

FREE WILL XI

Watson: Responsibility and the Limits of Evil

Recall that Strawson gave two sorts of circumstance under which we would not normally take the reactive stance:

Type One Conditions: the agent was pushed, didn't realize the harm that their action would cause, was acting under terrible duress

Type Two Conditions: the agent was scarcely an agent: they were a child, mentally ill, a psychopath etc.; or there was a similar but temporary excuse: they were under great strain, depressed etc.

The relevance of Type One Conditions is easily explained on Strawson's account: since, in exhibiting reactive attitudes, what we are reacting to is a lack of good will or regard on the part of the agent, we should not form such attitudes where the agent's action does not manifest such a lack. But what of Type Two Conditions: a child, or someone under stress, or a psychopath can manifest ill will towards me. So why should I suspend the reactive stance?

The traditional theorist has something to say: being in these situations removes one's moral responsibility. But Strawson can't simply say this, for to have moral responsibility just is to be someone to whom the reactive stance is taken. So that would not be an explanation of why we do not take the reactive stance in Type Two Conditions; rather it follows from the fact that we do not. We need to know what the rationale is for not taking that stance.

Watson offers one suggestion: to take the reactive stance is partly a communicative act: it involves a form of address. Perhaps the idea is that people under Type Two Conditions are not people with whom we can meaningfully communicate.

The case of Robert Harris: when we hear what he did, we are horrified; but when we learn about his childhood, this makes a difference to our response. It is not that we fail to take the reactive stance at all; but it is somehow qualified.

Can the 'address' approach explain this? It is far from clear that it can. For whether or not we can meaningfully communicate with someone is a function of how they are now. How they came to be this way doesn't seem relevant.

Incompatibilists will contend that this provides support for their account. For isn't this just confirmation of their hypothesis that we no longer hold someone responsible once we see them as determined by their background? But Watson thinks that this isn't right either since: (i) we don't give up on the reactive stance altogether; and (ii) it doesn't seem that we need to think of Harris as compelled by his childhood into his subsequent life: 'The thought is not "It had to be!" but, again, "No wonder!"' (Is this right: couldn't the incompatibilists' real point be put in terms of causation rather than determinism?)

Moreover, this isn't ultimately a clash between viewpoints in the way that Nagel might suggest. The problem is that even within the reactive viewpoint we want to see Harris both as victim and a perpetrator.