

## Conversation & Responsibility<sup>1</sup>

*colloquium version*

(work in progress, please do not quote without permission)

I agree with Jonathan Bennett, R. Jay Wallace, Gary Watson, and other Strawsonians that a theory of moral responsibility must be analyzed by reference to the morally reactive emotions, those that bear on the standpoint of holding morally responsible. Nevertheless, I disagree with Wallace and (most) other Strawsonians insofar as they take holding responsible as explanatorily more basic than responsible agency, so that the latter is to be accounted for in terms of the former. Building on Strawson's work, but moving in a very different direction, I shall develop a new theory of moral responsibility.

### *1. A Strawsonian Quality of Will Thesis*

A different way to approach Strawson's work does not place exclusive emphasis on the role of the reactive attitudes. Reactive attitudes are responses to the qualities in agents' wills. Strawson was at pains to emphasize that we care a great deal about the regard or lack of it that others have for us as manifested in their actions (75). Our reactive attitudes are sensitive to our assessment of that regard. What this suggests is that the initial point of departure for a theory of responsibility is grounded in the standpoint of the moral agent, the one whose will is a candidate for assessment from those susceptible to the reactive emotions. For this reason, and in opposition to other Strawsonians, I have elsewhere proposed a *Quality of Will Thesis*:

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<sup>1</sup> For helpful advice, I am grateful to Randolph Clarke, Ishtiyaque Haji, Stephen Kearns, Alfred Mele, and Michael Zimmerman.

(QW): Being morally responsible is to be settled in terms of the moral quality of the will with which an agent acts. (2005: 172)<sup>2</sup>

Theorizing about moral responsibility, I contend, should be oriented around QW.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. *The Reactive Attitudes and their Attendant Practices*

Regarding the reactive attitudes, I endorsed all of the following: 1) they are responses to the quality of will found in others, and in the self-reflective case, oneself; 2) they have an essentially conative dimension in that distinctive sorts of moral emotions are involved; 3) they also have a cognitive component insofar as they are directed at certain propositional objects, such as, on a view like Wallace's, the belief that an agent violated an obligation; 4) there are both moral and non-moral reactive attitudes<sup>4</sup>; and 5) they manifest the standpoint of holding responsible.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Recently, Nomy Arpaly has advanced a view that is similar in certain respects (2006: 15).

<sup>3</sup> When speaking of the quality of will, I do not mean to pick out by 'will' anything like a faculty or any other sort of action-theoretic entity, such as decision, choice, intention, motive, or reason for action. All I mean, and I take it all Strawson meant (76), is the regard or attitude one has toward others (or oneself), and toward the relevance of moral considerations, as manifested in one's conduct. That regard can be qualified as either good or ill, moral or non-moral. One's will, so understood, might well be exhibited in the intention with which one acts, the choices one makes, and so on. That depends on context, but it would be misleading to think that, for instance, if one located the intention that played the causal role or was an essential ingredient in an agent's action, one would be assured of finding the moral quality of an agent's will *there*. Sometimes the regard that a person has for others or for morally salient considerations is not revealed (at least not solely) in her intentions, decisions, choices, or reasons for action at all, which in and of themselves might be perfectly innocent. Sometimes it is what she fails to attend to that is revealing.

<sup>4</sup> The difference between moral and non-moral reactive attitudes is that in the non-moral case our response to the quality of another's will is not in response to a moral consideration, but rather it is a response along some other dimension, maybe one of intimacy or professional regard. Thus, as revealed in our non-moral reactive attitudes, we also hold people responsible in non-moral as well as moral ways. Strawson took this to be an instructive consideration as it illustrated how our moral relationships with others are infused in a larger web of interpersonal relationships and expectations (85).

<sup>5</sup> A brief qualification of this last point is needed. As Wallace has carefully explained, though the reactive attitudes are involved in holding responsible, in either praising or blaming, it is not required that one actually experience an episode of a reactive emotion in judging that another as praiseworthy or blameworthy (1994: Incomplete). All that is required is the judgment that a reactive emotion would be an appropriate response. Sometimes one is unable to muster the relevant emotions, though aware that it would be appropriate to do so.

We can gain a deeper appreciation of the reactive attitudes by considering their accompanying practices. In contrast with other theories, Watson approvingly noted that on the Strawsonian approach, regarding a person as a morally responsible agent means something in practice (1987:120). The ways that our reactive attitudes manifest themselves involve dispositions toward how we treat those held responsible. Sometimes normally expected courtesies are withheld, intimacies erased, demands altered, and so on. Of course, often, the manifestation is in the form of a cool assessment of the person's actions, a tongue lashing, an overt gesture, or an explicit rejection of a commitment to a relationship. Other times there is a public demand for an explanation or an acknowledgment of wrong done. There is no simple formula for how the emotions involved in holding responsible will bear on practices. But however they do effect them will in part be a function of the kinds of interpersonal relations sustained by our social practices in the absence of the infraction that precipitated the reactive emotion. A simple example will help.

Leslie and Daphne, both coworkers and friends, arrange a date at a local coffee shop. Quite publicly, and with no regard for who is within earshot, Leslie makes a derogatory racial remark about Hispanics in telling Daphne a joke. Daphne has no taste for this humor, and is especially disturbed to see that Leslie has caused others offense. She curtly tells Leslie her joke was despicable and storms out of the coffee shop. The following day Daphne excludes Leslie from her usual lunch outing, which the two normally take with another co-worker, who is Hispanic. Daphne makes no attempt to conceal from Leslie that she has excluded her. Later in the day, Daphne has to make a decision about distributing some added work, which comes with extra pay. Aware that Leslie has some unexpected financial pressures due to caring for a family member, and knowing Leslie to be an excellent worker, Daphne offers her the work. Once completed, and having done a fine job, Daphne congratulates her for it.

This ordinary case of Daphne holding Leslie morally responsible is revealing as much for what would be out of place as for what is so fitting. Were Daphne to have blurted out to

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Leslie before storming out of the coffee shop something like “Your children are ugly,” “Your breath stinks!” or even, “Your treatment of animals is outrageous!” her response could not be readily appreciated by Leslie as indignation *about Leslie’s offensive remark*. Likewise, had Daphne thought nothing of persisting in her usual lunch plans, she would have displayed little commitment to the moral convictions that the previous day figured in her offense. Also, Leslie’s seeing that Daphne has excluded her from lunch conveys to Leslie that Daphne has taken a stance toward her based upon her (Leslie’s) prejudicial attitudes. Note also that Daphne treats her altered stance toward Leslie as having boundaries. There are other aspects to their relations that Daphne takes not to be appropriate domains or vehicles for her moral emotion.

The interpersonal subtleties at play in the case of Daphne and Leslie, as commonplace as they are, reveal a deep feature of the reactive attitudes, one that critics of the Strawsonian approach often fail to appreciate. In particular, though the reactive attitudes are emotional responses, they are not unstructured ejaculations, mere eruptions issuing from psychological mechanisms outside the pale of the rational control of those who experience them. Rather, they provide a motivational base for altering our highly complex social practices and interpersonal relationships. The alterations that take place are understood to be fitting responses to the moral agent whose quality of will instigates the response. Once we appreciate how the reactive attitudes are intertwined with the social practices at the heart of adult interpersonal life, the central importance of the quality of will thesis is made even clearer. The rational ground for how reactive attitudes are manifested in practice is tailored to the pertinent elements of the responsible agent’s will that are revealed in her actions.

### 3. *Reasons to Modify the Reactive Attitudes: Excuses & Justifications*

The tight fit between quality of will, reactive attitude, and the practices involved in holding responsible is made even clearer in light of a related set of practices, our excusing practices. Strawson paid special attention to the relevance of excuses, justifications, and exemptions, all of which are pleas to suspend, alter, mitigate, or defeat the grounds for holding responsible (77).<sup>6</sup> As is well known, Strawson's aim was to achieve a compatibilist result. I do not wish to consider his compatibilist argument here. What does interest me is what these pleas tell us about the nature of moral responsibility.

One of the two types of pleas Strawson considers includes both excuses and justifications.<sup>7</sup> According to Strawson, an excuse or a justification such as 'I did not know', or 'I had no other choice', works by demonstrating that an agent did not act from a morally objectionable will (77-8). What this kind of plea does *not* show is that the person is not a morally responsible agent. Rather, the demands manifested in our practices of holding morally responsible are still presumed to apply to the agent. It is just that the agent's conduct was not morally objectionable after all; she did not act from a quality of will that would warrant blaming her.

A particularly notable fact about these pleas—one that other Strawsonians have not attended to with sufficient care—is that they offer reinterpretations of an agent's conduct. Initially, there is reason to believe that the agent's action *did* issue from a morally objectionable quality of will. Given such an interpretation, others holding

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<sup>6</sup> As Strawson did, in accounting for pleas, I'll stick to cases involving blame rather than praise. Though the discussion could easily be expanded to include praising practices as well.

<sup>7</sup> Some mitigating considerations are pertinent here. For ease of presentation, I will set them aside.

morally responsible have reason to blame by responding with a negative morally reactive attitude. But the plea is meant to defeat the presumptive interpretation, *thereby showing that the agent's quality of will was not morally objectionable* (at least not to the same degree or in the same way). If warranted, the plea provides grounds for suspending or modifying the reactive attitudes and reorienting practices accordingly.

#### *4. Further Reasons to Modify the Reactive Attitudes: Exemptions*

The second of the two types of pleas Strawson considers involves exempting considerations (78-9). Exemptions are pleas that give reason to believe that a person is not a morally responsible agent at all (78-9), as applies, for instance, to very young children, the severely mentally retarded, the insane, those suffering from pervasive delusions, and so on (79). In the case of exemptions, as opposed to excuses or justifications, the focus *is* upon the person's status as an agent.

Strawson argued that exemptions are explained in terms of an agent's incapacity for membership in the adult interpersonal community (79). Various critics have argued that Strawson's treatment of exemptions is incomplete because he does not specify what capacities *are* required for membership in the adult interpersonal community (e.g., Russell, 1992; Watson, 1987; and Wiggins, 1973). Perhaps, contra Strawson, what is required involves libertarian free will. How should a Strawsonian respond?

In an effort to improve on Strawson's work, Gary Watson suggested that the capacity at issue turns on constraints on moral address (126). To explain: Strawson himself noted that our practices of holding morally responsible *express* our moral attitudes and emotions (93). But if an episode of expression is to have a point, it must be

understandable to those towards whom it is directed. What the exempted agent lacks that the morally responsible agent has, on Watson's proposal, is a capacity to be addressed through the morally reactive attitudes and their attendant practices. Watson's insightful idea is to develop Strawson's remark by taking the morally reactive attitudes and the practices of holding morally responsible as expressions of our moral demands, of our regard toward the agent, and so on. Thus, Watson suggests that the reactive attitudes are "incipiently forms of communication" (127). We can then understand the capacities of the morally responsible agent by reference to this manner of communication.

I think Watson is right to propose an *expressive theory* of moral responsibility. It explains, as in the case of Daphne and Leslie, the subtlety found in *how* our practices are modified in relation to our moral emotions. For Leslie to understand Daphne's communication, she needs to be able to appreciate how Daphne's moral emotions are revealed in the modifications Daphne makes to her treatment of Leslie. According to Watson's proposal, the person exempted from the category of morally responsible agents—the person incapacitated for adult interpersonal relations—is so because she is incapable of understanding the complexity of the practices and reactive emotions of those in the moral community holding responsible. But if she is incapable of this kind of understanding, then she cannot be addressed. And if she cannot be addressed, she cannot be engaged. Moral dialogue with her is not possible. She is thus incapacitate for membership in the moral community.

Despite the enormous appeal of Watson's expressive theory, I do not think he hits on the best way to account for exemptions. His proposed rationale is that the exempted agent is incapable of understanding the forms of address possible from the standpoint of

the reactive attitudes. But failures of *understanding* seem too restrictive to capture all of the ways that an exempted agent might be incapacitated for membership in the moral community.<sup>8</sup> The more fundamental explanation, I contend, is that exempted agents are *themselves* incapable of *participation* in the practices. It is not (just) that they do not understand what others communicate to them within those practices. It's that *they* are impaired in such a way that *they* cannot communicate within those practices.<sup>9/ 10</sup>

##### 5. *The Intimate Link between Responsible Agency and Holding Responsible*

As I see it, a person's inability to participate in the practices of holding responsible (by participating in adult interpersonal life) is an impediment to her *being* responsible. A helpful way to think of the morally responsible agent is by analogy with the competent speaker of a natural language—a linguistically responsible agent. The competent speaker possesses the skills both to express herself, thereby making contributions to dialogue, and also the interpretive skills to understand others. So too a morally responsible agent is capable of assuming multiple offices, sometimes as one

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<sup>8</sup> Is it not at least possible that an agent might be incapacitated in such a way that she can understand the demands expressed by others, but yet be incapable of expressing herself to others? While this agent could understand what participation in the practices constitutive of holding responsible consists in, she could not participate. Her failure would not be one of understanding but rather due to some other defect of agency.

<sup>9</sup> This gets closer to the way Strawson described the exempted agents as one who cannot be seen "as a term in moral relationships" (86).

<sup>10</sup> On my analysis (McKenna, 2005), unlike all others who have commented on Strawson's work, both types of pleas Strawson considers are united by a Quality of Will thesis. In the case of excuses and justifications, an agent is shown not to be morally responsible, that is, not blameworthy (at least to the degree in question), because her conduct does not after all issue from a morally objectionable quality of will. In the case of exemptions, an agent is shown not to be a morally responsible agent because she is incapable of acting from a will that *could* have the relevant kind of moral quality at all (at least to the degree required for full responsible agency).

whose conduct is the subject of moral assessment, sometimes as the who is doing the assessing.

The competent linguistic agent's speaking skills are enmeshed with the interpretive skills she employs to understand what others say. A skillful speaker exploits her familiarity with how to interpret what other say as a resource for how she will express herself. Her appreciation of the pragmatic conventions of dialogue, of the expectations and resources of some rather than other interlocutors, will color her conversational contributions. In certain contexts, sarcasm or innuendo will be misplaced, in others not. Many of these considerations are captured in Grice's Cooperative Principle and his proposed conversational maxims, such as relevance and quantity (1975). For my purposes, the details do not matter. What does is a comparison between the skills bearing on action as a morally responsible agent, and those bearing on successful communication as a competent speaker.

When a morally responsible agent acts, like the linguistically competent agent, she does so aware that others stand prepared to interpret her against the backdrop of a constellation of shared conventions. She must be able to interpret others likewise to understand how, why, and what others in the moral community express in the practices and attitudes constituting the stance of holding responsible. Otherwise, she'll not be able to appreciate or comply with the moral demands being made of her. Furthermore, the morally responsible agent understands that by relying on rough conventions, those holding responsible are liable to take certain patterns of conduct as reflecting a quality of will that either shows due regard or lack of due regard toward their demands and expectations. Aware of this, a morally responsible agent must be able to adjust her

conduct accordingly. Thus, the quality of her will as exhibited in her conduct is itself (at least sometimes) influenced by considerations bearing upon the standpoint of holding responsible.

#### *6. Conversation & An Expressive Theory of Moral Responsibility*

Although Watson suggested an expressive theory as a way of advancing Strawson's, he did not develop it. I agree with his key insight—that the reactive attitudes are incipiently forms of communication. Building on Watson's proposal, I shall introduce a new theory of responsibility, one that relies upon the model of a conversation. My goal is to explain moral responsibility practices in terms of dialogue.

What a reactive attitude expresses is an analog to a contribution within a conversational exchange. On the model I offer, the contribution made by the reactive attitude does not *initiate* the exchange. Rather, it is a response to a distinct stage within a dialogue, a stage that *does* instigate the unfolding conversation. That initiating stage issues from the action of a morally responsible agent analogous to the way a competent speaker initiates a conversational exchange by performing some speech act. By acting as she does, the morally responsible agent opens up the possibility of a dialogue, a conversation about the moral value of her action, and most notably, what it reveals about the quality of her will. This initial contribution provides a basis for members of a community responding to her in some way, either by praising or blaming her via the reactive attitudes. Given the unfolding dialogue, it is now the agent's place—her conversational role—to extend the conversation by offering some account for her

conduct, either by appeal to some excusing or justifying consideration<sup>11</sup>, or instead by way of an acknowledgement of a wrong done, perhaps an apology offered. A defiant dismissal of the demands placed upon her might be taken as her expression that, in her estimation, the conversation is over, or instead that she rejects the terms or presuppositions in which her interlocutor has framed the dialogue.

I have described three stages in an analog to a conversational exchange between competent speakers of a natural language. Call the analog a *moral responsibility exchange* between morally responsible agents operating within the ‘language’ of a particular form of moral responsibility practices. The three stages might be labeled Moral Contribution, Moral Address, and Moral Account. Recall Leslie and Daphne. Leslie makes a moral contribution by telling a prejudicial joke. By engaging in blaming practices Daphne addresses Leslie. Suppose Leslie offers Daphne an account of her behavior. Acknowledging the offense, she apologizes and asks forgiveness. That reply might instigate further conversation, which Daphne might take up in the form of forgiveness, and so on. A subsequent act of contrition by Leslie in an effort to achieve reconciliation might be taken as a further evolution in the unfolding dialogue.

Each of the three stages in the model I have offered corresponds to each of the three key ingredients figuring in Strawson’s treatment: quality of will of responsible agent; reactive attitude of one holding responsible; and plea or other account offered by responsible agent. The expressive theory I propose, modeled along the lines of a conversation, shows our moral responsibility practices to be dynamic (rather than static) processes in which modifications to practice are understood as more or less reasonable

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<sup>11</sup> An exemption could be appropriate here as well, though in the standard case, it is usually offered by a proxy for the person whose agency is claimed to fall below the threshold required for moral responsibility.

manners of replying to an interlocutor. The standards of reasonableness will be susceptible to different sorts of norms, and the collection of practices as a whole can be assessed for how well or ill they live up to those norms.<sup>12</sup> However this dynamic process unfolds, and whatever the norms that will inform reasonable moves in the conversation, the model places at its heart reference to the quality of will of the morally responsible agent whose action is the subject of conversation. Thus, unlike other Strawsonians, my expressive theory gives explanatory priority to the nature of morally responsible agency. We can then account for holding morally responsible by reference to it.

### *7. Agent Meaning and Morally Responsible Agency*

I contend that a morally responsible agent's action can itself be the initial stage in an analog to a conversation between her and others in a community prepared to hold her morally responsible. But there is a crucial disanalogy between a speaker of a natural language whose speech act initiates a conversational exchange, and a morally responsible agent whose conduct initiates a moral responsibility exchange. A speaker intends for her utterances to be understood by relevant members of her audience. Exercises of morally responsible agency are not constrained in this way. Often what we hold someone morally responsible for is conduct that she meant to conceal, for example, stealing money from the poor box. But if her action is covert, then surely she cannot mean to convey anything to anyone else. If so, it might be objected, it misrepresents our practices to think of a morally responsible agent's action as the initiation of a dialogue. If we seek to develop an expressive theory along the model of a conversation, maybe it is better to think of the

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<sup>12</sup> Some moral communities' practices, for instance, might be especially ill-equipped for providing resources for women to voice their moral demands, appeal to legitimate excuses, and so forth.

conversation as starting at the stage Moral Address (at the stage of holding responsible), and then think of the actions of responsible agents as the subject matter of the conversation.

Surely there is an important disanalogy between a competent speaker of a language, whose speech act initiates a conversational exchange, and a morally responsible agent, whose action initiates a moral responsibility exchange. But since I offer a model that builds on analogy with a conversation, the question turns upon whether the dissimilarities undermine the usefulness of the analogy. So, is there any relevant respect in which we *can* regard an agent's actions as themselves like a speaker's initiation of a conversation? One basic requirement in the case of a speaker is that she has to mean something. Can we say something similar about the action of a responsible agent?

I believe that a morally responsible agent's actions can be taken as bearers of meaning, that is, objects of interpretive significance. I call this *agent meaning*. Because the relationship between action and quality of will is not always transparent, understanding it requires some interpretation. So actions themselves can be bearers of meaning, indicators of an agent's quality of will. Sometimes, they are not very good indicators, and so, as in the case of meaning in other domains, like language, or art, there is always the potential for misinterpretation. But there is yet a further aspect of agent meaning that is a product of these more immediate facts. A morally responsible agent acts with the knowledge *that* her conduct is always a potential object of interpretation by members of the (or a) moral community. She therefore is able to understand her own actions as having meaning. Indeed, an adept morally responsible agent is often able to exploit this fact. Anticipating the standpoint of those holding morally responsible, and

the loose conventions they use to interpret an agent's quality of will, can enter into the considerations bearing upon how an agent acts. Just as a competent speaker exploits various conventions to convey her intended meaning, so too, sometimes, a morally responsible agent exploits interpretive conventions so that her actions are understood in a certain light.

#### *8. Agent Meaning, Excuses & Justifications*

To help make my case for the credibility of agent meaning, I turn to a simple point about linguistic meaning. Paul Grice distinguished between speaker and sentence meaning, explaining how it is that the two could come apart (1957). As it sometimes happens, what a speaker means by using a sentence can diverge from the meaning of the sentence used. One of Grice's amusing examples was "If I shall be helping the grass to grow, I shall have no time for reading" (1969, in 1989: 88-90). The sentence meaning is something like, 'If I am taking care of the sort of things of which lawns are composed, I'll not have any time to read.' But a speaker might use that very sentence on some occasion to mean, 'One advantage of being dead is that I will be protected from the horrors of the world.'

Now consider a context involving a miscommunication wherein a speaker intends for his meaning to diverge from sentence meaning:

Ozzie returns home from the doctor's office and stoically gives Harriet the grim news: he's been diagnosed with incurable cancer; his death is immanent. As it happens, the daily paper is on the kitchen table with an especially disturbing headline about the Vietnam War. Putting on a brave face, he gestures at the paper and remarks, "Well Harriet, look on the bright side, if I shall be helping the grass to grow, I'll have no time for reading." Tears streaming down her face, Harriet replies, "Ozzie! How could you think about yard work at a time like this?"

Of course, were Ozzie to correct Harriet's misinterpretation, he'd explain that he was not referring to yard work, but his own death.

There is a telling structural similarity between the Strawsonian diagnosis of the underlying rational of excuses and justifications on the one hand, and on the other cases of miscommunication of the sort between Ozzie and Harriet. Here is a revised version of the Daphne and Leslie story to illustrate the point:

Just prior to Leslie's remark, the one that caused Daphne's offense, an especially disturbing story had come on the television, which Leslie overheard but Daphne did not as she (Daphne) was preoccupied ordering drinks. The story was about the degrading treatment of Hispanic workers by a local vigilante group. Leslie's joke, which Daphne did overhear, was told in sarcasm, and her intention, clear to everyone in the coffee shop but Daphne, was to express solidarity with the Hispanic workers. She meant to mock those who would take the vigilante's viewpoint. Daphne was correct to note that others in the coffee shop had taken offense, though it turns out, the offense taken was directed toward the vigilante nut job being interviewed on the local news, not Leslie. Mistaking the point of Leslie's joke, Daphne curtly tells Leslie her joke was despicable and storms out.

Were Leslie to account for her behavior, she would explain the situation, offering a justification for the propriety of her remark. Crucially, she would disabuse Daphne of her (Daphne's) interpretation of the quality of Leslie's will as revealed in the joke she (Leslie) told.

In the case of Daphne and Leslie, the stages Moral Contribution, Moral Address, and Moral Account can be easily identified. Two crucial points to note are first that, at the stage Moral Address, Daphne's response to Leslie is understandable given her misinterpretation of the significance of Leslie's behavior (the joke she told). Second, Leslie's account of her behavior in the form of a justification offers a warranted reinterpretation of the significance of her original contribution (her joke). Similar remarks would apply to the exchange between Ozzie and Harriet.

The case of Ozzie and Harriet suggests the following comparison with the case of Daphne and Leslie: Just as a competent speaker of a language makes linguistic contributions against the background meanings assigned to types of sentence, so too does a morally responsible agent acts within a moral community in which types of actions (such as racist jokes) are assigned types of moral significance. When interpreting a speaker, our interest is not directly in the meanings of the sentences which a speaker uses. Rather, it is in what the *speaker* means to convey in exploiting established sentence meanings (sometimes in non-standard ways) to *express herself*. Similarly, when determining questions of an agent's responsibility for her actions, we are not directly concerned with the significance of the type of action an agent performs (what such an action typically signals about the quality of a person's will); rather, we are concerned with the *quality of the will with which an agent acts*.

Grice's distinction between speaker and sentence meaning makes it easy to understand the conversational exchange between Ozzie and Harriet. I now propose a similar distinction between *agent meaning* and *action meaning*. Likewise, it can be used to account for the moral responsibility exchange between Daphne and Leslie. Types of actions can be taken to be indicative of types of attitudes of good or ill will. But situations are complicated, and the meaning of an agent's particular action, what it indicates about the quality of her will, can diverge from the typical associations.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For the skeptical reader who might (not unreasonably) think I have stretched too far the Strawsonian diagnosis of excuses and justifications, I would reply that, but for the added nomenclature (that is, the terminology of agent meaning and action meaning, as well Moral Contribution, Address, and Account) the point I am making here is more accurately described as Strawson's rather than merely Strawsonian. To see this, read in full the second paragraph on section IV of "Freedom and Resentment" (79-80), bearing in mind my treatment of the case of Daphne and Leslie.

## *9. Conclusion*

I have defended a theory of moral responsibility by relying upon the model of a conversation. The relationship between a morally responsible agent and those holding her responsible, I contend, is like a dialogue in which, at different stages, the participants express themselves in ways that invite responses from one another. A distinctive feature of the expressive theory I have offered is that exercises of agency are located within the conversation itself. These actions can themselves bear meaning of the sort that has a place in an unfolding dialogue, a moral responsibility exchange. A crucial motivation is that a theory of moral responsibility should make exercises of responsible agency have explanatory priority.

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