

The Objective Attitude

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Abstract

This paper aims to alleviate some of the deep pessimism with which people regard the ‘objective attitude,’ thereby removing a particular obstacle that P.F. Strawson and others have placed in the way of a more widespread skepticism about moral responsibility. First, I give a brief description of what I consider the objective attitude to be, and then address some specific concerns that Susan Wolf raises in her essay ‘The Importance of Free Will.’ Next, I examine certain attitudes that are thought to be ‘opposed’ to the objective attitude and argue that some of these attitudes are more compatible with the objective attitude than is commonly supposed. Finally, I examine the prospects of someone who wishes to adopt the objective attitude permanently. In response to philosophers who claim that doing so would be psychologically impossible, I argue that our commitment to attitudes that presuppose moral responsibility can fade and soften gradually, often without our noticing it.

I. Introduction: A Problem *with* a Solution.

No one has better expressed the problem of reconciling moral responsibility with a naturalistic view of the world than Thomas Nagel in the following passage:

I believe that in a sense the problem has no solution because something in the idea of agency is incompatible with actions being events, and people being things. But as the external determinants of what someone has done are gradually exposed, in their effect on consequences, character, and choice itself, it becomes gradually clear that actions are events and people things. Eventually nothing remains that can be ascribed to a responsible self, and we are left with nothing but a portion of the larger sequence of events, which can be deplored or celebrated, but not blamed or praised.¹

Some have referred to Nagel’s remarks as fear-mongering; I find them rather exhilarating. But whatever our emotional reaction, a philosophical question arises: why is this a problem without a

¹ T. Nagel, ‘Moral Luck’, in his *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979), pp. 24-39, at p. 37.

solution?² It seems to me that this is a problem *with* a solution—indeed, the solution indicated by Nagel in this passage. Actions are events, and people are things—complex and exciting things, but things nonetheless. Consequently, we are not morally responsible for our characters and we are not morally responsible (in a deep sense) for our behavior. This conclusion may be counterintuitive, or depressing to some, but there is nothing inconsistent or paradoxical about it. Why then do philosophers so often portray the arguments for skepticism about moral responsibility as problems or paradoxes that must be overcome at all costs?

I think there are two reasons for this. First, the implications of denying moral responsibility are thought to be dreadful. The position is often deemed not unsound, but “unacceptable.” (Nagel himself uses this word.) Regarding ourselves in this manner threatens our status as persons and conjures up Orwellian, or at least Skinnerian, visions of the future—a world where philosophers and scientists and their theories reason us out of love, kindness, and the appreciation of beauty. P.F. Strawson famously argues that denying moral responsibility on theoretical grounds would require us to take “the objective attitude” towards everyone—an attitude that would have us see other human beings as little more than targets for social engineering. A brave new world seems right around the corner.

The second cause for resistance to skepticism about robust (desert-entailing) moral responsibility (RMR henceforth)³—is that it runs counter to our subjective experience in a rather deep way. As Nagel writes:

We are unable to view ourselves simply as portions of the world, and from inside we have a rough idea of the boundary between what is us and what is not, what we do and what happens to us, what is our personality and what is an accidental handicap. We do not regard our actions and our characters merely as fortunate or unfortunate episodes—

² See also M. Zimmerman, ‘Luck and Moral Responsibility’, *Ethics*, 97 (1987), pp. 374-386 at p.374. Zimmerman points out that Nagel seems to accept the premises of his valid argument yet deny the conclusion.

³ ‘RMR’ can also refer to ‘robustly morally responsible,’ e.g. ‘he was not RMR for committing the crime.’ RMR skepticism is the view that denies (or strongly doubts) that we can deserve praise or blame for our actions.

though they may also be that. We cannot *simply* take an external evaluative view of ourselves—of what we most essentially are and what we do. And this remains true even when we have seen that we are not responsible for our own existence, or our nature, or the choices we have to make, or the circumstances that give our acts the consequences they have. Those acts remain ours and we remain ourselves, despite the persuasiveness of the reasons that seem to argue us out of existence.⁴

Both Nagel and Strawson seem to think that taking the objective attitude towards all human beings (including ourselves) is not only undesirable but psychologically impossible—“practically inconceivable,” according to Strawson. And since denying moral responsibility requires us to take the objective attitude towards everyone, we should regard skeptical positions with deep suspicion.

Like Strawson and Nagel, I believe that denying RMR would require us to adopt an exclusive objectivity of attitude.⁵ But I do not share their pessimism about what this would mean for our lives and relationships. The aim of this paper, then, is to more closely examine the nature of the objective attitude and what might happen to someone who decided to adopt it on a full time basis. I hope to show that the implications of doing this are far more ‘acceptable’ than they may appear. We should therefore consider the theoretical position of RMR skepticism with more of an open mind.

II What is the Objective Attitude?

When we take the objective attitude towards human beings, we view them as natural objects, not RMR for their character or behavior. As Nagel puts it, we regard human beings as *things* and our actions as “nothing but a portion of the larger sequence of events, which can be

⁴ Nagel, ‘Moral Luck’, p. 37.

⁵ See also D. Pereboom, *Living Without Free Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), pp. 199-200. Pereboom claims that hard incompatibilism—his term for the position that denies robust moral responsibility—would not require us to take an objectivity of attitude. He may, however, have a different interpretation of the objective attitude in mind than I do.

deplored or celebrated, but not blamed or praised.”⁶ We do not deny that human beings can be causally responsible for behavior, or that we can form second order desires, or that we are sometimes responsive to reason.⁷ Taking the objective attitude commits us only to regarding human beings as creatures who cannot deserve praise or blame.

P.F. Strawson notes that we can and do adopt the objective attitude towards other human beings on occasion. We take this attitude towards small children, schizophrenics, and even, every so often, on the “mature and normal” as a refuge from “the strains of involvement.”⁸ What Strawson and his followers worry about is what would happen if we *exclusively* regarded people with the objective eye.⁹ Shifting in and back out of the objective perspective allows us to retain the natural range of interpersonal attitudes, as well as our intuitive beliefs about moral responsibility. But if we exclusively adopt the objective attitude, then we must consider all beliefs, theories, and attitudes that are incompatible with it to be irrational or inappropriate. Thus, if a certain belief about justified punishment is grounded in the view that criminals deserve blame for their crimes, then we would view that belief as irrational. And if an attitude like resentment presupposes that the object of resentment deserves blame for an act, we must regard resentment as never appropriate. Indeed, we must abandon our commitment to all interpersonal and self-directed attitudes that conflict with RMR skepticism and the objective view.

I agree with Strawson that looking upon everyone with the objective eye would lead to a profound revision of our attitudes and beliefs (although I am far more optimistic about what

⁶ Nagel, ‘Moral Luck,’ p. 37.

⁷ See H. Frankfurt ‘Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,’ in Gary Watson (ed), *Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), pp. 322-337, S. Wolf, *Freedom Within Reason* (New York: Oxford UP), and J.M. Fischer and M. Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP) for leading compatibilist accounts of responsibility. It should be noted that RMR skeptics do not deny that we have the capacities described in these theories. Rather, they deny that these capacities are sufficient to ground moral desert.

⁸ P.F. Strawson, ‘Freedom and Resentment’, in Gary Watson (ed), *Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), pp.72-93, at pp.81-82.

⁹ Thanks to an anonymous referee at *Philosophical Quarterly* for encouraging me to emphasize this point.

effect this would have on our lives). Strawson's characterization does not stop there, however. He claims in addition that taking the objective attitude leads us to see people as "objects of social policy" and "the subject of...treatment,"¹⁰ Moreover, he says, we are unable quarrel or reason with someone we view from the objective perspective. We can "at most pretend to quarrel, or reason, with him."¹¹ As far as I can tell, Strawson provides little or no argument for these claims, so I would like to withhold judgment about them until we deepen our investigation. For now let us simply agree that taking the objective attitude requires us to view all people as natural things—objects—who cannot be RMR for their character or behavior.

III The Objective Attitude and Name Calling

As noted, most philosophers see a world in which we exclusively take the objective perspective as cold, dreary, and bleak¹²—according to Susan Wolf "a tragic world of human isolation."¹³ These observations are often thought to be so obvious that no argument is needed to support them. Take for example the "isolating" accusation. Many authors make this claim but no one has stated what exactly is so isolating about adopting the objective attitude. We are not, after all, separating ourselves from the rest of humanity when we adopt the objective view. On the contrary, we are claiming that this attitude is appropriate for everyone and everything, ourselves included. We are only saying that no one in our species, or any other species, deserves blame or praise for their character and behavior, and therefore that any attitude or belief

¹⁰ P.F. Strawson, 'Freedom and Resentment', p. 79.

¹¹ P.F. Strawson, 'Freedom and Resentment', p. 79.

¹² See, for example, S. Wolf, 'The Importance of Free Will,' *Mind*, XC (1981), pp. 386-405 and *Freedom Within Reason* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990), L.W. Ekstrom, *Free Will: A Philosophical Study* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), R. Kane, *The Significance of Free Will*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996), G. Watson, "Responsibility and the Limits of Evil," in J. Fischer, and M. Ravizza (eds), *Perspectives on Moral Responsibility*. (Cornell: Cornell UP, 1991), pp. 119-150, and even S. Smilansky—an RMR skeptic himself!—*Free Will and Illusion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

¹³ Wolf, 'The Importance of Free Will', p. 400.

which presumes otherwise is irrational. We still recognize that we are human and different from other species in important ways. We may still disapprove of the actions of our peers, even if we do not blame them for performing them. And, as will be argued below, we may still love and cherish other people for who they are. And so we ought to press these authors and ask: what *exactly* is the isolating feature of this perspective?

Some of the name-calling and castigation arises from a misreading of the implications of adopting the objective attitude. Susan Wolf, for example, writes:

Imagine for a moment what a world would be like in which we all regarded each other solely with the objective attitude. We would still imprison murderers and thieves, presumably, and we would still sing praises for acts of courage and charity. We would applaud and criticize, say ‘thank you’ and ‘for shame’ according to whether our neighbors’ behavior was or was not to our liking. But these actions and words would have a different, shallower meaning than they have for us now. Our praises would not be expressions of admiration or esteem; our criticisms would not be expressions of indignation or resentment. Rather, they would be bits of positive and negative reinforcement meted out in the hopes of altering the character of others in ways best suited to our needs.¹⁴

The objective attitude enthusiast can agree with much in this passage (e.g. “our criticisms would not be expressions of indignation and resentment”) but still question the gratuitous use of words like “shallower.” The issue of praise is more complicated, as will be discussed below. Wolf continues:

An act of heroism or of saintly virtue would not inspire us to aim for higher or nobler ideals, nor would it evoke in us a reverence or even admiration for its agent. At best we would think it is a piece of good fortune that people occasionally do perform acts like this...We would not recoil from acts of injustice or cruelty as insults to human dignity, nor be moved by such acts to reflect with sorrow or puzzlement on the tide of events that can bring persons to stoop so low. Rather, we would recognize that the human tendency to perform acts like this is undesirable, a problem to be dealt with, like any other, as scientifically and efficiently as possible.¹⁵

¹⁴ Wolf, ‘The Importance of Free Will’, p. 391.

¹⁵ Wolf, ‘The Importance of Free Will’, p.391.

Here, Wolf's worries are mostly groundless. Why, when we take the objective attitude, should an act of heroism not inspire us to aim for this ideal? True, we know that the hero does not deserve praise for his action, but that does not take away from the heroism of the act itself. We don't, after all, perform heroic acts merely to deserve praise for them; we perform them because we think the act will serve a worthy purpose. (Think, for example, of the firemen who entered the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Can anyone really think that what motivated them to do this was the idea that they would deserve praise and be labeled as heroes for doing so? Surely, their primary motivation was to save the people trapped inside the building from being burned alive.) The second claim is similarly wrong. Why should we not recoil from acts of cruelty? If Wolf's emphasis here is on cruelty as an insult to Human Dignity, then she is perhaps right. But this does not stop us from recoiling at the sight of cruelty, not as an insult to dignity, but as a cause of intense physical and psychological suffering. We all recoil at the sight of a human being eaten by a tiger, or being burned alive, without blaming the animal or the fire. And of *course* we would be moved to reflect with sorrow at how the event of human cruelty has come to pass. Not blaming the criminal in no way diminishes our sorrow at the suffering of the victim. Finally, while it is true that we would like to deal with the problem of human cruelty as efficiently as possible, this does not mean that we view the victim without compassion or fellow-feeling.

Wolf concludes her indictment of the objective attitude with the following passage:

The most gruesome difference between this world and ours would be reflected in our closest human relationships—the relations between siblings, parents and children, and especially spouses and companions. We would still be able to form some sorts of association that could be described as relationships of friendship and love. One person could find another amusing or useful. One could notice that the presence of a certain person was, like the sound of a favorite song, particularly soothing or invigorating. We could choose friends as we now choose clothing or home furnishing or hobbies, according to whether they offer, to a sufficient degree, the proper combination of

pleasure and practicality. Attachments of considerable strength can develop on such limited bases. People do, after all, form strong attachments to their cars, their pianos, not to mention their pets. Nonetheless I hope it is obvious why the words “friendship” and “love” applied to relationships in which admiration, respect, and gratitude have no part, might be said to take on a hollow ring.¹⁶

I quote these passages at length because they are the clearest and most eloquent expression of the prevailing view of the objective attitude. The view is wrong, however, and the pessimism misplaced. When you take the objective attitude towards other human beings, you do nothing more than see them as natural things. But a human being is still a human being—the most exciting, infuriating, unpredictable, lovable, loathsome natural thing in the world. So, when we adopt the objective attitude, we would not merely find people useful or amusing. We would not choose our friends like we would choose home furnishings, hobbies, songs, pianos, or pets. (One needs to be suspicious about analogies that are used to trivialize certain features of the objective attitude without providing a basis for the trivialization.) We choose friends like we choose human friends—that’s all. Nothing in the objective attitude prevents us from recognizing, appreciating, *cherishing* the rich and wonderful qualities of another person. It remains the choice that brings the greatest rewards and the deepest disappointments in all of human existence.

So it is not at all obvious that “love” and “friendship” take on a hollow ring when we take the objective attitude. To see this, however, to really believe it, we need to take a much closer look at what it means to fully adopt this view of the world—what it means, and what it does *not* mean. The better we understand the objective attitude, I believe, the less “gruesome” it will appear.

¹⁶ Wolf, 1981, p. 391

IV Objectivity and Participation.

Imagine a person—call her Sally—who is convinced by arguments for RMR skepticism and therefore wishes to adopt the objective attitude towards everyone, including herself, at all times. Set aside, for now, any preconceived ideas about what doing this would mean. We have to rid our minds of all the scare-adjectives—Bleak! Barren! Cold! Isolated!—that have come to be associated with the objective attitude. In this section I examine ways in which Sally would regard other attitudes and emotions, including the “participant reactive attitudes” described by P.F. Strawson.¹⁷

1. Resentment and Indignation.

Resentment is the paradigm of an RMR presupposing attitude. We feel resentment when we believe that people have wronged us, and that they deserve blame (and perhaps punishment) for what they did. We only resent people because only people are free in such a way as to make this attitude appropriate. We do not resent a dog for tracking mud into the house, or a computer for crashing, or the weather for ruining graduation—or if we do in the heat of the moment, we later, upon reflection, consider the attitude to be inappropriate. According to P.F. Strawson, the closely related feeling of indignation arises when we vicariously experience another’s wrong, and again believe that the perpetrator is deserving of blame. We resent injuries inflicted on us; we are indignant at the injuries of others.

To Sally, resentment makes no sense. We do not resent a tree that falls down on our house and destroys it; so we should not resent a thief who breaks in and steals everything in it. We may be angry, furious in fact; we may be deeply sorrowful (if, say, among the items lost

¹⁷ See B. Waller, *Freedom Without Responsibility*, (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1990) and *The Natural Selection of Autonomy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), R. Kane, *The Significance of Free Will*, G. Strawson, *Freedom and Belief* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), and especially D. Pereboom, *Living Without Free Will*, for other analyses of the reactive attitudes and how they are affected by the denial of moral responsibility.

were old honeymoon photographs and scrapbooks). But resentment is irrational to the RMR skeptic. As Sally looks at the robbery, she thinks that the thief could have refrained from robbing the house only in the sense that the tree could have refrained from falling.

One might protest at this point that the above claim is obviously false. Human beings and trees are quite different. Humans deliberate, make connections, they can act according to reasons. They are capable of being educated, of having second order desires, of planning their lives. At some point this thief could have thought to himself that stealing is wrong, or that a life of crime is too stressful and dangerous to be worthwhile, and he could have planned his life accordingly. To which Sally—being true to the objective attitude—replies: no, this criminal could not have. Perhaps *you* could have had those thoughts, but you are not the thief. The combination of heredity, environment, and (perhaps) stochasticity that produced the mugger did not make those thoughts possible under these particular circumstances. The thief ‘could’—in a certain sense—have been adopted by a humanitarian, he *could* have found God, he *could* have won the lottery, or found a nice high paying job. But then he would not have been the thief who came across that empty house on that morning. The tree, after all, *could* have had a stronger root system, the recent weather *could* have been less rainy, the roots not too rotted by the recent storms. From Sally’s point of view, both acts are unfortunate natural events. None of this of course means that Sally would not want the thief caught, or put in jail, to deter other criminals and prevent other crimes. But that would, in theory, be the only reason Sally desires the thief’s incarceration. (In fact, Sally will also want him punished because she is impulsively resentful, but upon reflection the “irrational” aspect of this emotion will diminish over time.)

Would ridding ourselves of the feeling of resentment be such a great loss? Resentment is a negative emotion that eats away at us when we feel we have been wronged or taken advantage

of. It may have strong psychological underpinnings—a product of our evolutionary past¹⁸—but it has no place in the worldview of the objective attitude enthusiast, in spite of how powerful the visceral feeling of resentment may be. I should note that Sally is not after all eliminating the feeling (at least at this stage); she is merely attempting not to, in Paul Russell’s words, *engage or entertain* the feeling.¹⁹ She wants to minimize its effects on her behavior.

Of course, the more horrible the act, the harder this will be to do. If someone harms a member of Sally’s family, the resentment will likely boil over. She would have an uncontrollable desire for vengeance. But even feelings this strong can diminish, succeeded by a lasting grief. And grief, no matter how passionate or intense, is perfectly consistent with the objective attitude.

Fortunately, horrifying acts of violence and cruelty are not the most common causes of resentment. Usually resentment is brought on by far more minor offenses—being cut off on the highway, a slight at work, a snide review in the *New York Review of Books*. The attempt to rid ourselves of resentment in most cases will likely improve our lives, make us more easy going, less consumed with bitterness. How many fine friendships are lost or damaged because of petty resentments which get in the way of a better understanding of why our friends did what they did? Sally will be on guard against these feelings. Rather than relentlessly judging the actions of her friends and acquaintances, she will try to appreciate them in all of their complexity. And remember: Sally is an RMR skeptic. It is generally good for one’s attitudes to comport with one’s rational beliefs.

2. Gratitude

¹⁸ See my ‘The Illusion of Freedom Evolves’, in D. Spurrett, D. Ross, H. Kincaid, & L. Stephens (eds), *Distributed Cognition and the Will*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, in press) for an account of why reactive attitudes like resentment might have been fitness enhancing.

¹⁹ P. Russell, ‘Strawson’s Way of Naturalizing Responsibility’, *Ethics*, 102 (1992), pp. 287-302, at p. 296.

Gratitude is a complicated feeling for the RMR skeptic (and the objective attitude enthusiast) because there are a number of components and aspects built into it. There seems to be an aspect of gratitude that does presuppose that the object deserves praise for his or her actions. But there is also an aspect of gratitude that does not. We are often grateful for a cool breeze, or a magnificent view. (Whereas we are not resentful of a hot muggy day.) So Sally the RMR skeptic must ask herself: how can we separate these two components of gratitude when it comes to human actions?

Suppose Sally, after visiting a bank machine, drops her wallet on the street, and later a woman picks it up. She looks at the address on the license and drives out to Sally's house to return it. How should Sally react to this act of good will? A pessimist about the objective attitude might say the following: Sally should just take the wallet, thank the woman (for that will reinforce the behavior, making it more likely that she will repeat the action in the future), and close the door, her true manner cold and indifferent to the woman. After all, this woman is not *deserving of praise* for her act. It was just a natural event. She is not morally responsible for being the kind of person who goes out of her way to commit a kind and thoughtful act.

As in the Wolf passages, much of the description here is factually accurate, yet unnecessarily bleak. Sally should thank the woman, but not only because it may reinforce the behavior. She should also thank her because she deeply appreciates the gesture. And while it is true that the woman is not ultimately deserving of praise for her actions (ultimately, Sally believes, it is a matter of luck that she became the kind of person who performs them), there is no reason for Sally to be coldhearted to her. She can warmly appreciate the gesture and the person who performed it without attributing desert-entailing responsibility to her. Sally can *exult* in the gesture if she wants; she can think "what a nice world it is that produces clumsy,

absentminded people like me who drop money-stuffed wallets, and sweet unselfish women like her who return them.” True, much of this appreciation does not pertain to the woman herself, but instead to the world that produced her. Nevertheless it is *her*, the woman, that Sally is celebrating. And the greater the heroes—the Danes, for example, who protected Jews during the Holocaust—the more profound our feelings of appreciation will be.

Our Kantian proclivities may begin to rebel at this picture, but we can suppress the rebellion, at least for now. True, we are not attributing to these heroes a dignity and respect as autonomous agents. But this does not prevent us from admiring and applauding their characters and the actions that arise from their characters. We are grateful to the world for having such people in it, and we appreciate the heroes themselves for being what they are (even if they are not morally responsible for it). This is a deep, warm, *unbleak*, *unbarren*, *unironic* appreciation, and it is entirely consistent with denying free will and taking the objective attitude. It is the aspect of gratitude that RMR skeptics can consistently embrace.

3. **Forgiveness**

Forgiveness, like gratitude, has multiple aspects. For the free will skeptic, there is certainly a sense in which *tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner* is true. If no one is morally responsible for any act, however heinous, then everyone should ultimately be forgiven.

Nietzsche's description of Mirabeau is relevant here:

Mirabeau had no memory for insults and vile actions done him and was unable to forgive simply because he—forgot... Such a man shakes off with a *single* shrug many vermin that eat deep into others; here alone genuine “love of one's enemies” is possible—supposing it to be possible at all on earth.²⁰

But there is another sense of forgiveness which survives. It requires that we follow Richard

Double's advice and replace the question “Was S free in doing *a*?” with “Was *a* reflective of S's

²⁰ F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, from Walter Kaufman (ed), *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: The Modern Library, 1992), p. 475.

character?”²¹ To forgive someone is to believe that the act to be forgiven is not an essential and ineradicable part of their character. There are a lot of determining factors at work when it comes to actions, and many do not essentially involve the type of human being the agent is. So if someone betrays Sally in some way, and Sally believes that the act was ‘out of character,’ she may forgive him. Why? Because she believes that the act does not reflect how the person is and how he will behave in the future. Her decision of whether or not to forgive him, in this sense, will then depend on whether she believes his regret is sincere and he is capable (in the compatibilist sense) of refraining from committing the types of action that make her unhappy.²²

One might object here that by my lights, no one ever deserves blame for a bad act, whether or not it reflects his character—so then why should we forgive some people and not others? Aren’t my criteria of forgiveness arbitrary and unfair? No. While it’s true that people with truly bad characters *should* ultimately be forgiven, this doesn’t mean we want to hang out with all of them. A bad person is still a bad person. It’s not their fault that they are the way they are, but we still want to avoid them when we can.

4. Love.

Love is the emotion many philosophers find to be most endangered by free will skepticism and the objective attitude. Laura Ekstrom, for example, writes:

Concerning at least certain of our personal relationships, crucial to our sense that they are genuine is the assumption that the participants are free in adopting whatever emotional stances they take, including their commitment, or lack of it, to each other. To suppose that human beings are wholly without free will seems naturally to require that we give up some of the satisfaction we derive from our relationships, since a view of persons who act, but never freely, entails that our speech, thoughts, emotions, and body motions, never count as free expressions of ourselves. One type of relationship especially illustrative of

²¹ R. Double, *The Non-Reality of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990), p. 228.

²² See Pereboom, *Living Without Free Will*, p. 201, for a similar analysis of the type of forgiveness that is compatible with the denial of moral responsibility.

this dependence of a sense of genuineness upon an assumption of free will is the romantic sort of personal relationship.²³

Here Ekstrom echoes P.F. Strawson, who writes that the objective attitude cannot include “the sort of love which adults can sometimes be said to feel reciprocally for each other;”²⁴ and Susan Wolf who “hopes it is obvious why the words ‘friendship’ and ‘love’ would take on a hollow ring under the objective attitude.”²⁵

This is certainly the majority view, and it is often unreflectively accepted as obvious. As Pereboom points out, however, “the thesis that love between mature persons would be subverted if hard incompatibilism were true requires more thorough argument than Strawson has provided.”²⁶ And not just Strawson. No theorist has to my knowledge provided any sort of rigorous argument showing that the denial of free will and RMR would endanger even the most tragic, passionate, romantic, blissful kinds of love that exist. The conclusion is simply assumed, and then underscored with gloomy metaphors. Ekstrom goes on to cite with approval the philosopher W.S. Anglin who writes that “it is an essential part of our most intimate relationships that we view our love as a ‘freely given gift.’ If I learn that my spouse loves me only because this ‘love’ is the inevitable product of some childhood experience then the whole relationship takes on a strange and dark colour.”²⁷

Sally, by contrast, cannot see why love must be viewed as a “freely given gift.” It would be disturbing, she supposes, if there was an active conscious agent who was hypnotizing her husband to love her. But RMR skepticism and the objective attitude presume no such thing. They presume only that the person who loves is not ultimately the source of their feelings and

²³ Ekstrom, *Free Will*, p. 12.

²⁴ Strawson, ‘Freedom and Resentment’, p. 66.

²⁵ Wolf, ‘The Importance of Free Will’, p. 391.

²⁶ Pereboom, *Living Without Free Will*, p. 202.

²⁷ Ekstrom, *Free Will*, p. 12.

action. Of *course* childhood and adult experiences, in conjunction with heredity, have resulted in the love husbands and wives feel for one another. Why on earth would that undermine the genuineness of the feeling itself? Consider the relationship many of us have with our pets. Those of us who feel reciprocal love for our dogs form this deep bond without in any way viewing their love as a freely given gift. We know that the dogs' love for us is a result of our having cared for them, played with them, walked them, fed them since they were puppies. Moreover, we know that dogs have been bred to form deep attachments with human beings—their loyalty and eagerness to please have been both artificially and naturally selected for. We know this, and we don't care. We still love them, and we view their love for us as genuine.

Objection: But that's love for a dog! How can you possibly compare it with the love of two rational mature adults? Response: the two kinds of love *are* different, but this difference has nothing to do with moral responsibility. The difference is that human beings have far more complex, maddening, and exciting ways of expressing and feeling love for one another. In saying that both human beings and dogs are not free and morally responsible agents, we are not saying that human beings are just like dogs. Both dogs and humans have two eyes, but that doesn't mean that my love for dogs is identical to my love for humans. A human being is a human being. We must always keep this simple tautology in mind whenever someone wishes to dismiss the emotions of a committed free will skeptic as deficient. The love we feel for our husbands, wives, partners, and close friends is deeper in many ways than the love we feel for dogs, just as our love for dogs is deeper than our love for TiVo. Romantic love and friendships evolve because of who we are, how we naturally complement each other, the good times, good jokes, and tragedies that we go through together. None of this is undermined by the objective attitude. None of this requires a belief in free will or robust moral responsibility.

Of course, some will not be persuaded by this defense of “unfree love.” They have conceived of and defined genuine love or friendship as essentially involving a deep form of free will and moral responsibility. But these people should ask themselves what they really mean by love as a “freely given gift” and whether this view of love is really necessary. Is the profound appreciation of other human beings, the joy we feel in being around one another, the laughs, tears, and the commitment to stay together through all of the varied experiences of life—is all of that enough? If not, then perhaps we should lower our sights a little—for the arguments against RMR are quite strong.

Finally, these pessimists should be reminded that the objective attitude has some benefits in the home as well. As Marge Simpson tells her daughter in *The Simpsons*: “marriage is a wonderful thing. But it’s also a constant battle for moral superiority.” When we take the objective attitude towards our spouses, we have a much better chance of reaching a cease-fire.

5. Self-Reactive Attitudes: Guilt, Regret, and Pride

We now have a better sense of how it is we might view others if we were to live in a manner that is consistent with RMR skepticism and the objective attitude. But how might we view ourselves? The “self-reactive” attitudes that would seem to be most affected by this view are guilt, regret, and pride.

On the face of it, RMR skepticism seems to undermine guilt, in the same way that it undermines resentment. After all, if others don’t deserve blame for their actions, neither do we. And if we are not blameworthy for our regrettable actions, then why should we feel guilty? Reasoning like this worries many pessimists about RMR skepticism and it is one of the causes, I believe, for the stubbornness with which they cling to their views. For a world where no one feels guilt for their actions would perhaps be a dangerous one to live in.

It is important first to recognize the aspect of guilt that is truly inconsistent with the objective attitude. Like everyone else we do not deserve of blame for our behavior, and the aspect of guilt that presumes that we do is inappropriate. But there is also an important difference between ourselves and other people. We have what Bruce Waller has called *take-charge responsibility* (TCR) for our own actions.²⁸ We can deliberate, make plans, guide our future conduct. By contrast, we do not have take-charge-responsibility for the actions of others. The feeling (or self-reactive attitude) of guilt is deeply intertwined with this TCR. Guilt is a signal to us that our actions are regrettable—it informs us that it would have been better if we had not performed the action. (This is not to be confused with the more problematic claim that we *should* have acted differently. Rather, it simply means that whether or not it was possible to have acted differently, we would have preferred it if the action had not occurred.) Now, since we have some compatibilist—or ‘take charge’—control over our actions in the future, we can allow the feelings of guilt and regret to guide us. We note that the action caused us to have these negative feelings, that it caused suffering to others, as well as to ourselves, and so resolve not to perform similar actions in the future.

The aspect of guilt that does *not* fit with the objective attitude is the kind of morbid hand-wringing that keeps us awake all night thinking about what might have been. When we feel this aspect of guilt, we dwell, we analyze the action, replaying the situation over and over in our head, thinking about all the different ways we *should* have responded. We do this not with an eye for future improvement, but with basic sadness and humiliation about the way we behaved. Again, it is tricky to call this aspect inconsistent with RMR skepticism and the objective attitude because it is bound up with the first aspect. If taking the objective attitude mitigates the

²⁸ Waller, *The Natural Selection of Autonomy*, p. 40. Waller contrasts TCR with “just-desert responsibility,” the type of responsibility that RMR skepticism rules out.

negative aspect of guilt, will the motivation to avoid similar behavior in the future remain as strong? Maybe, maybe not. Certainly, we can still *recognize* the negative effects of our actions without blaming ourselves for it. And then, using our TCR, our compatibilist control, we can resolve not to perform actions with similar effects again. The objective attitude may allow us to get a little more sleep, thinking: what's done is done, let's just not do it again.

The same reasoning applies to pride. Viewing ourselves from the objective perspective undermines the aspect of pride that presupposes that we deserve praise for our accomplishments. But there are aspects of pride that survive. When we do a nice turn for someone, or write a good essay, or perform well at work, a feeling of happiness accompanies these actions. There is absolutely no reason to deny this feeling, or to try to train ourselves out of having it. It exists, it is natural. That aspect of the feeling truly is non-propositional—it does not assume anything about our own praiseworthiness. We can then recognize that this positive, desirable emotion is associated with certain actions, and resolve to perform similar actions in the future. Virtue is its own reward: in this case the reward is the feeling of happiness associated with performing a good action. Furthermore, as with the feeling of gratitude, an aesthetic appreciation (of ourselves) can survive as well. Just as a beautiful woman looks admiringly at herself in the mirror, Sally may appreciate the kind of person she has become. She may admire certain qualities—loyalty to her friends, a desire to help others, the creativity she displays in her art, the dedication she shows to her work. No, she is not morally responsible for any of these characteristics nor for the kind of person she has become; it is all ultimately a matter of luck. Cleopatra presumably did not feel she was responsible for the beauty of her nose, but she certainly took pride in its length and elegance.

What *is* inconsistent with the objective attitude is the hint of self-righteousness that sometimes accompanies such self-appreciation—the thought “why can’t other people be as good as I am?” Recognizing that all the people whom we love, respect, and cherish, including ourselves, do not deserve praise for being who we are, may help to lessen the disdain and contempt we sometimes feel for those who are not fortunate enough to make it into this charmed circle. But the self-appreciation itself, as long as it does not involve a belief in desert-entailing responsibility, is something Sally can consistently embrace.

6. The Objective Attitude and Politics: Some Fringe Benefits of RMR skepticism

Finally, there is the question of how Sally might view the world of public affairs now that she is an RMR skeptic. This is a case where the upside of the objective attitude becomes easily apparent. Reading newspapers or blogs, talking to friends, co-workers, colleagues, watching television news, it often seems as though we live in a state of perpetual moral outrage. Witness the uproar over the recent decision to remove the feeding tube from a woman who had been in a persistent vegetative state for fifteen years. Thousands protested this decision furiously all over the United States. There was outrage from every corner, on all sides of the issue—everyone convinced of their moral or intellectual superiority.

As noted above, in a world without RMR indignation is almost entirely irrational. It doesn’t matter if you’re a conservative outraged at the prospect of gay marriage, or a liberal outraged by the ban of it, the resentment and bitterness we feel towards our opponents makes little sense. Sally will likely retain the disposition to become indignant—it is a powerful psychological drive. But she will also work to soften its impact on her psyche. When she notices the high-pitched semi-whine of moral indignation creeping into her voice, she will take a

deep breath and stop. Although she is an anti-war liberal she will realize that Dick Cheney no more deserves blame for bringing us to war under false pretenses than Howard Dean deserves praise for opposing the war. Taking the objective attitude will still of course allow her to vote for and finance candidates whose policies she favors. But there will be no hatred, no resentment for candidates who oppose those policies. A liberal RMR skeptic would believe that it is simply a matter of bad luck that Tom DeLay is the type of person he is (bad luck for him, bad luck for the country). And the conservative RMR skeptic would think the same about Michael Moore and the founders of moveon.org. Once we reflect that *all people*, including those who hold abhorrent political views, are not morally responsible for being who they are, we can rid ourselves of the high-toned self-righteousness that poisons most political discussions. And then we can work productively to convince people that our own views are more plausible. Will we be successful at banishing the soul-rotting anger and indignation at all times? Of course not. But over time, Sally can acquire a view of life that is compassionate, pragmatic, cheerful, and, that (as Einstein has written) gives humor its due. It is the view of life that scientific naturalists take to the field and novelists take to the world they wish to portray. Judgment takes a backseat to understanding; the goal is to learn, appreciate, describe—moral posturing is left to the politicians.

V Can We Really Deny Free Will and Moral Responsibility?

Sally now finds herself in the following situation. She is convinced *theoretically* that there is no RMR and therefore that the objective attitude is the rational one to take. She has also seen that the paranoia surrounding the objective attitude is unfounded. Yes, being a RMR skeptic is going to require a profound revision of her view of the world. But no, it will not turn

her into a bloodless robot who is unable to love or appreciate life. An important question remains, however. To what degree is it psychologically possible for her to abandon a belief in RMR and view everyone exclusively in an objective way? After all, RMR skepticism been around since the Greeks and perhaps earlier. It has been over two hundred years since La Mettrie's *L'Homme Machine*; the case that human beings are objects or machines has been made time and time again. Yet we remain—at least in the West—utterly committed to theoretically untenable notions of free will and moral responsibility. Is this whole project just a Quixotic exercise in abstraction? Will Sally ever be able to feel *in her gut* that robust moral responsibility is a fiction? Will she ever really be able to take the objective attitude towards everyone at all times?'

This is an important question. There are at least two psychological hurdles to pass over if we want to really live according to the principles of free will and RMR skepticism: (1) the phenomenology of libertarian freedom at the time we face difficult choices, and (2) our predisposition towards certain attitudes (like resentment) that presuppose that other agents are RMR for their actions. Both (1) and (2) make it difficult to genuinely *live* the denial of RMR—to exclusively adopt the objective attitude.

V Joshua's Journey

Let us concede that we are deeply committed to seeing others and especially ourselves, as morally responsible agents, and as appropriate candidates of attitudes like resentment. Let us concede further that it is hard to even imagine what it would be like to give up this belief in its entirety. But is an almost total embrace of the objective attitude *impossible*? I do not believe so. And is it possible for the commitment to RMR and the attitudes that presuppose it to weaken

gradually, without perhaps disappearing altogether? I think it is. Indeed, it is with this gradual erosion of the commitment that we may come closest to truly living according to the principles of RMR skepticism.

In a widely cited footnote, P.F. Strawson compares our commitment to the reactive attitudes with our commitment to induction. True, we cannot provide a rational justification for induction, Strawson observes, but our commitment to induction is “original, natural, non-rational (not *irrational*) in no way something we choose or could give up.”²⁹ Elsewhere, Strawson writes: “We can no more be reasoned out of our proneness to personal and moral reactive attitudes in general than we can be reasoned out of our belief in the existence of the body.”³⁰ But skepticism about RMR is not analogous to radical skepticism in these other areas for the following reason. Perhaps we cannot prove that it is true that we have a body, but we have no reason to think that it is false. By contrast, there are valid arguments with true—or at least extremely plausible—premises which concludes that there is no such thing as robust moral responsibility.³¹ If we had an argument that cast serious doubt on the existence of the body, perhaps we could be reasoned out of believing in its existence. As it stands, however, the evidence is neutral at best (for body skeptics), and so we have no reason to go against our psychology and doubt the body’s existence.

Let me suggest that there is a better analogy for what it would mean to truly deny moral responsibility and adopt the objective attitude. Denying these concepts and embracing the resulting worldview would, I believe, be analogous to a committed theist coming to believe that

²⁹ Strawson, ‘Freedom and Resentment’, p. 79, n. 7.

³⁰ P.F. Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 32-33. See also P. Russell, ‘Strawson’s Way of Naturalizing Responsibility’.

³¹ See G. Strawson, *Freedom and Belief*, for an argument to this effect.

there is no such thing as a personal God. To make this analogy as specific as possible, let us suppose this theist is an orthodox Jew.³²

Call him Joshua. Joshua, raised in Borough Park, Brooklyn, from the earliest moments of his remembered life is brought to *shul* three times a day. He *davins* (prays) after every meal. He learns about the history of God's creation, omniscience, his commandments and interventions. As he grows up into adolescence and beyond, Joshua feels the truth of God in the marrow of his bones. God is part of his every thought and action. It is not an intellectual belief—he is not persuaded by the ontological argument, or the argument from design. To Joshua all of that misses the point. He *knows* that God exists like he knows that he's breathing. End of story.

Now one day Joshua makes friends with an atheist, a proselytizing atheist. The two start a debate over the existence of a personal god. Since Joshua is no stranger to proselytizing himself, the two agree to exchange books, to read one every month, then continue their debate based on these readings. Joshua's first assigned book is *The Blind Watchmaker* by Richard Dawkins. He reads it carefully and, though he is full of admiration for the lively prose, he is far from convinced. The strength of his commitment is far too great to be eliminated or even eroded because of one book, no matter how well-written or well argued. But the subject intrigues him and he reads more. He becomes familiar with Darwinian theory and finds, after a year or two, that it seems persuasive, at least intellectually. Soon he is drawn to the writings of some prominent naturalists and materialists, and though he initially finds their views repugnant—if he *really* thought that we were nothing but atoms in the void, he would throw himself off a bridge!—soon, for the first time in his life, he is able to understand how someone can see the world that way. In fact, the more he reads, the more the naturalistic worldview

³² One could tell this same story, suitably modified, about a Catholic or Muslim or Hindu and so forth. I have chosen Orthodox Judaism because my father went through a transformation similar to the one described in this story.

makes sense, theoretical sense anyhow. Joshua is a serious dedicated man, after all. His whole life has been devoted to study, to the pursuit of truth, although not in this particular direction. Another year passes. More reading, more reflecting. One day Joshua notices that, without his realizing it, his commitment, his “non-rational” commitment, to a belief in God has eroded somewhat. He no longer feels God in his bones as he did before. God’s truth is no longer intuitively obvious. More time passes and finally, after all this study and reflection, he sees that he is ready to decide this question—this question of God’s existence—on its merits, on its intellectual merits. He assesses the arguments on both sides, arguments for belief in a personal God, and arguments against this belief. He finds that the arguments for the latter are more persuasive. And to his surprise, many of the deep problems he always associated with this position—if there is no God, then life would be meaningless, everything is permitted!—do not seem like terrible problems anymore. And for the first time in his life, this means something to him—something crucial, something that can alter his attitudes and behavior. He is now ready to say and to *truly believe* that the existence of a personal God is implausible and to adjust his life accordingly. And he does.

Yes, he still finds himself behaving as though God existed—he goes to *shul* occasionally, and he feels guilty for not fasting on Yom Kippur. In other words, he is not fully consistent in his rejection of the existence of a personal God. Even so, he is amazed to see how differently his commitments were shaped before embarking on his journey. You might even say that his intuitions, his phenomenology even, have been re-formed, at least a little bit.

It is certainly possible that someone could come around to live the denial of RMR in the same way. Not all at once, not after hearing one argument or after reading one book or essay. The commitments are too strong, the intuitions are still pervasive. *We feel* morally responsible.

We're brought up to *believe* that we are morally responsible. And we are often taught that only a sleazy defense attorney would even question this obvious common-sense truth about the world. But the more we reflect, the more even our common sense shows us that there is something deeply problematic about being responsible for our characters and actions. The more we reflect, the more we realize that the rejection of these concepts entails far fewer problems than we once thought.

One may object that this line of reasoning cannot apply to the way we feel about choices made in the present. No matter how much we reflect, we cannot fail to view a choice we have to make *now*, one with a moral dimension, as a choice for which we will be robustly responsible. For these choices, we are forced to think: "Okay, maybe my heredity and environment have determined my actions, my character, and so forth, and yes, all these things are influencing this decision I am about to make, but even with all of these influences, there's still something, a "me", that can swing matters one way or the other"? (This perhaps is the rough boundary between ourselves and the outside world that Nagel refers to.) And there, it might be claimed, is the disanalogy of my Joshua story. There are plenty of consistent atheists in this world, but no consistent deniers of moral responsibility. Nobody adopts the objective attitude towards their own choices in the present.

One possible way to respond is to point to certain Buddhist masters who at least claim to have made great strides in overcoming the delusion of self, in altering their actual *phenomenology*, how it *feels* to make a choice.³³ But we do not need to rely on these anecdotal reports, or even anthropologically substantiated reports. For these Buddhist masters are (possible) examples of those who have been *completely* successful in overcoming the delusion of

³³ See G. Strawson, *Freedom and Belief*, Chapter 6, for an illuminating discussion of Buddhism and the phenomenology of free will.

RMR. That probably will not happen for most of us. We are like Joshua in that sense; the experience of radically free choice and moral responsibility has been ingrained too deeply in us to achieve total success. But what can happen, as I have said, is a significant weakening of the commitment. And that is one reason I think the Joshua analogy is more appropriate than P.F. Strawson's analogy of the commitment to induction. It does not seem possible that we can make *progress* in giving up our belief in induction. (Nor, as I have argued, is there any reason to even engage in this attempt.) By contrast, if I am right, there exists a *continuum* of progress one can make in the rejection of moral responsibility and the full-time adoption of the objective attitude. Perhaps there are some who have achieved total success. Perhaps not. But there is no denying that our natural commitments, convictions, and intuitions on this issue can soften to a large degree, sometimes without our even noticing it.³⁴

VI Conclusion

My aim in this paper has been twofold. First, I have urged pessimists about RMR skepticism in general, and the objective attitude in particular, to reexamine their position. I have tried to show that Strawson and his followers have exaggerated or misread the implications of taking on this attitude full time. In doing so, they have also ignored the advantages of the RMR skepticism and the objective attitude. The undeniable human tendency to blame and judge at every turn is something that can and ought to be resisted. Relentless judging requires a lot of mental energy—energy that might be better directed towards understanding and appreciating what life and other human beings have to offer. Furthermore, as authors and thinkers as diverse

³⁴ See also G. Strawson, *Freedom and Belief*, p. 311. Strawson claims that simply engaging in philosophical reflection on this issue for a number of years may erode our commitment to viewing ourselves as ultimately responsible for our actions. But real progress towards eliminating the commitment, according to Strawson, would require years of disciplined meditation.

as Darwin, Spinoza, and the Buddha have noted, taking the objective attitude should cause a marked increase in compassion. No longer would we view criminals with hatred and deep resentment, desiring punishment well beyond any pragmatic goals that the punishment could achieve. Finally and perhaps most importantly, I have argued that nothing about the objective attitude precludes feelings of exuberance, love, disapproval, sadness, and many other emotions that add richness and beauty to our lives.

I have also attempted to show that the ‘problem’ of free will and moral responsibility is not an idle exercise in abstraction—it is not like the problem of induction, or the problem of other minds. With these latter two problems we may puzzle over them, get lost in them, and even feel temporarily dizzy and displaced. But then we leave the library, have dinner and drinks, play backgammon, and go back to living our lives exactly as before. Denying moral responsibility and adopting the objective attitude is a different matter. Doing so can have a significant and lasting effect on how we live our lives. What begins as a purely theoretical denial of free will and moral responsibility can cause us after a time to revise our behavior, attitudes, and our general view of the world.

Of course, none of these observations has any bearing on the truth of RMR skepticism. Either we are capable of being RMR for our behavior or we are not; metaphysical reality does not tailor itself to our hopes and needs. But if my arguments have helped to make adopting the objective attitude acceptable, then perhaps we can finally judge the question the plausibility of RMR skepticism on its intellectual merits alone.³⁵

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