative in her relationships. Becoming aware of one's oppression is necessary to interrupting and challenging the practices that shape one's oppression. As Bartky explains, the process of becoming aware of one's own oppression requires a certain amount of suspicion about the world as we know (or thought we knew) it:

Little political, professional, educational, or leisure-time activity is free of the blight of sexism. Startlingly few personal relationships exist without it. Feminist consciousness is a little like paranoia, especially when the feminist first begins to apprehend the full extent of sex discrimination and the subtlety and variety of the ways in which it is enforced. Its agents are everywhere, even inside her own mind, since she can fall prey to self-doubt or a temptation to compliance. In response to this, the feminist becomes vigilant and suspicious. Her apprehension of things, especially of direct or indirect communication with other people is characterized by what I call "*wariness*." Wariness is anticipation of the possibility of attack, of affront or insult, of disparagement, ridicule, or the hurting blindness of others. It is a mode of experience which anticipates experience in a certain way; it is an apprehension of the inherently threatening character of established society. While it is primarily the established order of things of which the feminist is wary, she is wary of herself too. (Bartky 1990, 18–19)

as well as other forms of emotional, social, reproductive, and caregiving labor, in accordance with social norms that govern and structure the relevant roles and relations" (Manne 2018, 301). Held (2006, 11) is attentive to these dynamics and makes it clear that "we need an *ethics* of care, not just care itself. The various aspects and expressions of care and caring relations need to be subjected to moral scrutiny and *evaluated*, not just observed and described."

Strawson assumes one must be a moral saint, solipsist, or “moral idiot” in order to have severe discord between the three types of reactive attitudes. I contend, for this to be the case, one need only be wary of oppressive forces in their moral community.

In conclusion, I want to specifically praise a recently published work by Michelle Ciurria (2020, 3), where she offers an emancipatory account of blame: “More precisely, emancipatory blame seeks to identify people’s contributions to hierarchies of power and take a stand against them (via some negative attitude) in light of those contributions; while emancipatory praise seeks to identify resisters and celebrate their contributions to resistance movements that liberate the oppressed.” I see future potential in explicitly bringing together Ciurria’s account of emancipatory blame and feminist care ethics. But, for the purpose of this article, my goal is modest. I aim to demonstrate how feminist care ethics is well positioned to provide a normative ground for Strawson’s account of the reactive attitudes, while pushing back on his claim that most humans will (obviously) deploy the three types of reactive attitudes in their interpersonal lives. If nothing else, I want to emphasize the importance of recognizing that many of us are blaming from inside the birdcage, so any account that claims blame is morally appropriate and normatively valuable ought to be working hard not to reinforce oppressive norms, practices, and institutions.

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