THE METAPHYSICS OF MORAL RESPONSIBILITY:

STRAWSON, NAGEL, AND REALISM

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTERS OF ARTS IN PHILOSOPHY

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
Department of Philosophy

MAY 2011
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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I wish to thank Joseph Keim Campbell for his guidance and encouragement in the construction of this thesis, which contributed heavily to the advancement of both my understanding of the material and my philosophical response to it. Brooke Barnum-Roberts and Matt Stichter granted additional feedback that shaped this final version. I would also like to thank my husband, Allen Coates, who provided me with unyielding emotional support, and with a regular sounding board for my ideas and analyses throughout the entire project.
In *Skepticism and Naturalism*, P. F. Strawson discusses four distinct philosophical topics (traditional skepticism, skepticism about moral responsibility, the mind-body problem, and the matter of meaning), and considers the methods of approach that dominate each topic in philosophical debate. His hope in discussing these topics is to expose certain parallels among them and the approaches to them, and thereby elucidate some of the philosophical tensions that persist in them. In *The View from Nowhere*, Thomas Nagel discusses a wider range of philosophical topics with the similar intention of identifying a common conceptual thread that relates all issues and the methods of approach that dominate them. Drawing from additional sources including Strawson’s “Freedom and Resentment,” and Nagel’s *Mortal Questions*, my aim in this project is to compare Strawson’s and Nagel’s analyses of the issue of skepticism about moral responsibility in particular.

In the first chapter, I explicate the parallels that Strawson exposes between traditional (epistemological) skepticism and skepticism about moral responsibility. I offer a brief description of his proposal to reconcile the latter skeptical problem with a “relativizing move,” and while such a proposal has inspired two interpretations that require further analysis, I reserve
this for the third chapter. In the second chapter, I likewise explain the parallels that Nagel exposes between epistemological skepticism and skepticism about moral responsibility, highlighting the role of objectivity and realism in both skeptical issues. In the third and last chapter, I consider the similarities and differences between Strawson’s and Nagel’s analyses of the issue of skepticism about moral responsibility. I then refer back to Strawson’s relativizing move from the first chapter and, appealing to Nagel’s use of realism in understanding the skeptical problem, offer an interpretation of this relativizing move that is distinct from and superior to the two interpretations preceding it.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgements</th>
<th>iii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1. Strawson on Skepticism about Moral Responsibility</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Skepticism about Knowledge</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Traditional Skepticism</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Responses to Traditional Skepticism</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Skepticism about Moral Responsibility</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Free Will and Moral Responsibility</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Reactive Attitudes and Objective Attitudes</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The Participant Attitude and the Objective Attitude</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Conflicting Alternative Standpoints</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. A Natural Question, a Natural Response, and Strawson’s Solution</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2. Nagel on Skepticism about Moral Responsibility</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Epistemological Skepticism</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Epistemic Luck</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Objectivity, Realism and Rationalism</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Tension</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Skepticism about Moral Responsibility</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Moral Luck</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

In *Skepticism and Naturalism*, P. F. Strawson discusses four distinct philosophical topics (traditional skepticism, skepticism about moral responsibility, the mind-body problem, and the matter of meaning), and considers the methods of approach that dominate each topic in philosophical debate. His hope in discussing these topics is to expose certain parallels among them and the approaches to them, and thereby elucidate some of the philosophical tensions that persist in them. In *The View from Nowhere*, Thomas Nagel discusses a wider range of philosophical topics with the similar intention of identifying a common conceptual thread that relates all issues and the methods of approach that dominate them. Drawing from additional sources including Strawson’s “Freedom and Resentment,” and Nagel’s *Mortal Questions*, my aim in this project is to compare Strawson’s and Nagel’s analyses of the issue of skepticism about moral responsibility in particular.

In the first chapter, I explicate the parallels that Strawson exposes between traditional (epistemological) skepticism and skepticism about moral responsibility. I offer a brief description of his proposal to reconcile the latter skeptical problem with a “relativizing move,” and while such a proposal has inspired two interpretations that require further analysis, I reserve this for the third chapter. In the second chapter, I likewise explain the parallels that Nagel exposes between epistemological skepticism and skepticism about moral responsibility, highlighting the role of objectivity and realism in both skeptical issues. In the third and last chapter, I consider the similarities and differences between Strawson’s and Nagel’s analyses of the issue of skepticism about moral responsibility. I then refer back to Strawson’s relativizing move from the first chapter and, appealing to Nagel’s use of realism and objectivity in
understanding the skeptical problem, offer an interpretation of this relativizing move that is
distinct from and superior to the two interpretations preceding it.
Chapter 1. Strawson on skepticism about moral responsibility

In *Skepticism and Naturalism*, Strawson identifies a “certain unity in the approaches” to the topic of traditional skepticism and skepticism about moral responsibility (Strawson 1985, vii). In this chapter, I will discuss the “parallels and connections” between the approaches to both topics, as he identifies them. In the first section, I provide his account of traditional skepticism, along with the numerous attempted responses to it he considers, and end by describing his position on the issue, as motivated by the work of both Hume and Wittgenstein. In the second section, I provide his analogous account of skepticism about moral responsibility. First, I relate the skeptical issue to that of the problem of free will and structure the debate accordingly, then I lead in to Strawson’s so-called reactive and objective attitudes and the role he ascribes to them in moral responsibility. These bring about a split in standpoint, which Strawson identifies as the key motivator in the skeptical problem, and to which he poses his cryptic “relativizing move” (inspired by his position on traditional skepticism in the previous section) as a solution. A much needed analysis and interpretation this solution is delayed until the third chapter, after I consider Nagel’s assessment of the skeptical problem in Chapter 2.

A. Skepticism About Knowledge

1. Traditional Skepticism

For Strawson, traditional skepticism involves the claim that specific types of propositions are not, and cannot be, known (1985, 4). Such propositions include the following: “the earth existed long before any individual’s recollection of it,” “physical objects exist in the world,” “the past is a part of reality,” “minds exist beyond one’s own.” The most commonly used and far-
reaching of these propositions, around which most of Strawson’s discussion of skepticism revolves, is the claim that physical objects exist in the world external to our perceptions of them. I will shorten this claim to, “an external world exists.”

In *The View from Nowhere*, Thomas Nagel phrased the issue in terms of doubt, stating that our ordinary beliefs go beyond their grounds: we believe that an external world exists, but the grounds we have for believing this claim do not substantiate it in the face of certain doubts (1986, 68). Such doubts include the possibility that, as Descartes considered, all of our perceptions of an external world are simulated by the deceptive works of an malignant demon; or that in reality we are all lying, flaccid, in a vat of liquefied human and such perceptions are the product of electrochemical bodily input from the Matrix; or that I am actually asleep and all such perceptions are merely the product of a lucid dream from which I cannot wake; or that I am actually nothing more than a brain in a vat and such perceptions have been injected straight to my brain by a mad scientist. As Nagel summarizes it, “there are ways we might be wrong that we can’t rule out” (ibid).

The core of the “argument from skeptical hypothesis,” a most popular argument used to present the skeptical problem, depends upon such hypothetical scenarios as these. While the basic structure of this argument pertains to the concept of knowledge, it captures the traditional skeptical problem in such a way that extends beyond that specific concept. Keith DeRose describes it succinctly in *Skepticism: A Contemporary Reader*:

1. I don’t know that such a hypothetical scenario is not the case.
2. If I don’t know that such a hypothetical scenario is not the case, then I don’t know that my ordinary knowledge claims\footnote{To avoid letting this argument be reduced to a discussion about the definition of “knowledge,” I want to note that the phrase “ordinary knowledge claims” here could easily be replaced by “ordinary beliefs,” with the severity of the skeptical problem still intact.} are the case.

Therefore,

C. I don’t know that my ordinary knowledge claims are the case. (DeRose & Warfield 1999, 2)

In line with the argument from skeptical hypothesis, Strawson describes skepticism as, strictly speaking, “a matter of doubt rather than denial” (1985, 2). The skeptic “is … not one who denies the validity of certain types of belief, but one who questions, if only initially and for methodological reasons, the adequacy of our grounds for holding them” (ibid). That is, a skeptic does not conclude that an external world does not exist, or cannot exist. Rather, we might say that she suspends judgment about such a claims (again, if only initially and for methodological reasons) (ibid). Even with this looser understanding of the traditional skeptical position, however, many philosophers find it (understandably) unpalatable and have attempted to challenge or respond to it. Strawson describes some of the more influential of these responses, as well as the skeptical retorts that follow them.

2. Responses to Traditional Skepticism

Strawson first considers Moore’s “common sense” response to the skeptic. Here, Moore claims to know with certainty the proposition that an external world exists (as well as other propositions like it), and uses this certainty to show that his skepticism is false (1985, 4). To illustrate his claim, he famously held up both of his hands and stated, “Here is one hand and here
is another,” thereby declaring conclusive evidence of an external world, and the falsity of skepticism (ibid). As DeRose explains, Moore’s strategy is to show that, “however plausible those premises may be, they are not as certain or as plausible as is the thought that we do know the things in question” (DeRose & Warfield 1999, 4). That is, the certainty with which we hold our ordinary beliefs and knowledge claims outweighs any plausibility that the premises leading up to this skeptical conclusion, and therefore the conclusion itself, may have. Moore’s argument essentially attacks the skeptic’s use of modus ponens in the argument from skeptical hypothesis with a modus tollens response:

1. I do know that my ordinary knowledge claims are the case.
2. If I don’t know that such a hypothetical scenario is not the case, then I don’t know that my ordinary knowledge claims are the case.

Therefore,

C. I know that such a hypothetical scenario is not the case. (DeRose & Warfield 1999, 5)

Moore’s position is that his argument is “just as good as the skeptic’s,” and that the skeptic is therefore wrong to conclude that we must suspend judgment about our ordinary beliefs (ibid).

Many philosophers found this argument of sorts unsatisfactory as a response to the skeptic. One such philosopher whom Strawson discusses is Stroud, who asserted that the driving philosophical consideration behind traditional skepticism was not a denial of subjective experience, but the fact that, “subjective experience could, logically, be just the way it is without its being the case that physical or material things actually existed” (1985, 5). Hence, in simply declaring certain knowledge of an external world based on his experience of it, Moore is either missing the point of skepticism completely, or is denying the skeptical thesis by dogmatically issuing his knowledge claims without offering any further argument to support them (ibid).
Either way, Stroud shows that Moore’s common sense response is not rationally satisfactory. He proposes instead that we try not to refute the skepticism, but to “defuse,” “neutralize,” or render “impotent” the skeptic (ibid).

Another philosopher whom Strawson introduces, Carnap, provides a different kind of response to the skeptic from that of Moore. He claims that no amount of evidence or experience could ever establish the proposition that an external world exists: it is completely “unverifiable in experience” (Strawson 1985, 6). Because of this unverifiability, such a proposition is rendered theoretically meaningless, implying that the question of whether an external world exists does not and cannot make philosophical sense (Strawson 1985, 6-7). This approach to the problem is distinct from Moore’s, though as Strawson explains, Stroud is equally dissatisfied with it. While it is possible that the skeptical question is indeed meaningless, it surely does not seem to be meaningless (Strawson 1985, 7). The reasoning that leads to the traditional skeptical position, albeit frustrating, seems intelligible insofar as it appeals to the same reasoning used in other philosophical criticisms, and the uneasiness that the position itself elicits seems intelligible as well (ibid).

Quine proposes what he calls “naturalized epistemology,” which would involve empirically investigating how it is that we come to form the “elaborate structure of our ordinary and scientific beliefs about the world” (Strawson 1985, 8). This would shift the focus away from the philosophical issue of skepticism, and toward the verifiable issue of belief-formation and the processes that lead to it, which, according to Quine is the more substantial question that we should be investigating. However, this shift in focus is precisely the problem with such a proposal, as Stroud points out (ibid). Shifting one’s focus toward a more empirically verifiable issue leaves the original skeptical challenge itself “completely untouched” (ibid). Before one can
move on to a different question and claim that this question is the one we should be asking, one must first show that the original question is not the question we should be asking – either by demonstrating that some element of it is faulty or misconceived – and Quine’s proposal has not done this (ibid).

Other philosophers have tried to concede that the problem of skepticism is indeed an intelligible problem, and still offer a satisfactory argument to challenge it. Descartes was one such philosopher, who appealed to the “veracity of God” as a reason to lay skeptical doubts to rest (Strawson 1985, 7). However, Strawson considers a more popular version of this traditional argument, according to which the existence of an external world is said to provide the best explanation of our sensory experience – or at least a better explanation than any other alternative (ibid). This position is called Inference to the Best Explanation. It is said to follow that assuming the existence of an external world is just as rational as adopting certain explanatory theories in the context of scientific inquiry, where such explanatory theories likewise provide the best known explanation for scientifically observed phenomena (Strawson 1985, 8). While Stroud does not address this more popular argument directly, a critique of it comes out in Strawson’s discussion of the transcendental argument, which follows.

Strawson distinguishes two forms of the transcendental argument. In the first form, one starts by noting that, whatever else the skeptic may manage to doubt, she cannot doubt instances of self-conscious thought or experience (Strawson 1985, 9). That is, no matter how many ways we might be wrong in our explanations of our experiences, it cannot be doubted that such experiences themselves exist. One then shows that believing in the existence of an external world

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is a *necessary condition* for having such experiences in the first place, and thereby precludes the threat of skeptical hypotheses (ibid). In the second form, one claims that the skeptical position undermines itself. As Strawson explains, one shows that the skeptic “could have no use for the concepts in terms of which he expresses his doubt unless he were able to know to be true at least some of the propositions belonging to the class all members of which fall within the scope of the skeptical doubt” (ibid). That is, the skeptic must take certain propositions to be known before he could even express his doubt, and that he must take certain propositions to be known at all directly undermines the entire skeptical project.

However, as Stroud explains, each form of this argument merely shows that our *belief* in an external world is necessary, which may well be the case, but neither form shows that the *truth* of such a belief is necessary, and this is closer to the heart of the skeptical problem (ibid). The skeptic can claim that fulfilling all the necessary experiential conditions for belief in an external world is still consistent with that belief’s falsity, implying that such evidence is not really evidence, and that “we cannot be said really to *know* that any such propositions are true” (Strawson 1985, 10). In a similar way, the inference to the best explanation declares the rationality of belief in an external world to be on par with the rationality of belief in a scientifically verified explanatory theory. Though, the process that leads to explanatory theories in science is distinct from the process that leads to our belief in an external world. We do not believe in an external world *because* it is the best explanation for our experiences. (There will be more on this response in Strawson’s discussion of Wittgenstein in the following section)

The back and forth that Strawson depicts here, between the challenges to traditional skepticism and the skeptical responses to such challenges, serves to highlight the ultimate futility of the rational approach to responding to the skeptic. We are inescapably resistant to the
skeptical position, and yet there is no logical way of avoiding it, for every argument attempting to refute the skeptic either misses the skeptical point, or suggests that it is not important enough to seriously consider. Thus Strawson considers a “different kind of response” to traditional skepticism that does not try to meet the skeptic’s challenge, but rather tries “to pass it by” (1985, 3). This new response takes from the works of Hume and Wittgenstein, and utilizes certain observations that are made with the transcendental argument.


Hume’s position on this matter, as Strawson lays it out, is not so much a response to the skeptic, but an attempt at understanding the entire skeptical problem more precisely (and Strawson’s position is very much like Hume’s in this regard). Hume sees all arguments that are given in support of traditional skepticism as “totally inefficacious,” and likewise all arguments given against traditional skepticism as “totally idle” (Strawson 1985, 11). (Note that this claim is distinct from Carnap’s who declared the skeptical problem entirely to be “meaningless”) This stems from Hume’s conviction that we simply “cannot help” believing in the existence of an external world: we have an “inescapable natural commitment” to inductive belief-formation, and it is only within this inductive framework that logical analyses, by which we refine our beliefs into a consistent and coherent system, take place (Strawson 1985, 14).

This understanding of the skeptical problem, however, is ultimately inconsistent, as Strawson points out (and as Hume himself acknowledges). Strawson notes that one might speak of “two Humes” – Hume the Skeptic and Hume the Naturalist – whose positions radically differ (1985, 12, 13). Hume the Skeptic concessively appeals to “philosophically critical thinking,” according to which reason leads inevitably to the traditional skeptical conclusion (Strawson
1985, 12). This stems from the fact that any attempted answer to the question of how or why it is
that we come to believe in an external world will itself presume the existence of an external
world (ibid). Hume the Naturalist, on the other hand, appeals to “everyday empirical thinking,”
according to which the steadfast response to the skeptic is manifested in one’s actions (ibid).
This stems from the fact that our believing and behaving under the assumption of an external
world is not something nature has left up to us; living in this way is not left to choice, for the
skeptic or anyone else, but is a part of our disposition (Strawson 1985, 12, 13).

Thus, Hume concedes that the skeptical argument cannot be refuted with reason.
However, he also asserts that the traditional skeptical position cannot be practically maintained
in the face of our natural commitment to belief in an external world. We cannot stop reason from
undermining nature, nor can we stop nature from inevitably trumping (in practice at least)
reason. As inconsistent as Hume’s position is, it effectively captures the dilemma involved with
traditional skepticism.

Wittgenstein’s position on the issue of skepticism is similar to Hume’s insofar as he sees
the debate between the skeptic and the reasoned believer as one that cannot be resolved.
However, his assessment of why it cannot be resolved is more complex than Hume’s, and
Strawson’s position appeals largely to this aspect of Wittgenstein’s position. Wittgenstein does
not simply declare the force of nature to be practically stronger than that of reason, while
conceding the inconsistency between the conflicting standpoints. He claims that the debate itself
arises from a misunderstanding of the role of such propositions as “an external world exists” in
the context of our systems of cognitive function and practice. He further claims that if the source
of this misunderstanding can be reconciled, then the entire debate will dissolve.
In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein discusses the debates that ensue from Moore’s attempted critique of traditional skepticism, and expresses certain sentiments that parallel Hume’s. He refers to Moore accordingly, and refers to the provider of skeptical responses to Moore’s position as simply “the skeptic.” We can see a parallel here between the opposing Humean positions – the Naturalist and the Skeptic. Much like Hume as well, Wittgenstein gives a special status to the kinds of propositions that the skeptic doubts, based on the role they play in our ability to make sense of the world. He alludes to them with such words as “axes” and “hinges,” and they have subsequently been dubbed “hinge propositions” (Wittgenstein §152, §341). The following passages illustrate his descriptions of them.

§137. …The propositions … which Moore retails as examples of such known truths are indeed interesting. Not because anyone knows their truth, or believes he knows them, but because they all have a similarly unique role in the system of our empirical judgments.

§152. I do not explicitly learn the propositions that stand fast for me. I can discover them subsequently like the axis around which a body rotates. This axis is not fixed in the sense that anything holds it fast, but the movement around it determines its immobility.

The notable feature of hinge propositions is the fact that they are learned in *practice* rather than through reason or evidence, as other empirical propositions are. They are like the structure of a game, which are “learned purely practically without learning any explicit rules” (Wittgenstein 2009, §95; S&N 16). As Wittgenstein states, the process of justifying the evidence and giving grounds for propositions eventually “comes to an end,” but this end is not comprised
of further propositions, nor of our coming to understand or see certain propositions as true; rather, “it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game” (2009, §204).

Strawson notes that for Wittgenstein, trying to establish the rationality of hinge propositions is a mistaken endeavor, for they themselves comprise “the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false” (2009, §94; 1985, 15). Hinge propositions are “beyond being justified or unjustified…” – they “underlie all questions and all thinking” (Wittgenstein 2009, §359, §415; Strawson 1985, 14, 15). Because of their unique status, they are not subject to the same rules as other propositions, nor are they subject to the same doubts. Rather, hinge propositions are the rules. They lay the groundwork upon which all other propositions can be organized, they construct the “scaffolding” upon which all other propositions can be doubted or affirmed (Wittgenstein 2009, §211):

§150. …Somewhere I must begin with not-doubting; and that is not, so to speak, hasty but excusable: it is part of judging.

§115. If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty.

§163. …Whenever we test anything, we are already presupposing something that is not tested. Now am I to say that the experiment which perhaps I make in order to test the truth of a proposition presupposes the truth of the proposition that the apparatus I believe I see is really there (and the like)?

Again, the heart of Wittgenstein’s response involves the claim that both the skeptic and Moore (indeed, anyone who adopts a rational approach to skepticism) mistakenly treat hinge propositions as though they were empirical propositions, and that if they understood their mistake, the apparent debate would disappear:
§32. It is not a matter of Moore’s knowing that there’s a hand there, but rather we should not understand him if he were to say “Of course I may be wrong about this”. We should ask “What is it like to make such a mistake as that” – e.g. what’s it like to discover that it was a mistake?

§37. But is it an adequate answer to the skepticism of the idealist, or the assurances of the realist, to say that “There are physical objects” is nonsense? For them after all it is not nonsense. It would, however, be an answer to say: this assertion, or its opposite [that is, a claim of knowledge/justification put forth by the antiskeptic, or the opposite put forth by the skeptic] is a misfiring attempt to express what can’t be expressed like that…

The “misfiring attempt” he describes in this last passage condenses Wittgenstein’s position on the entire sceptical debate. Much as Hume does, Wittgenstein claims that our beliefs in hinge propositions are not grounded beliefs, but are also not open to serious doubt (Strawson 1985, 19). To either propose skeptical doubts or to attempt to confront the skeptic with argument (as Moore did) is to misunderstand the role of these beliefs in our belief-systems, leaving both attempts equally idle (ibid). As Strawson most plainly states, “the reasons produced in those arguments to justify induction or belief in the existence of body are not, and do not become, our reasons for these beliefs; there is no such thing as the reasons for which we hold these beliefs” (1985, 19-20). Case in point, he explains: the inference to the best explanation, described in the previous section, does not ultimately serve to undermine the skeptic, for “no one accepts the existence of the physical world because it supplies the best available explanation” (Strawson 1985, 20).
However, Wittgenstein’s position is also distinct from Hume’s in other ways. Wittgenstein’s account of hinge propositions is much more complicated and dynamically conceived than Hume’s (Strawson 1985, 18). Hume appeals to Nature as the “one exclusive source” for hinge propositions, whereas Wittgenstein ascribes more of a dynamic element to their origins (Strawson 1985, 19, 26):

§96. It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid.

§97. The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other.

§99. And the bank of that river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away, or deposited.

Here, he sees hinge propositions as reflecting “the general character of the practice itself, [forming] a frame within which the judgments we actually make hang together in a more or less coherent way” (Strawson 1985, 19). As such, hinge propositions are essentially contextual for Wittgenstein, with certain propositions functioning as hinge propositions in a particular language game, but perhaps not in another – they can change over time.

Having discussed Hume’s and Wittgenstein’s responses to the skeptical problem, Strawson recalls the second of the two forms of the transcendental argument. This involved the
claim that the very possibility of forming intelligible skeptical doubts requires a kind of
knowledge at the outset (Strawson 1985, 21). Strawson recalls that the basic criticism of both
this and the first form of the argument is that “what is claimed to be a necessary condition has
not been shown to be so and could not be shown to be so without eliminating all possible (or
candidate) alternatives” (1985, 22-23). This criticism holds, and Strawson does not endorse
either form of the transcendental. However, this second form of the argument, like
Wittgenstein’s position, insists that our capacity to formulate doubts at all requires some instance
of knowledge, or what we take to be knowledge.

While the simple necessity of this sense of certitude does not guarantee its truth,
Strawson sees this type of argument as helpful in understanding the “connections between the
major structural elements of our conceptual schema” (1985, 22). His position utilizes the
argument’s unique way of understanding our conceptual schema – as more of an interlocking
web than a linear deductive system (Strawson 1985, 23). As he explains, because the naturalist
has rejected the skeptic’s invitation, the naturalist has given up the “unreal project of wholesale
validation,” and embraces instead the “real project of investigating the connections between the
major structural elements of our conceptual scheme” (Strawson 1985, 22). Indeed, for Strawson,
it may be the major task of analytic philosophy to understand our conceptual scheme “not as a
rigidly deductive system, but as a coherent whole whose parts are mutually supportive and
mutually dependent, interlocking in an intelligible way” (1985, 23).

Thus, in Strawson’s proposed naturalist account, he takes a more holistic view on belief,
appealing to the transcendentalist’s understanding of the role of knowledge in belief formation.
He also appeals to both Hume’s and Wittgenstein’s declaration that the entire skeptical debate is
idle, and simply rejects the skeptic’s invitation to reasoned rebuttal (Strawson 1985, 21, 28-29).
Concluding his discussion of traditional skepticism, Strawson references Wittgenstein, who writes that, with respect to skeptical inquiries, “it is so difficult to find the beginning. Or better: it is difficult to begin at the beginning. And not to try to go further back … to try to meet the skeptic’s challenge, in whatever way, by whatever style of argument, is to try to go further back” (Wittgenstein 2009, §471; S&N 24).

B. Skepticism About Moral Responsibility

1. Free Will and Moral Responsibility

Having sketched out some basics for his position on the topic of traditional skepticism, Strawson effectively lays the groundwork for discussion of skepticism about moral responsibility (1985, 2-3). He shifts his focus from hinge propositions to “another area of natural commitment” – reactive attitudes (Strawson 1985, 31). That is, the moral sentiments and judgments that we apply to ourselves and to others base on our (and their) actions (ibid). Strawson provides a detailed discussion of reactive attitudes in “Freedom and Resentment,” where they are introduced in the context of a debate about determinism and the threat it arguably poses to our practices of holding people morally responsible. Notably, the threat that determinism arguably poses to moral responsibility is analogous to the threat that it arguably poses to free will. Because freedom of will is commonly taken to be a necessary condition for robust moral responsibility, and because the debates and positions surrounding the problem of free will are more diverse, bountiful, and refined than those about the problem of moral responsibility, I will set the stage for Strawson’s discussion of skepticism about moral responsibility by providing a brief description of the problem of free will.
In, “An Essay on Free Will,” Peter Van Inwagen provides what he calls the Consequence Argument, which is given in support of incompatibilism, the position that free will (the thesis that people freely will the actions they perform) is incompatible with determinism (van Inwagen 1983, 56):

If determinism is true, then our acts are the consequences of the laws of nature and events in the remote past. But it is not up to us what went on before we were born, and neither is it up to us what the laws of nature are. Therefore, the consequences of these things are not up to us (van Inwagen 1983, 16).

That is, past states of the world, coupled with the laws of physics, determine our current actions, and because those factors determining our actions are not under our control, the consequences of such factors – our actions – are not under our control. In response to this argument for incompatibilism (aptly considered a ‘skeptical’ position), there have been two general types of responses. Many philosophers have conceded incompatibilism but provided libertarianism arguments that we still have free will in the face of this incompatibilism. Other philosophers have provided arguments for compatibilism, the position that free will is compatible with determinism, which often involves defining “free will” or “abilities” differently from how van Inwagen does. Such basic popular positions in the free will debate will be helpful in the following discussion of skepticism about moral responsibility.

With this understanding of the problem of free will, the analogous problem of moral responsibility is a small step away. As Strawson explains, our reactive attitudes are “indissolubly linked with that sense of agency or freedom or responsibility which we feel in ourselves and attribute to others” (1985, 31). Subsequently, the threat that determinism poses to our sense of
free will extends to our reactive attitudes and sense of moral responsibility. The relation between these two issues will come out more clearly in the following discussion of Strawson’s debate.

Strawson provides two interlocutors in the debate: the **pessimist**, who claims that the truth of determinism would render our practices of holding people morally responsible unjustified or absurd, and the **optimist**, who claims that the truth of determinism would have no effect on these practices (1997, 119). The optimist first concedes that, according to “the facts as we know them,” determinism cannot be shown to be false, so it cannot be argued against the moral skeptic that determinism is simply not true (Strawson 1997, 120). The optimist then claims that, even with the truth of determinism, we can still find an “adequate basis,” or justification, for moral responsibility in the **efficacy** of the practices we associate with it, such as praise and punishment (ibid). That is, we can still find meaning in our practices of holding people morally responsible by seeing them as a practical and effective way to keep people living together civilly. Gary Watson explains in “Responsibility and the limits of evil” that this is a consequentialist response to the problem, since the ‘efficacy’ with which the optimist finds meaning in our moral practices can be seen as the positive consequence of social regulation (1987, 257).

In response to this, however, the pessimist claims that the mere efficacy of moral concepts and practices is not enough to render them truly moral; for truly **moral** judgment requires true moral responsibility, which requires the falsity of determinism (Strawson 1997, 120). Our reactive attitudes for the pessimist serve as merely the “emotional side effects” of our seeing others as having free will or not (1987, 257). Watson describes the pessimist position here as incompatibilist, insofar as he (the pessimist) sees moral responsibility and the practices we engage in under the assumption of its truth as being incompatible with determinism (1987, 258). Likewise, the optimist’s position can be understood as compatibilist, insofar as he understands
moral responsibility and its related practices to be compatible with determinism.

2. Reactive Attitudes and Objective Attitudes

Before going into further detail about the philosophical responses to skepticism about moral responsibility (analogous to the responses of libertarianism, compatibilism, etc), I will present, as Strawson does in “Freedom and Resentment,” the aspects of moral responsibility that are less detached and theoretical – pertaining more intimately to our personal experience of morally relevant emotions. Having set up the debate about determinism and its two opposing sides, Strawson uses various “commonplace” examples to account for the types of reactive attitudes that we associate with moral responsibility, focusing mainly on resentment and gratitude (1997, 124). Consider a variation of one such example: If a colleague of mine, Ryan, were to unexpectedly present me with a gift, then his actions would seem to reflect a feeling of goodwill toward me, and I would react with a feeling of gratitude toward him for his generosity. If, however, he were to step on my foot, then his actions would seem to reflect a feeling of ill will toward me, and I would react with a feeling of resentment toward him for his malice.

These kinds of attitudes with which we react to other people in a moral situation are what Strawson refers to as “reactive attitudes” (ibid). These include such attitudes as resentment, gratitude, guilt, and forgiveness, and Strawson identifies them as playing an integral role in our daily lives (ibid). The examples that he uses serve to emphasize how much it “matters to us” whether the actions that other people take toward us reflect attitudes of ill will, goodwill, indifference, etc (Strawson 1997, 123).

Such examples also serve to illustrate a difference between two categories of attitudes. When Ryan steps on my foot in the example above, the resentment I feel toward him comes as a
kind of immediate and natural reaction (Strawson 1997, 126). But suppose that, shortly after Ryan does this to me, I discover that he is “psychologically abnormal” or “morally undeveloped” in some way (ibid). Perhaps he is mentally disabled, or is undergoing a psychotic break. This does not justify his stepping on my foot, but it does, to use Watson’s terminology, exempt it in a way (1987, 263). And with this exemption, I would understandably suspend the initial resentment I felt toward Ryan, perhaps experiencing instead a more objective variation of it, such as pity or repulsion (Strawson 1997, 127). This new example shows that, while we generally cannot help but experience reactive attitudes (they are in a sense ‘reactionary’), we can, under certain circumstances, find it appropriate to suspend them and adopt different, more objective attitudes – including pity, fear, or repulsion – toward another (ibid).

In one of the first examples, I felt resentment toward Ryan for stepping on my foot. Strawson would understand this attitude of resentment (and all other reactive attitudes) to be appropriate only when I can participate in a certain kind of relationship – a moral relationship – with Ryan. Under normal circumstances, I relate to Ryan as another moral agent, and react to his actions accordingly (with resentment, for this particular example). Strawson therefore classifies resentment and all other reactive attitudes under the category of “participant attitudes” (1997, 126, 127). In the last example, I suspended my reactive attitudes upon discovering Ryan’s moral ineptitude and, not being able to participate in that moral relationship with him, saw him as an object rather than a moral agent. As such, I experienced one of the more objective attitudes such as pity or repulsion, rather than resentment. Strawson therefore classifies repulsion and all other attitudes.

While it may seem that the terms “reactive attitudes” and “participant attitude” are interchangeable, the participant attitude is a perspective from which one experiences reactive attitudes; however, the term “objective attitude” represents both the perspective from which one experiences such attitudes as pity, repulsion, etc, as well as the attitudes themselves.
such attitudes that are experienced from a more distanced perspective under the category of “objective attitudes” (1997, 126).

3. The Participant Attitude and the Objective Attitude

Strawson considers several circumstances under which it is appropriate to adopt the objective attitude, however, I will present them under the more precise taxonomy provided by Campbell in “Compatibilist Alternatives.” Campbell describes Wallace’s account of moral responsibility in this way: one is morally responsible for an action if one has “powers of reflective self-control” (2005, 400). Quoting Wallace, Campbell accounts for reflective self-control as “a collection of powers that includes ‘the power to grasp and apply moral reasons, and the power to control one’s behavior by the light of such reasons’ (7) as well as ‘the further powers to step back from one’s desires, to reflect on the ends that they incline one to pursue in light of moral principles, and to adjust or revise one’s ends as a result of such reflection’ (14)” (Campbell 2005, 400). Tying this back to Strawson’s debate, the pessimist’s position would hold that such powers of reflective self-control are threatened by the truth of determinism, as is the rationality of the actions we take toward others based on the assumption that others possess such powers. The optimist’s position to the contrary would be that such powers and our actions that are based on them are not threatened.

The circumstances under which these powers of reflective self-control are diminished are described as “mitigating cases” for moral responsibility, insofar as they serve to mitigate the extent to which an individual can be held morally responsible for a certain action he performed (Campbell 2005, 401). Under this account, Campbell then defines an “exemption” as either a hindrance or complete absence of powers of reflective self-control on the part of an actor (2005,
These exemptions can be of two types – transitory and enduring. (I will continue to use the example of Ryan stepping on my foot to illustrate each of the following types of cases) A transitory exemption involves the temporary suspension (hindrance) of such powers, as would be the case if Ryan were hypnotized or intoxicated. In this way, his powers of reflective self-control are blocked or temporarily out of order. An enduring exemption, on the other hand, involves a longer – perhaps permanent – suspension of such powers, as would be the case if Ryan were mentally ill or merely a child (Campbell 2005, 401). Here, his powers of reflective self-control are not merely hindered, but are completely missing (that is, they are absent, as opposed to merely hindered).

Campbell then introduces another kind of mitigating circumstance, distinct from the exemption, which he refers to as an “excuse” (2005, 401). The excuse can also be of two types, which, as John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza describe, relate to two necessary conditions for moral responsibility: epistemological conditions and freedom-relevant conditions (1993, 7-8). If the epistemological condition is not met, then the agent simply lacked knowledge of the situation, as would be the case if Ryan simply didn’t see me standing where I was or didn’t realize that he was stepping on my foot. If the freedom-relevant condition is not met, then the agent lacked physical control of the situation, as would be the case if Ryan were pushed or if he had no other alternative but to step on my foot (Campbell 2005, 402). According to Campbell, if either of these two conditions is not met, then an excuse is provided for the agent’s actions – either an epistemological excuse, or a freedom-relevant excuse.

Appealing to this four-fold distinction (exemptions, transitory and enduring; excuses, epistemological and freedom-relevant) of mitigating cases allows us to recognize a similarity between exemptions and excuses. Both an enduring exemption and a freedom-relevant excuse
are more sweeping it their mitigation of moral responsibility than a transitory exemption and an epistemological excuse. Under the former cases, an agent can be understood as free of moral responsibility for her actions, whereas in the latter cases, her responsibility is merely diminished (Campbell 2005, 402).

To relate this back to the problem of skepticism about moral responsibility, it seems that determinism could potentially render all individuals’ actions mitigated specifically by a freedom-relevant excuse, no matter what the circumstance. This is the excuse according to which an agent lacked physical control of the situation – where Ryan was pushed and could not help but step on my foot. Recall the thesis of determinism, which implies that any person’s actions are never truly under their physical control. With reference to Nagel’s “Moral Luck,” Strawson explains that such a thesis therefore renders our reactive attitudes, in any moral situation, “unwarranted, inappropriate, or irrational” (1985, 31). Determinism implies that all agents, normal or abnormal, pushed or not pushed, are deserving of exclusively the objective attitude for their actions for the same reasons that pushed Ryan is deserving of it (Strawson 1997, 128-129). Once we see other people and their actions objectively, as nothing more than natural objects and events happening in the world, our reactive attitudes become completely unwarranted, reduced to the mere product of an illusion of freedom, a “veil” that ought to be dismissed upon realizing the truth (Strawson 1985, 32). People’s actions “may be matter for rejoicing or regret, but not for gratitude or resentment,” under a deterministic picture (ibid).

Thus, the optimist and pessimist resume in their debate, with the optimist needing to supply some condition of freedom that would justify our reactive attitudes in the face of determinism. Such a condition must explain why it is that we wish to judge individuals for their actions, rather than such individuals’ characteristics or physical presence. Though, as was the
case with traditional skepticism, a major problem with the responses to skepticism about moral responsibility is that, “no one has been able to state intelligibly what such a condition of freedom … would actually consist in,” just as no defender of ordinary knowledge claims could effectively account for the certainty with which we believe in an external world (Strawson 1985, 33). While it is easy to undermine the concept of moral agency with skeptical possibilities, “it is very difficult to give it a positive characterization” (Nagel 1979, 36).

Strawson’s assessment of all this – the optimist’s attempted responses to the pessimist, and the pessimist’s retorts to the optimist – is to claim that both interlocutors are misguided. They are not misguided because they are unsuccessful, but for the same reasons that attempted responses to the traditional skeptic, and the skeptic’s retorts to such attempts, are misguided: all such attempts are inefficacious. As he explains, “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 body” (Strawson 1985, 32). Indeed, to paraphrase Strawson’s evaluation of traditional skepticism, any reasons we come up with in attempting to respond to the moral skeptic would not be our reasons for experiencing reactive attitudes (1985, 19-20).

4. Conflicting Alternative Standpoints

Though Strawson assesses the pessimist-optimist debate as being misguided, there is another problem that arises from it, distinct from the challenge of rationally responding to the skeptic. As was made clear in the examples above, it is possible for us to be convinced that a particular reactive attitude on a particular occasion is unjustified, for this is how we come to see a psychologically abnormal Ryan with the objective attitude. This parallels the way in which it is possible for us to be convinced that a particular perception on a particular occasion is mistaken,
as it would be if we were witnessing a mirage. However, Strawson declares that we simply
cannot suspend our reactive attitudes ubiquitously, as is demanded by the pessimist, for our
proneness to experiencing reactive attitudes is a “condition of our humanity” (1985, 33).

We have a “natural human commitment” to these attitudes, and cannot “choose” whether
to have them or to reject them, he states (Strawson 1997, 130). They are not merely useful or
necessary for social interaction; they are a part of our psychological framework, which “neither
calls for, nor permits, an external ‘rational’ justification” (Strawson 1997, 140). His response on
this problem, much like it is on the problem of traditional skepticism, is to dissolve the debate by
showing that both the optimist and the pessimist are mistaken in trying to justify our moral
concepts and practices at all. Moral responsibility as we understand it, like our reactive attitudes,
are an irreducible part of our nature. Both the pessimist’s attempts to doubt moral responsibility,
and the optimist’s attempts to justify it, are equally “idle” (Strawson 1985, 28).

While he understands reactive attitudes to be “inescapable” in the same sense that Hume
finds our beliefs in an external world inescapable, Strawson clearly illustrates that it is still
possible to ‘detach’ from our natural attitudes and reactions and view a person as an object, even
when such a detachment is unwarranted (1985, 34). That is, it is possible “to see another or
others simply as natural creatures whose behavior, whose actions and reactions, we may seek to
understand, predict and perhaps control in just such a sense as that in which we may seek to
understand, predict and control the behavior of nonpersonal objects in nature” (ibid). Indeed, he
notes that we already exercise this capacity intentionally on occasion, “for reasons of policy or
curiosity or emotional self-defense” (ibid). It functions as a practical resource in this way, but a
notably “temporary” one (ibid).
Consider the example of Ryan being psychologically normal, not pushed, and stepping on my foot out of sheer malice. It is generally appropriate to adopt the objective attitude only under specific mitigating circumstances, such as enduring exemptions and freedom-relevant excuses. But it is still possible (perhaps difficult and frustrating, but possible) for me to inaccurately suspend my reactive attitude of resentment and adopt the objective attitude toward him when he acted purely out of malice. I could observe him as an “object of social policy” to be observed or managed, and react to his actions as though they were natural events in the world (Strawson 1997, 128).

This capacity to adopt the objective attitude in “perfectly normal cases,” when the participant attitude is otherwise warranted, is constantly open to us as an alternative way of observing people’s actions (Strawson 1985, 34). It implies “a radical difference in standpoint from which what are in a sense identical objects or events or phenomena may be viewed” (Strawson 1985, 35). We can view another’s actions from the participant standpoint, according to which we would be involved in a moral relationship with the other, as well as from the objective standpoint, according to which we would be detached from her, bearing no moral relationship (Strawson 1985, 36). Of course, both standpoints are not equally appealing, for the participant standpoint is that from which we naturally view others’ actions, allowing room for our reactive attitudes, while adopting the objective standpoint indefinitely would lead us to see reactive attitudes as alien (ibid). Strawson’s concern is not, he claims, what Nagel describes as the simple recognition or acknowledgment that people are such creatures, but the possibility of a state of being in which this recognition of other people as objects “so colors and dominates our attitudes to them as to exclude or suppress the natural personal or moral reactive attitudes” (1985, 34, italics added). That is, these standpoints and the attitudes that arise from them are not simply
different, but “profoundly opposed” (Strawson 1985, 36). It is impossible to adopt both
standpoints toward the same situation simultaneously, for this would require feeling two
conflicting sets of attitudes simultaneously, a feat which few if any people can achieve.

The conflicting alternatives in standpoint here introduce what Strawson calls a kind of
“tension” in us (1997, 127). If the “facts as we know them” cannot render determinism false, and
the truth of determinism calls for us to adopt the objective attitude ubiquitously, then, Strawson
considers, would employing at all times our capacity to adopt the objective attitude in “normal
cases” be the only way for us to live and behave in accordance with the facts (1997, 120, 128-9,
1985 34)? This consideration is distinct from the basic problem of skepticism about moral
responsibility in that we have the capacity demanded of us by the skeptic. It seems that Strawson
cannot appeal to the futility of such a skeptic lifestyle because we are indeed capable of viewing
all people and their actions objectively. However, he claims that this alternative objective way of
approaching moral situations is not actually an option for us at all. Sustaining such objectivity
indefinitely, he explains, is not something we as human beings are even capable of (Strawson
1997, 129). We generally adopt it when it is appropriate, and while we can adopt it when it is
inappropriate, we can do so for a limited time only. Our commitment to the participant attitude is
“too thoroughgoing and deeply rooted” for us to be able to suspend it indefinitely, leaving this
alternative as merely a theoretical option, not a plausible one (ibid).

5. A Natural Question, A Natural Response, and Strawson’s Solution

Strawson’s response to the problem of conflicting alternative standpoints (participant and
objective), however, does not resolve a related issue that arises. Even if we are not capable of
maintaining the objective attitude indefinitely in practice, Strawson shows that a natural question
to ask about the two standpoints is, “Which is the correct standpoint? Which is the standpoint from which we see things as they really are” (1985, 36, italics added)? He further explains that the natural response to this question is with one of two possible realities. In the first reality, what I call reality $P$, the participant standpoint is the correct one, there really is an objective moral reality, and our attitudes play a legitimate role in that reality (ibid). In the second reality, what I call reality $O$, the objective standpoint is the correct one, there is no objective moral reality, and the idea of such a reality is simply a human illusion, consequently rendering the attitudes we feel in accordance with that reality merely the products of an illusion (Strawson 1985, 36-7).

Strawson presents this question and potential pair of answers not with the intention of selecting one of the two answers or even to answer the question at all. He claims that the error of this paradox does not lie with one standpoint or the other being mistaken, but with “the attempt to force the choice between them” (Strawson 1985, 37). The very question of which standpoint is correct implies that they both cannot be correct; and as he claims, they both can be (ibid). He states, “the appearance of contradiction arises only if we assume the existence of some metaphysically absolute standpoint from which we can judge between the two standpoints … but there is no such superior standpoint – or none that we know of; it is the idea of such a standpoint that is the illusion” (Strawson 1985, 38, italics added).

The two standpoints that Strawson describes, and the two realities that would correspond to the accuracy of each, give way to the two “faces of naturalism” he defends: reductive and nonreductive (1985, 37). The nonreductive naturalist, he explains, parallels Hume the Naturalist by seeing nature as setting the bounds for reason; our reactive attitudes and moral judgments are “naturally secured against” arguments that would suggest their irrationality or non-justifiability (Strawson 1985, 39). There can only be a lack where there is a need, he states: “questions of
justification arise in plenty within the general framework of attitudes in question; but the existence of the general framework itself neither calls for nor permits an external reaction justification” (Strawson 1985, 41). The reductive naturalist, on the other hand, parallels Hume the skeptic insofar as he understands human beings and human actions as simply objects and events in nature that are to be “described, analyzed, and causally explained,” without any moral evaluation (Strawson 1985, 40). Under this naturalism, we should strive to adopt indefinitely the objective, detached standpoint that requires the bracketing and suspension of our reactive attitudes (ibid).

Strawson notes that while this solution may sound more like a mere evasion, it is not (1985, 38). He uses a theory of sense perception as an analogy to illustrate his position. According to this theory, there are two contrasting views regarding the nature of physical objects: commonsense realism and scientific realism. Commonsense realism consists of the view that the physical objects that we “discriminate in ordinary speech and experience” actually possess phenomenal properties (specifically for this example, colors) (Strawson 1985, 42). Our natural commitment to the view that physical things have phenomenal properties is prior – it ‘came first’ in a sense, and is a “necessary precondition of our even entertaining the view of scientific realism” (Strawson 1985, 44). This realist position clearly corresponds to Strawson’s nonreductive naturalist asserting the existence of an objective moral reality.

Scientific realism, on the other hand, purports that such physical objects in the world only possess “properties which are mentioned in physical theory and physical explanation,” including causal explanations for what this view calls the illusion of phenomenal properties (Strawson 1985, 42). Here, our physical constitution determines how we perceive things in the world, but “the real or intrinsic character of physical objects in space is clearly constant, whatever the
variations in the physiological make-up of species that can be said to perceive them” (Strawson 1985, 43). Phenomenal properties such as colors therefore, for the scientific realist, “belong, at best, to the subjective character of our perceptual experience” (ibid). This realist position likewise corresponds to Strawson’s reductive naturalist rejecting the possibility of an objective moral reality.

The apparent irreconcilability of commonsense realism and scientific realism in this debate, as Strawson declares with respect to the reductive-nonreductive naturalist debate, disappears with the recognition that there is an “ultimate relativity in our conception of the real” (where “real” here refers to the properties of physical objects) (1985, 44). Relative to the standpoint of human perception, commonsense realism is correct, and relative to the standpoint of physical science (which he notes is also a human standpoint), scientific realism is correct (ibid). Once this relativity to different standpoints and standards is acknowledged, “the appearance of contradiction between these positions disappears; the same thing can both be, and not be, phenomenally propertied” (Strawson 1985, 45).

Strawson admits that the scientific realist (in the context of the debate about phenomenal properties) could easily point out that the internal relativities for physical objects and human action simply serve to emphasize the subjective, unreliable character of phenomenal and moral characteristics:

… One and the same thing, without its real or intrinsic character varying at all, may causally produce quite different subjective experiences or reactions in variant circumstances and with different subjects. There can be no objective truth of the matter where there are so many competing candidates for the position, each
claiming its own validity, and no impartial or external criterion for judging
between them (Strawson 1985, 49).

With this understanding, the scientific realist sees his position not simply as an alternative view, but as a “cumulative advance or development in knowledge” – one that even takes into account and explains the subjective appearances we are familiar with phenomenally (ibid). The same argument can be offered in support of the reductive naturalist’s position, leaving the nonreductive naturalist in need of a response.

This response, as Strawson lays it out, stresses the fact that, “though we can, by an intellectual effort, occupy at times, and for a time, the former pair of standpoints [scientific realism and reductive naturalism], we cannot give up the latter pair of standpoints [commonsense realism and nonreductive naturalism]” (1985, 50, italics added). Strawson is quick to acknowledge that the parallel between properties of physical objects and moral properties of human actions is not exact: it is not so easy for us to shift between perspectives when moral standards are concerned (1985, 49). There are numerous diverse moral viewpoints, and “we are not as willing” to say that moral truth is relative to a given moral standard as we might be to say that the truth about phenomenal properties is relative to a given visual-perceptual medium (Strawson 1985, 47). However, Strawson’s relativizing move seeks to “reconcile” only the participant perspective with the objective perspective, each of which appeals to our basic understanding of the world in critical ways, those ways are simply critical in different ways (1985, 48). Relative to reductive naturalism, reality $O$ is the case and we do not have moral responsibility; relative to nonreductive naturalism, reality $P$ is the case and we have moral responsibility.
The nonreductive naturalist, he reminds us, is not claiming that the reductive naturalist position, and the objective attitudes that come with his position, are mistaken, nor is he claiming that viewing the world in purely naturalistic (participant) terms, and experiencing the reactive attitudes that come with it, is mistaken (1985, 49-50). He is only claiming that it is mistaken to see the reductive naturalist and nonreductive naturalist viewpoints as “genuinely incompatible” (ibid).

This last point made by Strawson seems to indicate that his position is expressly in favor of the nonreductive naturalist, and not with some reconciling, relativizing middle ground, for which he advocates earlier, insofar as it is only the reductive naturalist’s position that implies an incompatibility between reductive and nonreductive naturalism. However, a discussion of the ways in which Strawson has been interpreted in the philosophical literature on moral responsibility is something I wish to put off until the third chapter of this thesis. In this chapter, my intention was to investigate the manner in which Strawson approaches and understands the problems of traditional skepticism and skepticism about moral responsibility according to his two works, “Freedom and Resentment,” and *Skepticism and Naturalism*, with the help of outside sources to clarify and expound upon certain terminology and concepts. My understanding is that Strawson finds a distinct parallel between the two sceptical problems and the structure of the debates surrounding them. While his position on both sceptical problems is concessive, the degree to which he concedes is unclear. I will attempt to clarify this in the third chapter.
Chapter 2. Nagel on skepticism about moral responsibility

In the previous chapter I discussed Strawson’s method of approach to the problem of skepticism about moral responsibility, and the parallels he drew between it and traditional skepticism. In this chapter, I discuss Nagel’s method of approach to the problem, pulling mainly from his chapters on Knowledge and Free Will in *The View from Nowhere*. The first section opens with his account of epistemological skepticism, the same issue that Strawson refers to as “traditional skepticism.” I begin by accounting for the problem of epistemic luck as he describes it, and then progress into his assessment of our pursuit of *objectivity* as the driving force behind the skeptical problem. In the second section, I consider his account of skepticism about moral responsibility, starting with a discussion of the problem of moral luck and then moving into Nagel’s assessment of the problem of free will and moral responsibility, which are both explained as likewise driven by our pursuit of objectivity.

**A. Epistemological Skepticism**

1. *Epistemic Luck*

   The problem of what Nagel refers to as “epistemological skepticism” is the same form of skepticism referred to by Strawson as “traditional skepticism” – it is the problem of not being able to rationally substantiate certain ordinary beliefs and knowledge claims, such as the belief that an external world exists. In addition to being understood in terms of knowledge and doubt, as it was in Chapter 1, this problem can also be understood in terms of luck. In *Mortal Questions*, Nagel describes the concept of epistemic luck as a philosophical parallel to the problem of moral luck, which I will discuss later in section C below. I introduce it briefly below as a preface to
Nagel’s analysis of epistemological skepticism, and to illustrate that skepticism as a much broader problem than was allowed by discussions of doubt and knowledge alone.

One of the most unsettling considerations that epistemological skepticism presents, which is highlighted in the issue of epistemic luck, is the notion that “our beliefs and their relation to reality depend on factors beyond our control” (Nagel 1979, 27). Nagel explains this effectively in the following passage:

External and internal causes produce our beliefs. We may subject these processes to scrutiny in an effort to avoid error, but our conclusions at this next level also result, in part, from influences which we do not control directly. The same will be true no matter how far we carry the investigation. Our beliefs are always, ultimately, due to factors outside our control, and the impossibility of encompassing those factors without being at the mercy of others leads us to doubt whether we know anything. It looks as though, if any of our beliefs are true, it is pure biological luck rather than knowledge (1979, 27).

Biological factors, as well as environmental and circumstantial factors all play a critical role in the formation of our beliefs, and yet the nature of these factors, along with what exposure we have to them, are all essentially matters of luck. Basically, the accuracy or inaccuracy of our beliefs is left up to factors we cannot control or even fully understand.

Nagel clarifies that the epistemological skeptic here does not arrive at the problem by coming up with some new, more stringent or sophisticated set of standards for knowledge, as some opponents to skepticism have challenged (1979, 27). The problem grows from the ordinary standards and procedures we use to challenge and defend knowledge claims, and when those
standards are “consistently applied” and pushed to their rational limit, all such claims are inevitably undermined (Nagel 1979, 27). There must be something in the “ordinary idea of knowledge” that explains why such an idea is undermined by any influences on one’s belief that are not under one’s control (Nagel 1979, 36). (This element of control will present even more of a concern in the discussion of moral luck in section C)

Nor, he states, has the skeptic arrived at the problem by some misunderstanding of the concept of knowledge, as many other philosophers have taken to be the case (Nagel 1979, 27). This problem cannot be solved by simply defining “knowledge” the right way or by distinguishing the circumstances under which one can be said to have knowledge (Nagel 1986, 69). He explains that the problem cannot be reduced to the specific question of “whether, given my beliefs together with some assumptions about their relation to what is actually the case, I can be said to have knowledge” (ibid). Rather, it is the more fundamental and sweeping problem of “what to believe and how to justify one’s beliefs” (ibid).

2. Objectivity, Realism and Rationalism

In this section, I introduce Nagel’s explanation of the source of epistemological skepticism, and its relation to the concept of objectivity. Epistemological skepticism entails, basically, irrefutable skeptical possibilities and a subsequent loss of confidence in our experiences and the beliefs informed by them. The problem of luck can be understood not merely as one of these skeptical possibilities, but as an example of the permeating and inescapable nature of skeptical concerns.

In Nagel’s analysis of epistemological skepticism, he finds the source of the skeptical problem to be rooted in our pursuit of objective knowledge. He explains the goal in pursuing
objective knowledge to be the removal of oneself from one’s particular point of view in order to observe the world as it really is (with oneself and one’s point of view included in it) – that is, “to view the world from nowhere within it” (Nagel 1986, 67). He refers to the “objective self” as the part of an individual that is driven to obtain this more complete understanding of the world (Nagel 1986, 67). We strive toward a purely objective viewpoint – a view from nowhere – from which we might observe the world in its true form, independent of any subjective perspective or corporeal constitution; and from which we might assess that world’s relation to, and interaction with, ourselves.

There are many ways in which this goal could seem incoherent, but the concerns that motivate it are clear. We recognize that individual points of view (including our own) are limited, that the initial appearances we experience are affected by our own constitution in ways we cannot always quantify, and that such appearances are therefore “not themselves reliable guides to reality” (Nagel 1986, 67, 68). There are certain perceptions we have and beliefs we hold that happen to be mere appearances or illusions rather than truths, and objective advances in perspective allow us to distinguish those beliefs and perceptions that are illusions, from those that reflect reality. For instance, while standing on the surface of the earth, we perceive the sun rising and setting daily, revolving around us, and this perception led to the familiar long-standing belief that the earth was the center of the universe, with all other celestial entities revolving around it. However, with advances in scientific observation, a more objective view of the earth showed this perception to be a mere appearance rather than a truth. It was merely because of our limited viewpoint as terrestrial beings that the rest of the world seemed to rotate about our axis, and once we widened our perception beyond that limited viewpoint, we recognized the limitation (as well as the illusion based upon it) for what it was.
The sense of skeptical unease emerges, however, when we consider the fact that, no matter how many objective advances we make in forming beliefs about the world, “there are ways we might be wrong that we can’t rule out” (Nagel 1986, 68). That is, even the more objective ideas we formulate of the world – ideas that have incorporated within them an understanding of how it is that our constitution influences the way the world appears to us – cannot be relied upon any more than the initial appearances on which they are based; they are still subject to the same doubts (ibid). As Nagel explains, for any means or methods by which we might try to understand our interactions with the world, those means or methods will not themselves be incorporated into that understanding (ibid). So however often we try to step outside of our perspectives, “something will have to stay behind the lens, something in us will determine the resulting picture, and this will give grounds for doubt that we are really getting any closer to reality” (ibid).

Nagel uses this understanding of objectivity to reveal two basic theses that are necessary for the problem of epistemological skepticism to be possible. The first thesis he discusses is what he calls realism. As he describes it, this is the thesis that, “there is a real world in which we are contained, and that appearances result from our interaction with the rest of it” (Nagel 1986, 68). It is important to note that this definition of realism is restrictive compared to the more mainstream definition offered by Michael Dummett and Hilary Putnam. This mainstream definition pertains to two concepts, bivalence and objectivity, of which only the latter is emphasized in Nagel’s definition (Dummett & Putnam Calculus of Construction 1998, 1066). As such, we can understand Nagel’s use of the word “realism” to employ specifically the concept of objectivity, the thesis that what renders a given proposition or theory true or false is “something
external … [something that] is not (in general) our sense data, actual or potential, or the structure of our minds, or our language, etc” (ibid).

Nagel explains that skeptical possibilities are naturally built into our belief system from the start – “built into our ordinary thoughts, in virtue of the realism that they automatically assume and their pretensions to go beyond experience” (Nagel 1986, 73, 125). It is easy to see how this idea motivates us to pursue objective knowledge: with the presumption of realism comes a basic suspicion of whether the appearances we experience accurately reflect reality or not, and this suspicion leads us to pursue objective, more reliable accounts of the world that do not depend on our particular point of view. However, it is also this same presumption of realism that is responsible for the recurrent skeptical doubts that render the possibility of obtaining such knowledge uncertain. Realism leads us to question each objective advance we might make in understanding the world and introduces the skeptical concern that we are still not taking into account that part of us that forms the advance in understanding – that subjective part of us that “stays behind the lens” (Nagel 1986, 68).

Furthermore, because of this concern, “our natural realism makes it impossible for us to be content with a purely subjective view,” leading us to continue in our pursuit of objective knowledge (Nagel 1986, 74). The subjective nature of our experiences and dispositions render them, and the beliefs based upon them, “compatible with radical error” in the face of realist considerations; and yet we cannot incorporate the skepticism this entails into our system of ordinary beliefs (Nagel 1986, 88). As he explains, beliefs are about how things “probably are, not just about how they might possibly be,” and this makes it impossible for us to bracket them “so that they dovetail neatly with the possibility of skepticism” (Nagel 1986, 88, italics added). Nagel sums up the dual role that realism plays in objectivity: “the search for objective
knowledge, because of its commitment to a realist picture, is inescapably subject to skepticism...[and] skepticism, in turn, is a problem only because of the realist claims to objectivity” (1986, 71).

From here, Nagel explains that, “all theories of knowledge are responses to this problem” (1986, 68). He divides such responses into three types – skeptical, heroic, and reductive – and frames them in terms of basic responses to epistemological skepticism, rather than definitions of “knowledge.” Skeptical theories claim that we simply cannot defend our ordinary or scientific beliefs against doubt, due to the “ways we might be wrong that we can’t rule out” (Nagel 1986, 68). Skeptics concede the unclosable gap between the grounds of our ordinary and scientific beliefs and the contents of such beliefs “under a realist interpretation,” and declare that we cannot maintain confidence in such beliefs without “conscious irrationality” (Nagel 1986, 68, 69). As such, most philosophers find this response to be the least appealing. Heroic theories acknowledge this gap between grounds and belief, but don’t concede it – rather, they try to “leap across” it, leaving the chasm below “littered with epistemological corpses” (Nagel 1986, 69). Such theories attempt to defend the reliability of our perceptions and the beliefs based on them, as well as the possibility of objective knowledge, though they usually fail in their attempts. The responses to the skeptic offered by Moore, Descartes, and many of the others in Chapter 1 fall into this category of heroism. The last type of response, that of the reductionists, is similar to that of the skeptics insofar as they concede the gap; but rather than relinquish our beliefs completely as the skeptic would, they simply “reinterpret the content of our beliefs about the world so that they claim less” (Nagel 1986, 68). They take our beliefs, and the grounds on which we hold them, to be merely about how the world appears to us, rather than about the world as it truly is.
Among these types of responses, Nagel asserts that the “truth must lie” with either of the two realist positions – skepticism or heroism (1986, 69). For, as he explains, the only way to make sense of the skeptical problem is under the presumption of both realism and rationalism, and a reductionist position presumes (or at least requires) neither. That it does not presume realism is clear, insofar as reductionists concede that our beliefs are about the world’s appearance, not its true composition. However, Nagel’s definition of “rationalism” – the other thesis necessary for epistemological skepticism – has yet to be discussed.

For Nagel, the thesis originates in the very concept of objective knowledge. Such a concept by definition implies a kind of a priori conviction, a level of certitude, which for Nagel can only be established under a rationalist epistemology (1986, 70). By “a priori,” Nagel does not mean that we have some innate knowledge of the world, but that we have the innate capacity to “generate hypotheses about what in general the world might possibly be like, and to reject those possibilities that we see could not include ourselves and our experiences” (1986, 83). That is, we formulate an understanding of the world with certain restrictions. We have the capacity to “fill out the pure idea of realism with more or less definite conceptions of the world in which we are placed,” and this capacity can produce only two ways of seeing the world from ‘without’ a particular point of view – skepticism and objective knowledge (Nagel 1986, 70-71, italics added). Skepticism satisfies a rationalist requirement because it presents a consistent and definitive suspension of certain beliefs; objective knowledge satisfies the rationalist requirement because it affirms definitive truth claims. To the contrary, a reductionist position does not presume rationalism, insofar as it concedes the lack of certitude that comes with seeing our
beliefs as being about mere appearance rather than truths.

3. Tension

Nagel emphasizes that, compared to other kinds of objective advance, the advance that brings with it epistemological skepticism has unique implications for the rest of our beliefs. In most cases, when an objective advance is made – that is, when one obtains an objective view of something that was originally dependent on one’s subjective perception – it involves the recognition that such a perception belongs to the realm of appearance, as opposed to the realm of reality (Nagel 1986, 87). Such an advance does not require the complete rejection of the subjective view, for being reduced to the status of an appearance allows that view to “coexist with the objective view” (Nagel 1986, 89). Recall the example above of the sun rising and setting. In this case, we discovered through objective advances in understanding that it merely appears from our terrestrial point of view as though the sun revolves around our planet, and that in reality, the sun does not revolve around us at all. Here, we do not deny that we perceive the sun as rising and setting, we simply reduce such a perception to the status of an appearance, and allow that appearance to coexist with the truth of the matter.

However, with certain subjective concepts that we hold to be important, such as knowledge, beliefs, free will, and moral responsibility, reducing them to the status of mere appearances is not an option. The reason is because, as Nagel explains, doing so “would be the equivalent to giving them up” (1986, 89). There is something about these concepts that renders them incapable of coexisting with the objective advances that challenge them, presenting what Nagel calls an “insoluble subjective-objective conflict” (1986, 87). Our objective conceptions of these things cannot be “harmoniously combined” with our original subjective conceptions of
them – they require both subjective and objective elements that “cover the same territory” and cannot be combined into a single consistent view (ibid). Objective advances in rational investigation reveal that what I take to be known about the world (such as the existence of an external world) is merely an unfounded appearance. To say that the existence of an external world is a mere appearance is, for me subjectively, the equivalent to saying that there is no external world. Again, there must be something in the “ordinary idea of knowledge” that explains why it is undermined by skeptical possibilities (Nagel 1979, 36).

B. Skepticism about moral responsibility

1. Moral Luck

Nagel describes the problem of moral luck in tandem with the problem of epistemic luck mentioned in section B. He starts by noting how it seems clear that people should not be morally evaluated according to actions or decisions that are performed “due to factors beyond their control” (Nagel 1979, 25). The absence of control in one’s decisions and actions excuses one from moral judgment, and reduces one’s actions to the status of a mere “state of affairs,” rather than freely willed actions (Nagel 1979, 25). Recall the example used in Chapter 1 of Ryan stepping on my foot, and the various mitigating cases that serve to either mitigate or remove Ryan’s responsibility in such a circumstance. These mitigating cases appeal largely to the notion that one is not responsible (or at least not as responsible) for actions that are performed due to factors beyond one’s control.

However, as Nagel explains, all of our daily actions actually depend on factors that are not under our control – in many more ways than are considered in examples pertaining to
mitigated responsibility (1979, 25). He introduces an example: there is a significant moral difference between reckless driving and manslaughter, but “whether a reckless driver hits a pedestrian depends on the presence of the pedestrian” at just the right place and time (Nagel 1979, 25). Here, whether a person performs the act of manslaughter, or performs the less heinous act of reckless driving, is a pure matter of luck, and yet we hold the person who hit a pedestrian to a significantly different moral standard than we do the reckless driver (Nagel 1979, 25).

This broader range of external influences (luck) is not usually thought to excuse a person from moral judgment (ibid). However, what we do everyday is severely limited by the opportunities and choices we are exposed to, which are determined by factors beyond our control (Nagel 1979, 25-26). When we continue to treat someone as an object of moral judgment in spite of the fact that much of what she does depends on factors beyond her control, we call this moral luck (ibid). And given the extensive amount of moral luck in the world, most of our moral assessments, when seriously considered in light of it, are undermined (Nagel 1979, 26).

With all the facts of the world taken into account – all the factors that influence, limit, and in many ways determine what we do – all or virtually all of the culpable control we see ourselves and others as having seems to be stripped away, rendered impossible (Nagel 1979, 26). What circumstances we find ourselves in, what kind of person we have become, and the causes and effects that lead up to our actions and decisions as well as determine their outcomes, all boil down to factors of luck. It’s simply the case that, when we try to reflect on the facts that make moral luck possible, we lose our grip on judgments of moral responsibility (Nagel 1979, 27-28).

2. Attempted Responses
As was the case with epistemological skepticism, there have been numerous attempts to respond to this problem of moral luck. One common response is the proposal that we simply redefine the conditions needed for moral responsibility (Nagel 1979, 26). Much like the compatibilist who declares a different definition of “free will” as a way to avoid incompatibilism, this other common response is that we can distinguish between different “kinds of lack of control” – that is, we can identify coercion, force, moral ineptitude, etc. as factors that are clearly distinct from factors of biological or environmental luck (ibid). As such, we could simply define “moral responsibility” only in terms of those kinds of lack of control that external factors such as luck do not influence (ibid).

However, similarly to the arguments for compatibilism, Nagel argues that this proposal is not satisfactory. The reasons for which such excuses as coercion, force, or psychological abnormality serve to mitigate moral responsibility are, he explains, the same reasons for which external factors such as luck or determinism are understood to mitigate moral responsibility. Coercion, force, etc. mitigate moral responsibility ostensibly because they indicate a lack of control over one’s actions, which is also the reason that factors of luck likewise seem to mitigate it moral responsibility (recall the mitigating circumstances discussed in Chapter 1). Similar to Nagel’s explanation of epistemic luck, the “erosion of moral judgment” emerges not from the misapplication or misunderstanding of some given theory of morality, but “as a natural consequence of the ordinary idea of moral assessment, when it is applied in view of a more complete and precise account of the facts” (1979, 27). It is not a mistake, but a consequence of the consistent application of ordinary standards for moral judgment (Nagel 1979, 27).

Nagel explains that many other moral theories have emerged as solutions to this problem of moral luck. Immanuel Kant, for instance, identifies the source of moral judgment for a person
as that person’s will, bad or good (Nagel 1979, 24). That is, the motives of goodwill or ill will behind a person’s acts tell more about how we should judge that person’s action than does the action itself. A major reason for this is that Kant wanted to avoid the incorporation of luck-based consequences into the process of evaluating people’s actions (Nagel 1979, 25). Such an assessment is said to therefore allow moral evaluation of that person and her actions to take place, regardless of the luck-based influences or consequences of those actions (Nagel 1979, 25). For similar reasons, Adam Smith finds the moral core of an act in the agent’s intention, and Joel Feinberg restricts the domain of moral responsibility to the agent’s inner world (Nagel 1979, 31-32). The driving notion here is that we generally try to condemn or praise a person according to her will, her personal intention, her character – not according to the circumstances she happens to find herself in, her physical constitution, or any other factor of happenstance that is not under that person’s control.

Yet, as Nagel goes on to argue, one’s character is a quality that is ultimately not under one’s control (1979, 33). An agent’s intentions or inner world or character can still be understood as determined by external factors that are not under her control (Nagel 1979, 33). With this being the case, Nagel then sets up the question, “if one cannot be responsible for consequences of one’s acts due to factors beyond one’s control, or for antecedents of one’s acts that are properties of temperament not subject to one’s will, or for the circumstances that pose ones moral choices, then how is it that one can be responsible even for the stripped-down acts of the will itself, if they are the product of antecedent circumstances outside of the will’s control” (1979, 35)? And if one cannot be responsible for those acts, one cannot be responsible for their results (except in cases of so-called strict liability, which Nagel exposes as legally practical, but morally objectionable).

In Gary Watson’s “Responsibility and the Limits of Evil,” he provides an example that very
effectively illustrates this particular concern regarding the role luck plays in the formation of character. The example pertains to a convicted murderer and sociopath named Robert Harris, whom Watson introduces in the context of his analysis of responsibility and Strawson’s reactive attitudes (recall from Chapter 1) (1987, 268).

Watson first describes Harris as an “archetypal candidate” for blame and, according to many others, an archetypal candidate for the death penalty (1987, 271). Watson references numerous malicious actions that Harris performed throughout his life from adolescence on, including the torture and murder of both animals and people (1987, 270, 271). Those who knew Harris, including his family members, described him as being completely devoid of conscience, laughing freely at his own cruel acts, and mocking his victims and their torment (Watson 1987, 269-270). One of the many inmates who lived in a cell next to Harris’s and celebrated his execution said that Harris “doesn’t care about life, he doesn’t care about others, he doesn’t care about himself” (Watson 1987, 268). Harris does not simply lack an understanding of morality, as a child or psychologically abnormal Ryan would – he seems to rejects morality completely. As such, Watson declares him to be unambiguously deserving of attitudes of “moral outrage and loathing” (1987, 271).

Watson then investigates the possible relevance of certain “historical considerations” about Harris to our reactive attitudes toward him (1987, 272). These historical considerations include the following. Harris was born into a life of incessant cruelty and alienation. He was the fifth of nine children, born prematurely after his mother was kicked in the stomach by her jealous and accusatory husband (Watson 1987, 272). All of his siblings endured “monstrous childhoods,” but all of them saw ‘little Robbie’ as getting the most horrific of it (ibid). Both his parents were abusive alcoholics with regular criminal records, and his mother harbored particular
resentment toward him for her injuries surrounding his birth, and her life in general (ibid). Harris developed both learning and speech disabilities, and was subjected to further ostracization and abuse once he began school.

In stark contrast to all his abuse, he was described as a terribly affectionate and sensitive baby (ibid). One sister described him as wanting love so bad “he would beg for any kind of physical contact,” trying to rub his hands on his mother’s leg or arm (Watson 1987, 273). In response, his mother would push him or kick him away, once blooding his nose in the process. Another sister described watching “Bambi” with him at age ten, and recalled Harris crying incessantly when Bambi’s mother died. At fourteen, he was sent to a youth detention center for car theft, and wound up spending four years there after repeated escape attempts and parole violations (ibid). He was raped several times, attempted suicide twice, and was thoroughly hardened by the time he was released at nineteen, at which point he had already begun abusing and killing animals (ibid). Shortly after his release he was convicted of manslaughter for beating his neighbor to death.

After considering these historical considerations, Watson notes that no facts about Harris’s past serve to undermine the judgments “that he is brutal, vicious, heartless, mean,” but these facts do provide a kind of explanation for his being the way that he is (1987, 274). Furthermore, with respect to our reactive attitudes, Watson explains that the historical considerations about Harris lead us to react with sympathy to his plight as a boy, which flies in the face of the outrage with which we react to his character as a man (1987, 275). He states, “each of these responses is appropriate, but taken together they do not enable us to respond overall in a coherent way” (ibid). This ambivalence, as he calls it, “results from the fact that an overall view simultaneously demands and precludes regarding him as a victim” (ibid). However,
this conflict in response, Watson claims, is not the most disturbing aspect of Harris’s story. What is most disturbing is the fact that “Harris’s cruelty is an intelligible response to his circumstances … that if I had been subjected to such circumstances, I might well have become as vile” (Watson 1987, 276). It is unsettling to think of one’s moral self as “such a fragile thing” as that (ibid).

My goal in bringing up this example is not to instigate a discussion of the reactive attitudes and the roles they play in such cases as these. Rather, this example illustrates the extent to which external influences, completely out of the control of an individual, shape the formation of not only that individual’s actions, but of her very moral character. The Harris case is a perfect illustration of moral luck, and Watson’s remarks in the last paragraph connect back to the issue at hand: the moral self is so fragile that once all the external factors that work to comprise an individual are taken into account, there seems to be hardly any room left for the individual herself to still exist. Indeed, circumstances need not be as dire as Harris’s to warrant this unease, for any individual’s personality or character is likewise comprised of such external factors that are ultimately not under her control. And yet, we wish to judge individuals, not their mere existence or characteristics (Nagel 1979, 33). When we evaluate a person’s character as good or bad, we mean to say that she should or should not have such a character – we do not mean to say that it is merely “unfortunate” that she does or does not have it (ibid).

3. Types of Luck

Nagel describes four ways in which those objects we naturally take to warrant moral assessment “are disturbingly subject to luck” (1979, 28). The first object is one’s character. As discussed above, we normally take to morally evaluating a person according to her character – her constitution – but a look at the facts reveals that one’s character is just as subject to
influences outside of one’s control as one’s biological makeup and environmental circumstances. This is called \textit{constitutive luck} (ibid). Another natural object of moral assessment is the handling of one’s circumstances. That is, the exposure to certain circumstances rather than others allows for certain moral situations to arise that otherwise would not, or precludes certain moral situations from arising that otherwise would. However, the circumstances in which one finds oneself are clearly not under one’s control, and more or less subject to luck. A given person, living as an ordinary citizen in Nazi Germany, may join the Third Reich and murdered innocent people, or may “behave heroically by opposing the regime” (Nagel 1979, 34). However, if that situation never arose for him, he never would have had the chance to reveal himself one way or the other (Nagel 1979, 33-4). This is called \textit{circumstantial luck} (ibid).

The last natural object of moral assessment considered here is the category of one’s actions and decisions. Luck plays a two-way role here with respect to cause and effect. In one way, luck is revealed in the external factors that lead up to one’s actions by antecedent circumstances. In the other way, luck is revealed in the physical consequences of one’s actions – how they turn out. Nagel refers to an example, similar to one of the earlier ones, of a driver who has had too much to drink and swerves onto the sidewalk for an instant. Whether or not a pedestrian was on that very part of the sidewalk at that very instant is a matter of pure luck, and while the driver’s recklessness would not be different either way, the consequences of his swerving would be drastically different (Nagel 1979, 29). This can be called \textit{luck in cause and effect}. The outcome, the actual result of an action, influences culpability or esteem in many ethical cases.

Each of these types of luck – constitutive, circumstantial, and cause and effect, present the common problem that “one cannot be more culpable or estimable for anything than one is for
that fraction of it which is under one’s control” (Nagel 1979, 28). And after considering all the facts, that fraction seems increasingly negligible, rendering our moral practices of holding others responsible for their actions unfair in some way. Yet to the contrary, it seems impossible to live our lives as though we don’t have control over our actions – we see others and ourselves as responsible for what we actually do, “even if what one actually does depends in important ways on what is not within one’s control” (Nagel 1979, 35). The concerns surrounding this issue of luck pertain directly to the problem of skepticism about moral responsibility.

4. The Problem of Free Will

As I did in Chapter 1, I wish to illuminate the problem of skepticism about moral responsibility by analogy with the problem of free will. The problem of free will pertains to the same considerations as that of luck – the notion that any external factors beyond one’s control influence one’s actions and decisions in important ways. We understand one’s freely willed actions to be the source of one’s responsibility, where one is responsible for what one freely wills to do. Indeed, Nagel notes that the basic reactive attitudes we express toward others, which are “conditional on the attribution of responsibility,” are undermined alongside free will with the consideration of external influences on our actions that are beyond our control (1986, 112). As such, I will capture the basic elements of skepticism about moral responsibility by way of Nagel’s broad meta-analysis of the problem of free will. In this meta-analysis, he describes two sides to the problem of free will – autonomy and responsibility, where autonomy consists of the understanding we have of our own free will, and responsibility consists of the understanding we have of the free will of others (Nagel 1986, 111). I will discuss both sides, starting with autonomy.
I. Autonomy

From our subjective perspective, we see alternative courses of action that are available for us to choose from, and our actions follow from the choices we make (Nagel 1986, 113). However, from a more objective perspective, the “circumstances of action” as seen by the agent are not the only factors that are taken into account (ibid). In fact, the “conditions and influences lying behind the action, including the complete nature of the agent himself” are taken into account (ibid). To see the external influences that constitute what we call action on the part of an agent is to reduce such free action to the status of a mere appearance (ibid). Recall from earlier the problem that arises when an important subjective concept such as this is reduced to the status of a mere appearance – that concept is essentially rendered nonexistent by such a challenge. In this way, seeing free action as a mere appearance is likewise equivalent to there being no real free action at all (ibid). As he states, “everything I do is part of something I don’t do, because I am a part of the world,” and even in the absence of a complete determinist picture, or a complete account of the factors dictating our actions, the very possibility of such a picture is enough to be threatening (Nagel 1986, 114).

The problem is this: when we do something, we see it as explained and determined only by our subjective intentions; “my reason for doing it is the whole reason why it happened, and no further explanation is either necessary or possible’ (Nagel 1986, 115). However, with a more objective understanding of the world, only a causal (or, as discussed in the context of moral luck, constitutive or circumstantial) explanation can account for all happenings, including one’s actions, leaving no room for the subjective explanation we are driven to ascribe (Nagel 1986, 115).
Even when rational reasons for action are taken into account in the actor’s evaluation, the objective view presents a conflict. Nagel introduces an example of a person who is faced with the decision of whether to accept a job or not (1986, 116). He notes that we usually explain the person’s decision by pointing to his reasons for choosing one option or the other (ibid). However, he states that, “bad reasons are reasons too,” meaning that even an intentional explanation of an agent’s actions “cannot explain why the person accepted the job for the reasons in favor instead of refusing it for the reasons against” (Nagel 1986, 116). In essence, the intentional explanation does not explain why one chooses a particular course of action when an alternative was causally open to one (Nagel 1986, 116). Any defense of truly free action requires the “acknowledgement of a different kind of explanation” – one that is “essentially connected to the agent’s point of view” (Nagel 1986, 115). And this kind of explanation is precluded entirely by a consideration of the facts leading to skepticism about moral responsibility.

As discussed in Chapter 1, many philosophers (compatibilists) have attempted to reconcile autonomy with an objective view of the world by redefining the concept of free will, and other philosophers (libertarians) have attempted to redefine “explanation” to include subjective intention, accusing the skeptic of having a “limited conception of what an explanation is” (Nagel 1986, 115, 117). However, while such attempts succeed in clarifying the respective concepts, the concepts themselves still collapse upon closer, more objective observation. Again, the clarifications account more clearly for how the decisions we make seem to us to take place, but there is no way to show that this experience on our part is anything more than a mere impression (ibid).

One last consideration that tends to undermine the skeptical conclusion here for most people is the practical aspect. We typically find certain “natural stopping places” along the route
of philosophical debate that, in practice at least, keeps skeptical problems at bay (Nagel 1986, 119). This goes for epistemic skepticism as well as skepticism about moral responsibility and the problem of free will. However, upon further objective reflection (which has no practical limit or stopping point with respect to knowledge, understanding and action), the complacency that we adopt for practicality is not shown to be rationally warranted (Nagel 1986, 119).

The problem of skepticism about free will parallels that of epistemological skepticism in another way. Recall the dual role that realism played in epistemological skepticism, as both the motivator for pursuing objective knowledge, and the motivator for inevitable skeptical doubts about such knowledge. A related kind of realism likewise motivates our desire for more advanced understanding of free action, as well as motivates the skepticism about such action (Nagel 1986, 117). By recognizing our situation as beings in the world (from a more objective viewpoint), we wish to act under the “most complete view of the circumstances of action that we can attain, and this includes as complete a view as we can attain of ourselves” (Nagel 1986, 118). And taking this understanding to its “logical goal” would require us to completely detach from the subjective standpoint we occupy before acting (ibid).

However, as was the case with realism in epistemological skepticism, this goal is incoherent, for “in order to do anything we must already be something” (ibid). That is, in order to act in the world, one must be a thing that acts in the world, in the very way that, in order to view the world, one must be a thing that views the world from within it. Obtaining true objectivity, true detachment from our subjective perspectives, is impossible because it reduces our existence in the world to nothing. We imagine ourselves “seeing” the world from nowhere within it, but we cannot truly assess, revise, or confirm our understanding of the world from the outside, “for we would have nothing to do it with” (Nagel 1986, 118).
Again, this account of the problem of free will with respect to autonomy can be transposed to the problem of skepticism about moral responsibility, insofar as the experiences we have of our own moral responsibility for our actions are concerned. When we feel guilt over having performed a wrongful act, or when we feel pride over having performed a righteous act, these very experiences of reactive attitudes themselves can be challenged under such skeptical considerations. It seems that such experiences are merely illusions in the face of a more objective understanding of the world, and attempts to defend the rationality of such experiences have had the same success as attempts to defend our own sense of agency.

II. Responsibility

The previous discussion dealt with problems facing our own free will in the face of skepticism, and in this section I will discuss the corresponding problems facing the free will of others. Nagel describes a judgment of responsibility as always involving two parties – the judge and the defendant (1986, 120). The defendant is an agent who acts, and the judge assesses that agent’s actions “in light of the alternatives presenting themselves” to that agent (Nagel 1986, 120). As Nagel explains, the judgment made does not consist of merely evaluating the action as good or bad, but of projecting into the defendant’s viewpoint and evaluating her actions from within it – we judge the agent for her action “in view of the circumstances under which it was done” (120, 121). This element of projection, Nagel claims, is what prevents us from judging snakes and cats for their behavior – “our understanding of their actions and even of their point of view puts us too far outside them to permit any judgments about what they should have done” (121). Similarly with children or with people who are mentally disabled, he claims that there
exist limits as to how far we can project ourselves into their states of mind at the time of their actions (Nagel 1986, 121).

Nagel expounds upon two general types of conditions that undermine judgments of responsibility. Conditions that “alter the character of the action to be assessed,” but do not entirely preclude a judgment of responsibility, include a lack of knowledge of the situation on the part of the defendant, severe coercion or duress, and a lack of alternative courses of action available to the defendant (Nagel 1986, 122). Other conditions, such as acting under hypnotic suggestion or under the influence of a powerful drug, or not being of a rational state of mind, prevent the projection of the judge into the point of view of the defendant from being relevant, insofar as the judge is “quite different from the defendant in crucial ways” (Nagel 1986, 122).

The loss of responsibility that seems to accompany the objective viewpoint is an extension of the latter of these two undermining conditions (Nagel 1986, 122). This is because a judgment of responsibility is an “internal comparison with alternatives,” and from an external standpoint, the explanation of an agent’s actions leaves no room for any alternative to have been eligible for comparison (Nagel 1986, 122). From the external position, no intentional explanation for action matters; even the act of judgment itself is reduced to a mere happening in the world (Nagel 1986, 123). Just as in the case with autonomy, the objective viewpoint, taken to its logical end, again presents an “unfulfillable demand” (Nagel 1986, 115, 123). It inspires in us the drive to understand the true nature – the objective nature – of action and decision-making on the part of the defendants we wish to judge (ibid). However, at the same time, it leads to the recognition that, under this ‘objective truth,’ the very notion of choice or free action on the part of any defendant (including one’s self) is impossible (ibid).
The tension that arises in this problem, much as it did with epistemological skepticism, stems from the fact that, on the one hand, this objective viewpoint is impossible to maintain indefinitely – we inevitably “drop back into our point of view as agents” once we break from the skeptical debate (Nagel 1986, 124). Yet, on the other hand, we are driven to pursue it, to achieve the certainty and the truth that we see it as offering us. And the external standpoint, from which all the skepticism is sourced, is never truly lost or refuted, but remains a constant possibility, and once it has been entertained, there is a permanent sense of doubt in our judgments of responsibility (Nagel 1986, 124). For its implication is that our judgments of responsibility and our sense of autonomy simply depend on the illusion of free action – depend on “a forgetting of the fact that we are just parts of the world and our lives just parts of its history” (Nagel 1986, 124).

The connections to the issue of skepticism about moral responsibility in this section are more evident than in the previous section. In the same way that we lose the legitimacy of judging others for their actions under a more objective view of the world, we likewise lose the sense of legitimacy in experiencing our reactive attitudes toward others. Both autonomy and responsibility are two sides of the same coin in the context of free will, and as Nagel explains, “guilt and indignation, shame and contempt, pride and admiration are internal and external sides of the same moral attitudes” (1979, 37).

5. Tension

This tension, this pattern of the problem, as Nagel describes it, can be summarized as follows. While we might be persuaded that these moral judgments are indeed irrational in the context of argument, they “reappear involuntarily as soon as the argument is over” (Nagel 1979,
33). Nagel sees the situation as not a contradiction exactly, but as a paradox: “a person can be morally responsible only for what he does; but what he does results from a great deal that he does not do; therefore he is not morally responsible for what he is and is not responsible for” (1979, 34). He explains that the problem penetrates to the notion of the acting self, in that it arises “because the self which acts and is the object of moral judgment is threatened with dissolution by the absorption of its acts and impulses into the class of events” (Nagel 1979, 36). We wind up absorbing our and others’ actions into the class of events that we are supposed to observe and act on in the world (ibid).

Nagel explains further that, while it is relatively easy to undermine the concept of agency, “it is very difficult to give it a positive characterization” (1979, 36). The problem is not solvable “because something in the idea of agency is incompatible with actions being events, or people being things” (Nagel 1979, 37). But external determinants reveal that, indeed, “actions are events, and people are things,” and while the idea of agency – “the active self” – cannot be clearly defined, or at least has not been able to be clearly defined yet, Nagel asserts that it is sourced in our feelings (attitudes, emotions) about ourselves and about each other (1979, 37). The internal conception of agency and its connection with moral attitudes, are necessary to understand the problem of moral luck (ibid).

6. Blind Spot

The paradoxical nature of objectivity (as undermining itself) is captured most clearly in Nagel’s observation that any advanced objective viewpoint is not itself within the scope of its own understanding. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, by nature of its status as a viewpoint, “something will have to stay behind the lens,” no matter how far from its original
viewpoint it advances (Nagel 1986, 68). When discussing the role of objectivity in freedom and action, he explains that, preceding the actions of a free agent is that agent’s ultimate objective “self-surveillance” – obtaining as complete a view of the circumstances surrounding his actions as possible (Nagel 1986, 118, 127). However, this self-surveillance can never be accomplished in full, nor can the attempts at true objective knowledge in epistemological skepticism (Nagel 1986, 127). There exists, as he describes it, a constant “blind spot” behind our eyes that is the performer of the act, and therefore cannot itself be taken into account during the action (ibid). This blind spot likewise in the context of knowledge is the viewer of the perspective, and therefore cannot itself be taken into account within the perspective (ibid). Thus, the process of “enlarging objectivity” will always be incomplete, leaving us with two problematic and inevitable aspects of objectivity: 1) every objective view always has a blind spot; 2) there is no limit to the objective advances one can make (Nagel 1986, 128).

Again, if we were to completely detach from our subjective perspective in order to evaluate and refine our system of thought and judgment from a perfectly dissociated objective viewpoint, “we would have nothing to do it with” (Nagel 1986, 118). That is, there would be no observer or actor in the world to use or experience such an observation. Being ‘viewers’ by nature, we may be able to discuss the concept of a lens-less world, but we cannot genuinely conceive of one. We have viewpoints because part of our existence is the drive to observe, make sense of, and act within, the world. If we possessed a truly objective perspective divorced from any connection with such creatures, then the notion of ‘understanding’ the world at all from such a perspective would be impossible; indeed such a perspective in the first place would be impossible – for such a ‘thing’ would not be a perspective at all.
This relates to the rationalism of Nagel’s account, according to which we presume a necessary *fit* between our beliefs (as well as the means by which we establish them) and the world (1986, 85). Nagel clarifies that the a priori capacities we inherit as our rationalism, converging with uniform properties of reality, do not converge to truth, but only to the “relation between reality and the mind” (1986, 83, italics added). Objective advances in perspective can only ever be made from the point of view of yet another particular, incomplete perspective not encompassed by itself. For any objective advance that reduces a former belief to a mere appearance, it is possible for that advance to be subsumed under yet another advance, reducing it in turn to a mere appearance (Nagel 1986, 77). More importantly, this relation can in turn only be explained and understood “in terms of the kind of part of reality the mind is” (ibid). Thus, he captures the concept of the blind spot, providing a foundation upon which the problems of both epistemological and skepticism about moral responsibility are made possible.

I have provided here an account of how Nagel approaches the problem of both epistemological skepticism and skepticism about moral responsibility. I will provide further commentary on his approach and the similarities and differences between it and that of Strawson in the following chapter.
In this final chapter, I consider some of the similarities and differences between Strawson’s and Nagel’s approaches to the problem of skepticism about moral responsibility. The similarities I illustrate include the parallels that both philosophers identify between epistemological skepticism and skepticism about moral responsibility, as well as the concessive nature of both philosophers’ positions on or responses to the issue. The second section on the differences between Strawson’s and Nagel’s approaches include their discussion of luck and control, the role of the self in the skeptical problems, and most notably the role that realism and the pursuit of objectivity play in both problems. I use the last issues of realism and objectivity to finally reintroduce Strawson’s relativizing move from Chapter 1 and provide an alternative analysis of what this move consists of, and an alternative interpretation of his ultimate position on the issue of skepticism about moral responsibility. I conclude with some questions and possibly some insights into the skeptical debate.

A. Similarities

1. Skeptical Parallels

As discussed in the previous chapter, Nagel identifies in *The View from Nowhere* a common conceptual thread running through the prominent skeptical debates that surround both the philosophical issue of knowledge, and the philosophical issues of free will and moral responsibility. He refers to the “objective self” as the part of an individual that is driven to obtain a more complete understanding of the world (N 70). The ultimate “task” of the objective self, whether in the context of obtaining knowledge or of freely acting and being held responsible for
those actions, is to attain the view from nowhere – the vantage point from which we can see and act within the world independent of the restrictions and distortions that inevitably accompany a particular, subjective point of view. Nagel explains this pursuit of objectivity as the source of both the problem of epistemological skepticism and the problem of free will.

Similarly, in *Skepticism and Naturalism*, Strawson notes that the debates surrounding both traditional (epistemological) skepticism and skepticism about moral responsibility exhibit certain “parallels and connections” in their methods of approach (1985 vii). His goal in discussing the skeptical issues is to expose such parallels more clearly, and hopefully gain some insight into these enduring philosophical conflicts. Appealing to distinction clarified by Hume, Strawson distinguishes two opposed yet equally indispensable standpoints: Naturalist and Skeptic. From the Naturalist standpoint, we believe without question in the existence of an external world, and behave without question under the assumption that we, and all others around us, are morally responsible for our actions. We go on living our lives as we normally do. From the Skeptic standpoint, however, we recognize that no satisfactory rational response to the skeptical challenge seems to be available, for either knowledge or moral responsibility. We rationally concede the unabated skeptical concerns.

With these standpoints in mind, Strawson’s findings in both philosophical issues include the observation that 1) the Naturalist standpoint and the Skeptic standpoint cannot be reconciled in the context of rational debate, and 2) neither standpoint can be permanently ejected from our worldview. These findings apply to both epistemological skepticism and skepticism about moral responsibility. As he explains, our belief in an external world exists in stark contrast to the skeptical doubts that warrant the suspension of this belief, yet we cannot genuinely suspend our belief in an external world, nor can we genuinely deny the skeptic her rational superiority in the
debate. Likewise, he explains that our presumption of moral responsibility on the part of ourselves and others is opposed to the skeptical concerns that jeopardize such presumptions, yet we cannot genuinely terminate our presumption of moral responsibility, nor can we genuinely deny the skeptic her rational superiority. In this way, both Nagel and Strawson discuss the two sceptical issues by identifying similarities in the common reasoned approaches to them and the corresponding sceptical retorts.

2. Concessive Responses

DeRose and Warfield list the category of “concessive responses” to the sceptical challenge, where such responses allow a sort of rational triumph to the skeptic and concede that approaching the sceptical problem in the traditionally reasoned way it has been approached will always leave the skeptic with the upper hand (DeRose & Warfield 1999, 20). In this section, I discuss how both Nagel’s and Strawson’s positions are concessive in similar ways. Strawson’s response to the epistemological skeptic was expressly not a rational one, nor was it irrational. Having identified the entire sceptical debate as idle, his response was to simply reject the skeptic’s invitation to rebuttal. Importantly, this response rationally concedes the skeptic’s challenge in a way, for it allows that no reasoned argument has succeeded or is likely to succeed in refuting the skeptic. However, the other side of this response claims that no reasoned challenge from the skeptic, however unyielding, has succeeded or is likely to succeed in genuinely changing our ordinary beliefs.

In response to the archetypal critiques of skepticism, Nagel consistently points out that sceptical possibilities do not arise because philosophers tweak out new and more stringent standards for belief justification or for moral responsibility, nor do they arise because
philosophers have misunderstood the meanings of certain terms and propositions. Rather, skeptical possibilities for both epistemology and moral responsibility emerge when our basic rational investigative standards are “consistently applied” to our ordinary knowledge claims and moral practices (Nagel 1979, 27). Skeptical possibilities, as he explains, are “built into our ordinary thoughts, in virtue of the realism that they automatically assume,” meaning that as long as we presume realism in our belief systems, and as long as we appeal to rational inquiry as a legitimate method of belief checking, there will always be “ways we might be wrong that we can’t rule out” (Nagel 1986, 68, 73).

Nagel does not conclude with a skeptical position, however, for he ascribes equally significant weight to the fact that no individual can ever truly accept the skeptical position on either philosophical issue, which is very much like Strawson’s ultimate position on the matter. Both philosophers simply concede to the skeptic that there is no satisfactory reasoned response that can be made – only an appeal to what we are capable or incapable of genuinely incorporating into our practices and belief system.

B. Differences

1. Luck and Control

In Nagel’s account of the two skeptical issues, he appeals to the problem of luck as a different perspective from which the skeptical concern can be understood – a perspective that presents a role for the concept of control in skepticism. This element of control is not said to permeate both skeptical issues in Strawson’s account, however. It is brought up in the discussion of skepticism about moral responsibility to the extent that skeptical concerns threaten the free
control of our actions that we believe we have and behave as though we have, but it does not arise in his discussion of epistemological skepticism.

Nagel shows that, with epistemic luck, our susceptibility to form certain beliefs and not others, to reflect on and challenge certain beliefs and not others, arises in us from a collection of factors over which we ourselves have no control. This implies that the accuracy of the beliefs we maintain has nothing to do with what we have done (studied, researched, reflected) of our own volition; rather, such accuracy or inaccuracy is the product of external factors we cannot control – that is, a product of luck. With moral luck, he shows that our susceptibility to perform certain actions and not others, to become a certain kind of person and not another, likewise arises from a collection of factors over which we have no control. This luck implies that the responsibility with which we hold others for their actions, and the freedom we see ourselves as having in our actions, are unfoundedly ascribed. The things we decide to do, and the things we see others as responsible for doing are not actually decided by us or done by others. Such things are the product of external factors we, and others, do not and cannot control, meaning that they are a product of pure luck.

Although the role of the concept of control may be more obvious in the context of skepticism about moral responsibility than epistemological skepticism (due to the tight association we have between free will, responsibility, and control) its role in epistemological skepticism may illuminate a certain bias or assumption that is made in the common approaches to both problems. There exists an interesting connection between the concepts of accuracy and control, as we tend to understand them, that is made visible under Nagel’s account. The threat of epistemic luck renders the accuracy or inaccuracy of our beliefs not simply unknown or unverifiable, but not up to us. We see ourselves as formulating our beliefs in a way that ensures
or at least furthers the chance of their being accurate; to face the possibility that our belief-
formation practices are the consequence of environmental and biological factors, rather than the
consequence of us, is to see ourselves as not in control of our beliefs.

Although this element of control comes out most notably in the context of epistemic and
moral luck, it bears a resemblance to the kind of objective drive Nagel describes in The View
from Nowhere. In the same way that our disposition to rationalism leads us to seek (and
presume) a level of fixedness and certitude in the formation of our beliefs and the execution of
our actions, perhaps some other thesis leads us to seek (and presume) a level of control and self-
determination in the formation of our beliefs and the execution of our actions.

2. The Self

In Strawson’s account of skepticism about moral responsibility, he describes his position
as distinct from that of Nagel’s in Mortal Questions. He is not saying that the objective
standpoint provides us with the simple acknowledgement or recognition that people are things
and actions are events. Rather, it allows this recognition to actually influence our attitudes
toward other people such that it “excludes” or “suppresses” the natural reactive attitudes we
would otherwise have toward them (Strawson 1985, 34). The objective standpoint, for Strawson,
compromises our reactive attitudes in a way that Nagel does not account for. It leads us to
respond differently to people, to respond to them as though they were objects, and to experience
objective, rather than reactive, attitudes toward them. Of course, this change in our attitudinal
relationship toward others is only a temporary one, for as Strawson pushed, the objective
standpoint cannot be maintained indefinitely. But this does not affect the difference that he cites
between his approach and Nagel’s. He claims that Nagel’s account simply addresses the
impersonal shift in perspective that comes with objectivity – seeing people as objects – whereas Strawson’s account addresses the more personal shift in *experience* of attitudes towards others.

Strawson is correct here in claiming that his approach is different from Nagel’s, but not in the way he describes. As I explained in the previous chapter, Nagel’s account of the problem of free will in *The View from Nowhere* was two fold: he considered autonomy (the sense of having our own free will) and responsibility (the sense of others having free will) as both being threatened by skeptical considerations in distinct but related ways. The uneasiness we experience when we consider our own free will to be under threat is different from the uneasiness we experience when we consider the free will of others to be under threat. In the latter case, I understand Nagel to be considering *exactly* what Strawson does with respect to the shift in the experience of attitudes. Nagel would not have characterized it as a paradox at all if it had been a matter of mere acknowledgement. When we consider the notion that people are merely objects, we lose the ability to project into their states of mind when evaluating their decisions and actions, for we cannot relate to them as we would to another autonomous (moral) agent. And this loss of relatability to others, corresponding to the adoption of the objective standpoint, as Strawson explained, is part of what we find so distressing about the skeptical challenge.

Furthermore, I would argue that Nagel actually goes a step further than Strawson in his consideration of the former case of autonomy. Here, Nagel extends the skeptical concern beyond our experiences toward other people and addresses the even more personal conflict that arises when we turn the skeptical questions on ourselves, as a challenge to our own free will and sense of moral responsibility. The very fact that we still have attitudes to experience at all under Strawson’s account (be they participant or objective) relates to Nagel’s blind spot. Discussing the appropriateness or accuracy of such attitudes in one context or another presumes unquestioned
the presence of the individual, the self, who is experiencing them. This self – the bit that stays behind the lens, the blind spot – is not taken into account under Strawson’s account. However, the introspective skeptical consideration that comes with Nagel’s discussion of autonomy calls into question not only our experience of reactive or objective attitudes toward others, but the very experience or sensation that we are indeed freely choosing and doing the things we see ourselves as freely choosing and doing.

3. Realism

A third difference in Strawson’s and Nagel’s approach to the skeptical problem involves their use of the notion of realism. The role that Nagel ascribes to realism in the context of epistemological skepticism is a significant one. As described in the previous chapter, realism is one of two theses that Nagel describes as both inspiring our pursuit of objective knowledge, and making the enduring skeptical doubts possible. The role that realism plays in Strawson’s discussion of skepticism is not explicitly clear, but I believe that a more effective analysis of his position can take place if this role is clarified. As I mentioned at the end of Chapter 1, my analysis of Strawson’s final position in *Skepticism and Naturalism* and the extent of its concession to the skeptic would be discussed in greater detail in this chapter; such an analysis will now take place.

An understanding of the role of realism in Strawson’s account will first require an analysis of how much he in fact concedes to the skeptic. There are two available interpretations of Strawson when it comes to skepticism about moral responsibility, and only one of those interpretations has governed most of the discourse surrounding the topic. These can be called the
“constitutive theory” and the “persistence theory,” with the former being the more popular one (Campbell manuscript, 18).

I. Constitutive Theory

While Watson is not the first proponent of this interpretation⁴, I believe he explains the position most clearly in “Responsibility and the limits of evil.” An understanding of this interpretation first requires a recap of the pessimist-optimist debate, which Watson uses as the hub for his discussion. In this debate, the so-called pessimist expresses the skeptical concern that the truth of determinism might threaten the rationality of our practices of holding people morally responsible, including our experience of reactive attitudes toward one another. The pessimist’s interlocutor, the optimist, attempts to respond to this concern with the claim that the truth of determinism would not actually threaten the rationality of such practices.

The basic argument from the optimist is that our reactive attitudes serve a practical purpose. They are efficacious in keeping people living among one another civilly, and the truth of determinism does not threaten this. The basic retort to this from the pessimist, then, is that mere efficacy does not indicate true morality, and true morality is what the rationality of these practices depends on. We understand true moral responsibility to require an objective moral reality in which, barring certain mitigating circumstances, people are responsible for their actions, and defending the efficacy of our practices, as the optimist does, does not address the real skeptical threat that such a reality does not exist.

Recall that Strawson’s ultimate response to this debate is to reject the skeptic’s invitation to rebuttal. Insofar as we cannot ever effectively respond to the skeptic, nor can we ever truly

⁴ See Russel, Smilanski, and Pereboom (Campbell manuscript,16-18).
stop experiencing our reactive attitudes, Strawson sees both positions on the issue as equally idle, and refuses to entertain the skeptic with any reasoned response. Watson highlights the importance of the latter consideration in Strawson’s position – the fact that we cannot help but experience reactive attitudes.

Pulling largely from his reading of Strawson’s “Freedom and Resentment,” Watson understands Strawson as claiming that our reactive attitudes constitute our practices of holding people responsible and to thereby constitute moral responsibility altogether. As he explains it, “to regard oneself or another as responsible just is the proneness to react to them in these kinds of ways under certain conditions” (Watson 1987, 257). This means that our practices of holding people morally responsible for their actions are legitimized by our very experiences of our reactive attitudes. These attitudes are not “emotional side effects” of seeing people as having free will (as the pessimist might claim), nor are they manifestations of any attempts at social efficacy (as the optimist might claim) (ibid). Rather, for a person to be morally responsible “just is” for us to hold her responsible (ibid).

This interpretation of Strawson’s reactive attitudes effectively captures for Watson the moral responsibility that the pessimist seeks in the debate, without employing any metaphysical claims of free will, and this moral responsibility itself provides the rational basis for our practices of holding people morally responsible that the optimist seeks, without employing consequentialist claims of efficacy. In terms of basic skepticism about moral responsibility, this translates as the Humean Naturalist position not simply ‘winning out’ over the Skeptic, but providing on its own all the rational justification that is necessary for our practices of holding people morally responsible, through the reactive attitudes that come with it. The resentment that I feel toward Ryan just is his responsibility in the key example from the previous chapters; and the
suspension of resentment that I experience upon discovering Ryan’s psychological abnormality just is his lack of responsibility in the other example.

While there are numerous problems\(^5\) that arise with this thesis on its own, I will only address the problem that arises with it as an interpretation of Strawson’s position. As Joseph Keim Campbell explains in “Strawson’s Free Will Naturalism,” constitutive theorists have the shared belief that Strawson provides a “rational justification” for our natural beliefs and attitudes in the face of determinism (manuscript, 17). The reasoning behind this belief is, as is the case with Watson, Strawson’s appeal to the inescapability of our reactive attitudes, to the fact that we cannot help but experience them (manuscript, 16). However, Campbell explains this as a misinterpretation of Strawson’s response. As he lays it out, any rational justification for something first “requires a need and, according to Strawson, there is no need in the case of natural beliefs” (manuscript, 18). He explains that, to understand Strawson’s position as constitutive in this way

…is analogous to the idealist’s response to the problem of the external world. The idealist thinks that our beliefs about the world constitute reality and that there is no reality beyond those beliefs. Yet Strawson is not an idealist. He thinks that the idealist’s approach to the problem of the external world is just as flawed as Moore’s approach (Campbell manuscript, 20).

Here, Campbell clearly shows that this constitutive interpretation of Strawson cannot possibly be correct, for this would imply that Strawson is siding with one standpoint or the other on the debate.

\(^5\) Fischer and Ravizza (1993, 18)
II. Persistence Theory

Having critiqued this common misinterpretation of Strawson, Campbell then provides a different interpretation. He claims that Strawson appeals to the inescapability of our natural attitudes for a different reason: to show that such attitudes (and the beliefs that motivate them) “remain even after the recognition of powerful arguments for free will skepticism” (Campbell manuscript, 19, italics added). That is, the state of our beliefs and actions after we leave the skeptical debates, no matter how seriously we entertained the skeptical conclusions, reveal the idleness of skeptical concerns. This interpretation applies to both epistemological skepticism and skepticism about moral responsibility, in that our natural beliefs and attitudes persist immediately following the end of the debate (perhaps even throughout the debate). Indeed, it seems impossible for us to ever be truly ‘convinced’ of either skeptical conclusion. I will refer to this second interpretation as the “persistence theory” insofar as our natural beliefs and attitudes are said to persist in the face of skeptical challenges, thus revealing such challenges as idle.

While this second interpretation is clearly superior to the constitutive one in that it avoids the idealist implications for Strawson’s position, another problem arises with it as well. Campbell notes that the constitutive theory bears a certain similarity to the position of Strawson’s reductive naturalist (manuscript 20). This is the naturalist who rejects the possibility of an objective moral reality, reducing people and their actions to objects and events in the world, and advocating for the ubiquitous adoption of the objective standpoint. Similarly, the constitutive theorists want to keep a certain part of our experience (notably, physical truths) completely shut out of the legitimacy of moral evaluation. Maintaining this analogy, however, Campbell’s persistence theory exhibits the same kind of similarity to the position of Strawson’s nonreductive naturalist. This is the naturalist who claims that nature sets the bounds for reason,
asserts the existence of an objective moral reality, and does not see this moral reality as conflicting with the facts of the physical world, to which the reductive naturalist largely appeals.

We now arrive back to the issue at the end of Chapter 1: an understanding of Strawson and his position with respect to the reductive and nonreductive naturalist positions. I left my earlier exposition of his account admitting uncertainty as to whether Strawson was simply siding with the non-reductive naturalist, or whether he was advocating for the more complex relativizing middle ground between the reductive and nonreductive naturalist. If it is the former, then it seems that Campbell’s persistence theory would be the accurate interpretation. However, I will argue that Strawson’s position lies with the latter option, not the former.

III. A Third Alternative

I propose an interpretation of Strawson’s response to the skeptic that is different from the constitutive or the persistence theory and that draws from Nagel’s presentation of realism and its role in the skeptical problem. Again, Nagel describes realism as motivating (in tandem with rationalism) the entire back and forth of the skeptical debate: it inspires our pursuit of objective knowledge, and likewise makes the enduring skeptical doubts possible. Using this model, we can come to view the skeptical debate about moral responsibility in a similar fashion.

Recall that, after setting up the two distinct standpoints from which we could see the world, and the two corresponding realities that would follow from either, Strawson’s proposes the “natural” question: Which standpoint is correct? Which standpoint allows us to see things “as they really are” (1985, 36)? Asking this natural question then leads to the two natural answers available: either the participant standpoint is correct and there is a moral reality, or the objective standpoint is correct and there is no moral reality. The analogous dynamic for epistemological
skepticism would involve the question: Which standpoint is correct – the skeptical one, or the natural one? Is it really the case that we can’t have certainty in any of our beliefs, or is it the case that we can? And the debate between the Naturalist and Skeptic ensues. One cannot help but note the rationalist and realist elements implicit in the very question itself: “which standpoint is really the case?”

Strawson’s discussion of this question does not advocate for the nonreductive naturalist response that there is a moral reality, and that this moral reality does not conflict with the skeptical concerns. As Strawson states in his analysis, the error of this paradox does not lie with one standpoint or the other at all, but with “the attempt to force the choice between them” (S&N 37). He explains that the mere “appearance of contradiction” only arises when we assume that there exists some “metaphysically absolute standpoint” from which we can evaluate both the participant and objective standpoint, declaring one standpoint correct and the other incorrect (Strawson 1985, 38). But, as Strawson continues, “there is no such superior standpoint – or none that we know of; it is the idea of such a standpoint that is the illusion” (ibid, italics added).

In this statement, Strawson does not merely seem to be asserting the reconcilability of the participant and objective standpoints. He is not declaring the reductive naturalist to be the correct, as the constitutive theory asserts, nor is he declaring the reductive naturalist to be correct as the persistence theory asserts. He is asserting that there exists no such standpoint from which we could reconcile them. He declares that there is an “ultimate relativity in our conception of the real” in that we can conceive of reality as relative to the two standpoints that we have available to us: relative to the participant standpoint, the non-reductive naturalist is correct, and relative to the objective standpoint, the reductive naturalist is correct (Strawson 1985, 44).
4. Questions and Implications

Importantly, this interpretation of Strawson’s relativizing move implies that there is no objective (moral) reality according to which we can answer the question of which perspective (participant or objective) is accurate. The parallel of this response to that of epistemological skepticism, as discussed in the first chapter, would be to declare that there is no objective (epistemological) reality according to which we can answer the question of which perspective (Skeptic or Naturalist) is accurate. This rejection of the notion of moral reality could be aptly labeled “moral antirealism,” for it implies the falsity of realism – that there is no objective reality that exists independent of our subjective experiences. Our subjective experiences comprise one kind of reality, whereas the products of our objective investigations comprise another kind of reality – but there is no single objective reality, no objective truth of the matter to reveal one such experience as ‘really the case’ or not.

It likewise follows from this observation that this interpretation of Strawson’s position demands a limit to the pursuit of objectivity in the context of moral responsibility. While it may seem to us like we can obtain a more objective view of the problem, as Nagel’s account of realism suggests, we cannot. It seems like there is a metaphysically absolute standpoint from which we can judge between the objective and participant perspectives’ comparative accuracy, and we repeatedly seek it out. This is the endless aspect of Nagel’s blind spot, where we are constantly seeking a more objective understanding of the world, but Strawson declares that this further objective standpoint, at least in the context of skepticism about moral responsibility, simply does not exist. A further implication of this interpretation is that, at least in the context of skepticism about moral responsibility, one can adopt a quasi-realist stance on the issue, according to which the reality of moral responsibility is a relative one, not specific to any
externally established objective perspective. Whether this position could extend to the problem of epistemological skepticism is questionable, for such a position would look like the following. Relative to the naturalist standpoint, it is the case that an external world exists, and relative to the skeptical standpoint, we must suspend judgment as to whether it is the case that an external world exists. The details of such a position would need further work, but this alternative interpretation of Strawson makes such a position available as a consideration.

Last, I express a final concern pertaining to this alternative interpretation of Strawson. Here, reality is relative to two standpoints, rendering two possible realities that one can be perceiving at any given time. Depending on which standpoint one adopts, different moral properties can be ascribed to the same situation, though in a way both standpoints are correct. It seems that some factor or other generally determines which standpoint I happen to adopt at any given time. Using the analogy of looking at blood under a microscope, I recognize that seeing blood under a microscope allows me to not be disturbed at its colorless appearance; I likewise recognize that seeing blood with the naked eye allows me to not be disturbed at the blood having color again. As he states, we can say without contradiction that blood is both “really uniformly bright red and also that it is mostly colorless (Strawson 1986, 46).

However, Strawson’s relativizing account does not explain what exactly this determining factor is. The major concern with skepticism about moral responsibility is the possibility that we ought to start adopting the objective perspective in certain circumstances that we are otherwise accustomed (even naturally so) to relegating to the participant perspective. For the objective perspective is seen as being more in line with the facts as we know them. Simply asserting the relative legitimacy of both perspectives does not explain why it is that we should still adopt one perspective in a certain context, but adopt the other perspective in a different context. Strawson’s
position seems more descriptive that proscriptive, and the skeptic’s concern has more to do with which perspective we ought to adopt under most, or only certain, circumstances. Answering this question seems to be what the skeptical problem actually hinges on, but the acknowledgement of relative legitimacy does nothing to answer it. For this reason, I see a lingering problem with Strawson’s position, even under this alternative interpretation. Nagel’s basic assessment of the problem is basically to concede that the problem is real, that we have yet to resolve it, and that all we can do at this point of our philosophical advancement is to make as much sense of what motivates the problem as possible. My hope is that, while Strawson’s proposed relativistic response to the problem may not resolve the problem in the way he intends, perhaps it contributes to understanding of what motivates the problem.
Conclusion

In this thesis, I provided an in depth analysis of both P. F. Strawson’s and Thomas Nagel’s assessment of the problem of skepticism about moral responsibility. Identifying certain similarities and differences in their approach leads me to reinterpret Strawson’s proposed relativizing move in a way that is distinct from the two most common interpretations of his work. This alternative interpretation introduces a uniquely quasi-realist response to the problem skepticism about moral responsibility, which could have potential implications extending into the problem of epistemological skepticism as well. Although I identify a significant problem with this new interpretation of Strawson’s position, I conclude with the following. To make this position known and exposed to examination in the philosophical discourse serves to advance the general understanding of the problem of skepticism about moral responsibility one subtle but discernable step forward.


_______. Manuscript. “Strawson’s Free Will Naturalism.”


