


Callous murderers and the abuse excuse

ROBERT GAMBOA DENNIS

CCORDING TO STRAWSON (1993), the reactive attitudes people have toward other people's actions directly resemble what we think about the moral status of that person and the way we think of them as morally responsible for those actions. It is not that judgements are one thing and the status of the person of whom those judgements are made is a different one. On the contrary, such reactive attitudes constitute the attribution of moral responsibility of the agent. In this sense, the present discussion does not have to do only with what people think of callous murderers. What they think of and feel about them (following a Strawsonian view) will tell us how responsible they are for their actions. So, the judgement of blame and the feeling of outrage upon callous murderers when knowing about their horrible actions, tell us that they are—or indicate to others that we regard them as—morally responsible for those actions and that they deserve to be blamed. However, these judgements are subject to change if the blamers get to know a broader picture of the perpetrator's life.

Considering the difficult childhood a person had—in which he/she was constantly abused—, as a way of saying that such a person is not morally responsible for his/her adult evildoings, counts as what is called in the literature an *abuse excuse*. An *abuse excuse* is when we take certain aspects of the evildoer's history as the explaining reasons of why such a person is the way he/she is now, and that such aspects bear the culpability of the evildoer's actions instead of the evildoer himself/herself. So, the responsibility for X action is not on the perpetrator of X if there is sufficient information to show that he/she was considerably abused (Stocker 1999). The abuse in question here is the one that occurs in childhood, as it occurred to Robert Harris, a callous murderer who was severely abused by his parents and other people (Watson 1988, pp. 235—36). Should such upbringing excuse Robert Harris from his callous murder, where such excuse means that he is not morally responsible for his evildoings? Combining the abuse excuse with Strawsonian language, this question can be

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reformulated: should this abuse excuse (Harris' childhood) change the appropriateness of the first judgements made of Harris? If that is so, it means that judgements should be changed, and thus—as reactive attitudes and judgements talk about the responsibility of a person—, Harris will not be responsible for his actions, or at least not fully responsible.

First, it seems that changing our attitudes and judgements towards an evildoer implies that we impose responsibility on someone or something else. We cannot consistently take all or part of the responsibility from the evildoer and say that the taken responsibility vanishes or is eliminated. There must be a recipient of the responsibility taken away from the evildoer. Commonly, when people excuse psychopaths for their doings, they place the responsibility on their illness. They say something like «they are not themselves», «they are ill», etc. Similarly, the expression «no wonder he is like that» when it comes to cases like that of Harris', is intended to set as the cause of his evildoings (to charge as responsible for them), something or someone other than Harris.

I think that only people can be the bearers of responsibility for actions, but also that actions can be responsible for the formation of features. Harris' parents inflicted on him a series of very damaging actions, both physically and psychologically, and they were surely responsible for them.¹ They treated Harris in a way that is not even close to sub—optimal, and that very likely will have an impact on whoever happen to be treated like him. Nonetheless, what those actions are responsible for are (some of) Harris' features and not of his actions. The actions perpetrated by his parents informed Harris' traits, no doubt, and traits (that is, how we are) influence what we do. However, bad traits do not always produce bad people, nor all abused children develop into callous murderers. So, excusing Harris from his evildoings, is to place all or part of the responsibility of his murders either on his parents or on his traits. If we say that Harris' parents share some of the responsibility for Harris' murders, we then must compromise with the idea that so Harris' grandparents (or other people for that matter) are partly responsible for the actions done by Harris' parents upon him, so in some sense responsible too for Harris' murders (perhaps only to a lesser extent). This view is absurd and will take us to no one being responsible for anything, or to something like collective responsibility upon very particular actions like those of Harris, which is very difficult to hold both theoretically and practically.

The other possible recipient of responsibility are Harris' traits. Feeling loveless, without attention and affection, being angry at life and perhaps never feeling completely happy are some things that people whose childhoods were like

¹ Unless we also want to excuse, say, the father because he got damaged by war, and like that *ad infinitum*.

that of Harris' are very likely to feel and are justified in feeling in the sense that they cannot help it. However, features are not determinant for actions, although they contribute to them. So, we can say that Harris' parents are responsible for their actions towards him and that those actions built up some of Harris' features which may contribute to but not determine his actions. Then, what happens when our judgements are tempted to change after knowing about his upbringing? Our reactive attitudes of blame are looking for another recipient. Our judgements do not suffer alterations (people are still blaming), what happens is that we look for others to deposit them on. If we say that Harris did as he did because of his upbringing, that is to pose at least some of the responsibility on his parents' actions. But how is an action responsible for another action? This would mean that X action is the moral cause of Y action. This would mean that the physical and psychological damage done by Harris' parents upon him are responsible for Harris' murders. I think this way of linking does not match what happens when people are tempted to change their judgements. The expression «no wonder he is as he is» does not link his parents' actions to his actions, but his parents' actions to his features, attitudes, personality, and character. And, as we have seen, features are not determinants but contributors to someone's behaviour.

Here the incompatibilist objection might appear plausible but falls short in the sense that it does not reach all the way to Harris' actions. Roughly, incompatibilism says that free agency (thus moral responsibility) and determined features are incompatible. So, what we are and what we do is determined by features and traits we cannot help but have. The expression «no wonder he is as he is» shows exactly the kind of determinism that incompatibilists appeal to when excusing an evildoer who suffered abuse as a child. The reason why he did what he did is his upbringing, therefore he couldn't help but act that way, which means that Harris is not morally responsible for his evildoings. But, as a deterministic view, the same should apply to everyone who suffered that kind of upbringing. This meaning that everyone whose childhood was like that of Harris' would have the same features as Harris did. But we can see that not all evildoers had such a childhood, and that not everyone who had such a childhood became an evildoer. Such history certainly contributes to such evil but does not determine it. Also, many people who allow the thought «no wonder he is as he is», would not be willing to jump from that to «no wonder he did what he did». There is a substantial difference in people's judgements to be willing to excuse a person's features than a person's actions.

This leads us to the ambivalence of reactive attitudes and judgements people might have about an evildoer. When people get to know about Harris' upbringing

and entertain the thought «no wonder he is as he is», what they do is pity him. They somehow thereby lessen the attitudes of blame and resentment due to the emergence of a factor that was not present before. However, they don't lessen such attitudes towards the action done by Harris, but towards his history. I explain: we all know intuitively that everyone has a history. That is, we all know that people have a past, despite not knowing the details about that past. When we hear of evildoers, we assume their history to be ordinary and then we blame them. But there is a clash in our thoughts when we get to know their history was extraordinary.² There, it seems we have judgements towards a person which seem to be contradictory (we blame and pity the same person at the same time). And indeed, they are contradictory, but the recipients of such judgements are not of the same kind. The recipients of the attitude of pity are the effects of Harris' parents' actions (that is, Harris' features). But the judgements of blame are still placed on Harris. If we think our blame goes from Harris to his parents, what we are doing is blaming his parents for their doings towards him, but not his parents for his doings.

In conclusion, our judgements about an evildoer when we learn that he/she suffered child abuse, should not suffer alterations. Blaming the evildoer for his/her horrible actions is still appropriate. However, I allow —to a certain extent—, the incompatibilist objection and the possible ambivalence objection as a way of explaining the contribution of our history to the having of our features, and as explaining the possible confusion of having contradictory judgments towards the same person, respectively. I have outlined a view in which actions cannot be responsible for other actions, but only contributors to features. In that sense, what we do when having contradictory judgements about an evildoer who was abused as a child, is really to blame the perpetrators of that history (while pitying the victim), but still blaming the evildoer for the actions he/she performed (while pitying his/her victims too).

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² The same occurs when we get to know the history of people with great achievements. If such a history was difficult, we tend to value it more; if it was not, we tend to value it less.

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Callous murderers and the abuse excuse

In this essay, I hold the assumption that most people would be horrified by callous murders. Having that in mind, I briefly explain two things: first, the Strawsonian view of reactive attitudes which says that feelings of blame and outrage, for example, tell us a lot about the moral responsibility of the perpetrator of the action that gives rise to those attitudes; second, the abuse excuse which says that evildoers may be excused from their actions if they were abused in their upbringing. Then, I panoramically argue that our initial reactive attitudes of blame and horror towards callous murderers should not be changed if we get to know about their history of abuse. This will mean —following a Strawsonian view— that callous murderers should remain equally responsible, culpable, and blameworthy for their actions.

Keywords: Responsibility · Blameworthiness · Reactive attitudes · Evil · Strawson.

Sobre asesinos sanguinarios y la exsusa del abuso

En este ensayo, asumo que la mayoría de las personas se horrorizaría al enterarse de asesinatos especialmente monstruosos. Tomando eso como punto de partida, explicaré brevemente dos cosas. Primero, explicaré la visión Strawsoniana de las actitudes reactivas, la cual nos dice que los sentimientos de indignación y la adjudicación de culpa reflejan la responsabilidad moral de los perpetradores de las acciones que suscitaron dichas actitudes. Después, explicaré la excusa del abuso, la cual nos dice que quienes obran mal pueden ser condonados si fueron abusados en su infancia. Por último, argumento de manera breve que nuestras actitudes reactivas iniciales de horror e indignación hacia los asesinos no deben de cambiar aun a sabiendas de que fueron severamente maltratados cuando niños. Esto se traduciría —desde una postura Strawsoniana— que los asesinos sanguinarios deben permanecer igualmente responsables, culpables y dignos de reprobación por sus acciones.

Palabras Clave: Responsabilidad · Reprobabilidad · Actitudes reactivas · Mal · Strawson.

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