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Resentment, Will, and Moral Identity

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Abstract

Our everyday personal interactions with others are nothing if not complex. Accidents happen, mistakes are made, and the seamless understanding of the attitudes and actions of others doesn't always occur. At some point an apology will need to be offered. In this essay I intend to examine the work done by an apology after an accidental transgression in mitigating unfavorable reactive attitudes like anger and resentment. This important work, I'll argue, is more than just a societal norm. The work of an apology not only helps others to hold us in our identity as morally responsible agents, but has the ability to engender hope in ourselves and our fellow man.

Our everyday personal interactions with others are nothing if not complex. Accidents happen, mistakes are made, and the seamless understanding of the attitudes and actions of others doesn't always occur. At some point an apology will need to be offered. In this essay I intend to examine the work done by an apology after an accidental transgression in mitigating unfavorable reactive attitudes like anger and resentment. This important work, I'll argue, is more than just a societal norm. The work of an apology not only helps others to hold us in our identity as morally responsible agents, but has the ability to engender hope in ourselves and our fellow man.

Starting with P. F. Strawson's work, *Freedom and Resentment*, I will look at what it means to develop a negative reactive attitude versus an objective attitude toward another person. *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments*, by R. Jay Wallace, will help us examine one of the qualities necessary to be an agent deserving of these attitudes, what it means to be blameworthy, and the exempting conditions that require we forgo our negative reactions. Hilde Lindemann, in *Holding and Letting Go: The Social Practice of Personal Identities*, then gives us a framework to understand how expressions of will are correctly or incorrectly taken up by others as part of our moral identity. In the last part I will explore one argument against the need for an apology after an accidental transgression as well as the reasons I have for believing that it is apologies, in this context, that do real work in a community of hoppers.

This past summer my friend and I were in Washington D.C. for a conference. It was July, it was hot, there were lines, and people were testy. I don't mind crowds, the jostling and closeness don't bother me. What does bother me is when a person, we will call them Sam, knocks into my friend, almost knocks him down, and then blames him for being in their way when he was the one standing still. Knowing Sam somewhat from the conference, I have no reason to believe them not to be a fully functioning, responsible moral agent, fully understanding his rights and responsibilities in the moral world. But this agent did not apologize for his actions. This agent could have carelessly hurt my friend and did not express (what to me was) the appropriate response of remorse, regret, or concern for my friend's wellbeing, so of course this made me angry and resentful of Sam.

This resentment, this negative reactive attitude that I felt toward Sam is important. By not apologizing, Sam is signaling a lack of concern for the welfare of others and I am picking up on

it. Even accidental, very minor missteps can give rise to such reactions and rightly so. P. F. Strawson writes in his work *Freedom and Resentment*, “The personal reactive attitudes rest on, and reflect, an expectation of, and demand for, the manifestation of a certain degree of goodwill or regard on the part of other human beings towards ourselves” (Strawson 1962, 200). To have a reactive response to the actions of a moral agent communicates that there are indeed moral responsibilities at play. Strawson believes that these reactive attitudes, resentment or gratitude or a myriad of the emotional reactions in between, are a very normal part of the human response to a moral agent either upholding or abandoning their moral obligations to others (Strawson 1962, 195). When we are on the receiving end of a moral failure of someone whom we have had no indication is anything less than a mature moral agent, fully aware of their responsibilities and obligations as such, then we are going to have these types of negative reactions including resentment. Were we as humans to only experience an objective attitude towards others, an attitude of detachment where the actions and intentions of others has minimal emotional impact, then there would be no human life to experience. All interpersonal relationships would be flat, surface interactions without the connection that makes human life so robust.

Strawson shows us how our natural reactive attitudes signal moral responsibilities at play. However, we do need to know if this signaling means that we are in fact interacting with a moral agent capable of understanding moral responsibility and being held accountable for transgressions? Wallace believes, “That it is fair to hold people morally responsible if they possess the rational power to grasp and apply moral reasons, and to control their behavior by the light of those reasons” (Wallace 1994, 1). A morally responsible agent, in other words, is able to reason and understand for themselves the moral principles involved in a situation (Wallace 1994, 157). Beyond that, they are also capable of reflective self control. “The ability to step back from one’s immediate desires and assess the actions they incline one to perform, in light of the moral reasons one has grasped and accepted” (Wallace 1994, 158). This intersection of action and reflection is where we are able to pick up on the quality of will of others and determine if they too are worthy of being considered morally responsible agents or if a non-reactive more objective attitude should be taken towards them. For Wallace this leaves young children, cognitively impaired individuals, and individuals suffering from some forms of major mental, psychological, emotional, and personality disorders exempt from being held as mature moral agents. Holding those without the necessary reflective self control to the same standards of moral responsibility is unreasonable (Wallace 1994, 161). But Sam is not a child, nor are they (that I know of) impaired in a way that would exempt them from moral responsibility. I am pretty sure that they are generally a good person, not mean or evil, so I don’t think that an objective attitude is called for, but I am starting to question that. Is this behavior indicative of a larger moral failure with Sam and should I be cultivating a more detached attitude towards them?

Sam might be thinking that he doesn’t need to apologize because it wasn’t his fault that he knocked into my friend. They can’t be blamed because they were not at fault, it was an accident after all. Wallace might agree, to a point. This is the function of the excuses according to Wallace: to inhibit blameworthiness (Wallace 1994, 121). “The excuses rely implicitly on a moral principle of fairness, to the effect that an agent does not deserve to be blamed for an action if the agent could not have done otherwise” (Wallace 1994, 121). Sam did not intend to knock into my friend –it was an accident. Because it was an accident, it is not their fault. Because it is not their fault, I cannot blame them for almost hurting my friend. And yet my reaction is still a negative one. Wallace might say that this is because even though Sam was not at fault for

bumping into my son, they may still be a candidate for blame for a carelessness or recklessness of their action that led to the interaction with my son (Wallace 1994, 138). That may well be, but I am not entirely convinced that this is the reason for my attitude. I believe that there is more at play here.

Wallace explains that “the moral obligations we hold people to concern qualities of will as expressed in action” (Wallace 1994, 132). These bodily movements of the will often play out publicly and taken together they create a narrative of who we are. Our identity, on display, and ready for uptake by those around us is contained within this body of work.

Lindemann writes, “The physical expression of an identity can involve anything from heroic deeds to Facebook updates, with modes of dress, body language, choice of vocabulary, room décor, and characteristic mannerisms falling somewhere in between” (Lindemann 2014, 107). Our outward actions toward others contain clues as to whether we do in fact understand our moral responsibilities and have the capacity to utilize reflective self control in action. In her book, *Holding and Letting Go*, she advances that there are four moments in the practice of personhood and within each moment there is identity work that goes on (Lindemann 2014, 104). These moments in Lindemann’s practice of personhood are: 1. the human has mental activity that could be expressed. 2. The mental activity is expressed. 3. Others recognize the expression. 4. Others respond to the expression (Lindemann 2014, 53).

These four moments loosely map on to the reactive attitudes of Strawson and the qualifications of a morally responsible agent as discussed by Wallace to give us four moments of moral identity. The first would correspond to Wallace’s mental activity necessary to understand and make our own the reasons for moral responsibility and obligation. The second moment maps to the reflective self control necessary for the practical application of those responsibilities to our interactions with others. During the third moment others join in, recognizing the understanding of moral responsibilities. This then brings us to the fourth moment that were others react to the quality of will displayed in action that can give rise to Strawson’s reactive attitudes, the good and the bad.

However, just like in Lindemann’s four moments of personhood, there is the potential for something to go wrong in each moment of this work (Lindemann 2014, 104). Understanding of moral rights and wrongs can be limited. Sometimes accidents just happen. Even with the best of intentions, actions towards others are often at the mercy of circumstances outside of our reflective self control. It is therefore possible for others to misrecognize these accidental actions as saying one thing about a person’s quality of will when in fact that action implies something quite different calling for the opposite reactive attitude. But how is the one that was accidentally wronged supposed to be able to reconcile this action with the moral identity of the actor without resorting to an objective, detached, and indifferent attitude that assumes we got their identity wrong and they are just a mean person?

Let’s now look back at Sam and the incident in DC. I’m sure it was an accident, that Sam didn’t mean to knock into my friend, but they could have really hurt him and now I am angry with them. I believe that we have a moral responsibility to not hurt others and Sam is not signaling that they have the same moral understanding. In the absence of any excuse or exemption, I feel that my reactive anger is justified. I may also develop a more intentionally objective attitude toward them in the future, no longer trusting that they are indeed a morally responsible agent.

But there is something that Sam could have done to stay held in their identity as a good, morally responsible person. The apology. “I’m sorry” does more than just placate a person on the street or conform our behavior to socially accepted norms of conduct. It speaks to the quality of our will. These words signal to others that we do indeed have an understanding of our moral responsibilities and the capacity for reflective self control. This apology bridges the gap when our will and our actions do not line up. When moved to act on a desire by our will, accidents can happen. If we want to get out of the train station quickly and we turn and bump someone we didn’t know was there, it is the apology that signals that we never intended for our action to cause harm to others, not the excuse of an accident. This movement, this apology, must be expressed for others to view our identity as being that of a mature moral agent. Regretting our actions during self-reflection does not signal to others that we are good, morally responsible people. In fact, by not expressing this in an outward fashion, it may work to signal that we are in fact not a full moral agent, have a limited ability for understanding our moral responsibilities, or that we are just plain mean and the injured party is justified in feeling not-so-pleasant reactive attitudes toward us. But it is not just this work, to hold us in our identities as morally responsible individuals, that the apology does. It can also work towards building a community of hope.

Victoria McGeer, in her article “The Art of Good Hope,” writes that “To be a full-blown intentional agent—to be a creature with a rich profile of intentional and emotional states and capacities—is to be an agent that hopes” (McGeer 2004, 101). Just as Strawson’s reactive attitudes are necessary to the experience of living a fully human life, so is hope. As we grow and change from young children, incapable of the reflective self control necessary to inhibit actions that do not align with the moral standards of responsibility and obligation that we are learning, the apology acts as a way of signaling that we intend to do better in the future. This in turn gives hope to those who may have been wronged that this young child is going to continue to learn and grow and will be better able to enact self control as a mature moral agent. This also brings hope to the child. The child is able to have hope that others will still see them as good moral agents-in-training and not just mean little children on those inevitable future occasions when their will is not reflected in their actions and they have made a mistake. This is akin to the type of scaffolding that McGeer speaks of in her essay. “One could not become a properly human agent, and therefore an agent who hopes, without the scaffolding of others. It is others who invest us with our sense of how we can be in the world—the future—by initially enacting our potential for us” (McGeer 1004, 108). The apology could work the same way for Sam. An apology from them would let me know that their action was not aligned with their will, that it was an accident, and that my hope in being treated with care as a fellow human has not been misplaced in them. Saying ‘I’m Sorry’ would also allow Sam to continue to hope to also be treated as a fellow moral agent capable of understanding moral responsibility and utilizing their powers of reflective self control.

The will must find public expression if we are to treat others and be treated by others as morally responsible agents. It is not enough to have the capacity for reflective self control without others being able to recognize this and respond in kind. Moral identity is not something that one has in a bubble. No one is going to mind if you cannot hold yourself accountable when there is no one else around. There would be no one to protest your objective attitude and call it uncaring. But things don’t always go to plan in our complex interpersonal interactions. When accidents happen it is not enough that there is an excuse. An excuse only looks to the past. There

must be a clear signal of the quality will of the moral agent in order to mitigate what would otherwise be justified anger and or resentment and to preserve and engender hope for the future.

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