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Strawson's Inescapability Claim: Metaphysical, not Psychological

ABSTRACT: *At the heart of P. F. Strawson's naturalistic approach to responsibility sits the Inescapability Claim. The main argument of this article is that the established interpretation of this claim is mistaken. According to, what I will call, the Standard Reading, it is* the empirical claim *that it is* psychologically impossible *for us to abandon our responsibility practices. Although widespread, this reading lacks interpretative basis, is in conflict with other features of Strawson's approach, and is—most strikingly—explicitly rejected by Strawson himself. In its place, I propose that we understand Strawson's Inescapability Claim as* the metaphysical claim *that the concept of responsibility is among those ineliminable concepts that form the fundamental core of any conceivable conceptual scheme. The responsibility skeptic's doubt is "idle, unreal, a pretense", not because their doubt is psychologically inefficacious, but because it treads beyond the bounds of sense; their doubt is, in a particular sense,* inconceivable *or* unintelligible.

KEYWORDS: P. F. Strawson, Moral Responsibility, Free Will, Free Will Skepticism, Reactive Attitudes

1. Introduction

P. F. Strawson's 'Freedom and Resentment' (1963) is considered "the founding document of contemporary work on blame" (Coates & Tognazzini 2013: 4, 5) and on responsibility more generally (e.g., Nelkin & Pereboom 2022; Talbert 2024). While it's perhaps a slight exaggeration to call it "the most influential philosophical paper in the 20th century" (Pettit 2006/7), it is nevertheless true, as the editors of a recent volume on Strawson's work affirm, that the essay's significance for the contemporary discussion of responsibility "can hardly be overestimated" (Heyndels, Bengtson, & De Mesel 2024: 5). Indeed, all of the major methodological issues and foundational fault-lines of the contemporary responsibility discussion have been traced back to that very essay (Shoemaker 2020).

This article reconsiders the claim that sits "at the heart of Strawson's naturalistic strategy" (Russell 2017b: 34) in 'Freedom and Resentment': *the Inescapability Claim*. In outline, the Inescapability Claim is that we inescapably have a concept of responsibility, or that we are incapable of ceasing to have reactive attitudes, or that it is impossible for us to completely abandon the participant stance and our responsibility practices.

On, what we'll call, *the Standard Reading* of the Inescapability Claim, the claim is taken to be a *psychological* claim: an empirical, (in principle) verifiable thesis about

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human psychology. This understanding is widely assumed, and it is uncontroversial to claim that, according to Strawson, to abandon the reactive attitudes "would be *psychologically impossible* for us" (McKenna & Russell 2008: 6, emphasis added). The main argument of this article, however, is that this reading of the Inescapability Claim—and, by extension, of Strawson's naturalistic strategy against the responsibility skeptic—is mistaken.

A first problem with this reading is that there is no solid interpretative support for it—neither anything explicit nor anything upon rational reconstruction. The reading is furthermore in conflict with other aspects of Strawson's approach for which we do have clear interpretative support. Most striking of all, however, is that Strawson himself *explicitly rejects* the characterization of his claim suggested by the Standard Reading. Despite its almost unquestioned standing in the contemporary discussion, we have no reason to assume the Standard Reading of the Inescapability Claim, but quite strong reason to oppose it. In light of this, we need to reconceptualize Strawson's Inescapability Claim and, with it, his naturalistic approach to responsibility.

How, then, are we to understand Strawson's Inescapability Claim? I outline a novel answer to this question. The Inescapability Claim should be understood as a *metaphysical* claim, in a recognizable sense of 'metaphysical': Strawson's claim is that the concept of responsibility is among those ineliminable categories and concepts that form the fundamental core of human thinking, the structure of any human conceptual scheme. Let's call this *the Metaphysical Reading*. On this reading, the charge against the responsibility skeptic is not that their doubt is "ineffective", as on the Standard Reading, but that it is *insincere*—"idle, unreal, a pretence" (Strawson 2008b: 15)—because the possibility that the skeptic asks us to imagine is, in a particular sense, *inconceivable* or *unintelligible*.

The first part of this article (section 2 and 3) is negative: the aim is to show that the Standard Reading is mistaken. The second part of this article (section 4 and 5) is positive: the aim is to present an alternative reading of the Inescapability Claim. More specifically, section 2 presents the Standard Reading of the Inescapability Claim and the main criticisms against it, so understood. Section 3 rejects the Standard Reading, arguing that it is interpretatively unfounded, in conflict with other features of Strawson's approach, and explicitly rejected by Strawson himself. Section 4 presents the Metaphysical Reading of the Inescapability Claim, which draws more widely on Strawson's whole oeuvre than is common in the responsibility discussion. Section 5 seeks to deepen our understanding of the Inescapability Claim by considering some respects in which one might wish to challenge the claim on this new understanding of it.

2. The Standard Reading

Below is the perhaps most emblematic expression of the Inescapability Claim in 'Freedom and Resentment':

> The human commitment to participation in ordinary inter-personal relationships is, I think, too thoroughgoing and deeply rooted for us to take seriously the thought that a general theoretical conviction [i.e., that

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> determinism is true] might so change our world that, in it, there were no longer any such things as inter-personal relationships as we normally understand them; and being involved in interpersonal relationships as we normally understand them precisely is being exposed to the range of reactive attitudes and feelings that is in question. (Strawson 2008a: 12)

That Strawson makes the Inescapability Claim and takes it to be central to his approach is indisputable. Paul Russell (2017b: 34) is perfectly right when he observes that the Inescapability Claim sits "at the heart of Strawson's naturalistic strategy". But what does it mean that we are "naturally committed", as Strawson says we are?

Something like a consensus has emerged among commentators. Here are a few representative examples of how the Inescapability Claim is regularly presented:

> According to Paul Russell, the claim is that "it is psychologically impossible to suspend or abandon our reactive attitudes entirely" (2017b: 33).

> According to Derk Pereboom, the claim is "the psychological thesis that our reactive attitudes cannot be affected by a general belief in determinism, or by any such abstract metaphysical view, and that therefore the project of altering or eliminating our reactive attitudes by a determinist conviction would be ineffectual" (1995: 37; also 2001: 92; 2014: 154).

> According to Michael McKenna, the claim is that, "it is not psychologically possible for us to suspend [the reactive attitudes]" (2005: 166).

> According to András Szigeti, the claim affirms "a thoroughgoing psychological incapacity rooted in human nature which makes it impossible for us to give up the practice of responsibility-attributions" (2012: 103).[1]

> According to Gary Watson, "[t]he psychological incapacity claim is that we (as we are now) could not be led to abandon that framework, *whether or not it is correct*" (2014: 25, original emphasis).

These presentations express what we may call *the Standard Reading* of the Inescapability Claim. The Standard Reading treats the Inescapabilty Claim as a *psychological* thesis: an empirical, (in principle) verifiable claim about the rigidity of our actual practice *vis-à-vis* a belief in the truth of determinism, stating that a conviction of the truth of determinism would be "ineffectual". The reason for this cognitive or otherwise psychological immunity is taken to be, simply, that it is "psychologically impossible" for us to abandon our responsibility practices and, specifically, the reactive attitudes constituting these practices, in virtue of "our

[1] Szigeti (2012) distinguishes between (at least) four different arguments from inescapability; the Standard Reading is one possible reading he considers.

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psychological make-up" (Coates 2017: 804; Shabo 2012: 132). While this is not the only existing interpretation (cf., Campbell 2017; Coates 2017; Rummens & De Mesel 2023), it is by far the most common interpretation of the Inescapability Claim (see Fischer 2014: 104f.; McKenna & Russell 2008: 6; Miller 2014a, 2014b; Nagel 1986: 124; Shoemaker 2020; Vargas 2004: 220; Wolf 2008: 73; also, at least in part, Sars 2022a; Watson 2014).

It is also widely agreed that the Inescapability Claim is unpromising; that it cannot ground a credible response against the responsibility skeptic. Even to those who are otherwise sympathetic to Strawson's approach, the Inescapability Claim seems unhelpful (e.g., Russell 2017a: 98). Of course, how to understand the claim and how promising it is are closely connected issues.

Broadly speaking, there are two kinds of criticisms that are regularly levelled against the Inescapabilty Claim: that it is *implausible*[2] and that it is *irrelevant*[3]. To be more precise, commentators tend to find the claim to be either:

(a) empirically implausible,
(b) naturalistically implausible,
(c) rationally irrelevant, or
(d) dialectically irrelevant.

Let's review these criticisms as to get a sense of how sensible they are and, correspondingly, how unpromising a response to the responsibility skeptic the Inescapability Claim is on the Standard Reading.

(a) The *empirical plausibility challenge*[4] casts doubt on the *strength* of the Inescapability Claim, holding that it needs to be significantly attenuated to be a plausible psychological thesis. Is it really plausible that an unwavering skeptic convinced of the irrationality of reactive attitudes could not possibly bring herself to also, as Tamler Sommers puts it, "feel *in her gut* that robust moral responsibility is a fiction?" (2007: 336, original emphasis). And even if it would not be possible for *her* to do so, given her social circumstances and upbringing, is it really plausible that *no one* may come to maturity without any disposition to reactive attitudes? Admittedly, it may take time (a life-time, or perhaps several generations') and effort (continuous self-correction, or perhaps some social engineering). But to admit that it might be *very hard* falls short of saying that it is *impossible*; it does not show that engaging in responsibility practices is an absolutely *irremovable* feature of human life. The challenge presses the critical question: Is there really *strong enough empirical support* for Strawson's psychological thesis?

(b) The *naturalistic plausibility challenge* also casts doubt on the *strength* of the Inescapability Claim, but it holds that it needs to be attenuated if it is to constitute a

[2] See, for example, Justin D. Coates (2017), Pereboom (2001), Russell (2017b), Tamler Sommers (2007), and Watson (2004). R. Jay Wallace (1996: 31f.) too, on his "narrow" construal of the claim, rejects it as implausible.

[3] See, in particular, Victoria McGeer (2014), Szigeti (2012), Watson (2014), and Wolf (2008). John Callanan (2011), Hans-Johann Glock (2022), Sybren Heyndels (2019; however, see Heyndels 2020), Hilary Putnam (1998), and Sars (2022a) all take the claim to be irrelevant for Strawson's general anti-skeptical project.

[4] This label is adopted from Sars (2022a).

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plausible "form of naturalism" (Russell 2017b). According to Russell (2017b: 37), Strawson's argument hinges on the claim that we inescapably "feel or experience" or "entertain" particular *episodes* of the reactive attitudes. But, so the criticism goes, on no plausible naturalistic understanding of human beings could it be held that we inevitably entertain episodes of these emotions "whatever reason suggests to us" (2017b: 38). These attitudes are reactive, but they are not mere reflexes. While it might be that we are psychologically hard-wired to be *prone* to or *disposed* to have these kinds of emotions to others and ourselves, this is compatible with (at least, a credible form of) skepticism about the appropriateness of reactive attitudes. If Strawson's Inescapability Claim is that we would simply continue to manifest episodes of reactive attitudes even if we were convinced of their inappropriateness, then he holds a naturalistically implausible view of human emotions and of the reactive attitudes in particular.

(c) The *rational relevance criticism* calls into question the *relevance* of the Inescapability Claim as the key premise in an argument about whether it would be *rational* to engage in responsibility practices and have reactive attitudes such as resentment, indignation and guilt. Even if the Inescapability Claim were true, and it were psychologically impossible for us to be engaged in responsibility practice and have reactive attitudes, this just seems completely irrelevant for whether it would be *rational* to be so engaged and have these attitudes. This criticism takes two different forms in the literature: it focuses either on *fact* or on *justification*. Its factual form: even if we are, per the Inescapability Claim, psychologically incapable of ceasing to have reactive attitudes to others' behavior and our own, we *are* not therefore responsible beings. It might still very well be that we are not responsible beings, but just cannot help but treat other people and ourselves *as if* we were (Wolf 2008). Its justificatory form: the mere fact that we cannot help but have reactive attitudes and are simply stuck with responsibility practices, given our psychological make-up, does not *justify* us in having these attitudes and engaging in these practices. The inevitability of doing something is the wrong kind of reason (or in any case an insufficient reason) for rationally justifying us in having reactive attitudes and engaging in responsibility practices.[5]

(d) The *dialectal relevance criticism* questions the claim's supposed *dialectical relevance* for the responsibility debate. On the assumption that the rational relevance criticism is correct, it asks: given that being psychologically necessitated to engage in responsibility practices does not make it rational to engage in such practices, what is even the point of stating the Inescapability Claim? Stating it is just off topic. What the skeptic is asking about is the *rationality*, or otherwise *normative justification*, of these attitudes and practices. That is the issue that divides skeptics, libertarians, and compatibilists. As Gary Watson (2014: 25) puts it, to point out that "even if [… the sceptical] conviction were correct, we couldn't adjust our lives accordingly […] leaves these interlocutors' basic position completely intact". Therefore, the criticism goes, the Inescapability Claim "just seems irrelevant to the issues of the essay" (Watson 2014: 25).

[5] That is, this form of the criticism rejects a key premise of what is sometimes called "the psychological impossibility argument" (see Heyndels 2020, ch. 4; Sars 2022a; Szigeti 2012).

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What these criticisms together show is that, even though Strawson's approach in general has been very influential, one of Strawson's most central claims is widely held in very poor regard. Indeed, *if* Strawson's Inescapability Claim really is, as the Standard Reading has it, that we are *simply stuck with* our reactive attitudes and our responsibility practices due to a *psychological incapacity* of ours, and that pointing to this supposed fact of human psychology is furthermore meant to somehow refute the responsibility skeptic's doubts, then the dissatisfaction with Strawson's claim seems rather reasonable. But—just given how unconvincing that claim seems to be, we should feel impelled to ask—is that really how the claim is to be understood? What interpretative support is there for the Standard Reading?

3. Rejecting the Standard Reading

Somewhat surprisingly—given just how entrenched this interpretation is in the expansive commentary on Strawson's approach—the Standard Reading is, as an interpretation, quite implausible. I'll be arguing that there is no solid support for this particular reading of the Inescapability Claim—neither anything explicit nor anything upon rational reconstruction. To the contrary, the reading conflicts with other aspects of Strawson's approach, for which we do have clear interpretative support. But most strikingly of all, the Standard Reading has persisted to dominate contemporary philosophical engagement with 'Freedom and Resentment' despite the fact that Strawson himself *explicitly rejected* the understanding of his claim that it assumes.

First of all, nowhere in 'Freedom and Resentment' or elsewhere does Strawson put the claim *explicitly* in terms of human psychology. There are passages that might, *prima facie*, allow for such a reading. But there is no explicit argument for so understanding Strawson's claim in the literature. The interpretative basis for the Standard Reading cannot simply be that Strawson appeals to 'human nature'. This does not itself imply that the Inescapability Claim is to be understood as a psychological thesis; an account of human nature only in psychological terms would be wholly inadequate.

If proponents of the Standard Reading were to make the case for their interpretation, then they could perhaps point to Strawson's recurrent claim—for which he regularly makes some reference to Hume (e.g., Strawson, 1958; 2008a, n. 7; 2008b, *passim*)—that just as we have a "natural disposition to belief" in material objects, in other minds, and (roughly speaking) in the reliability of the practice of induction, so we have a "natural disposition to" reactive attitudes (e.g., Strawson, 2008a, n. 7; 2008b, p. 26). Strawson's references to Hume's naturalistic strategy against skepticism about material objects and induction might seem to provide some interpretative support for the Standard Reading of the Inescapability Claim. However, when we explore this parallel below—that is, between skepticism about material objects or induction and skepticism about reactive attitudes or responsibility—what we will see is that it does not serve to support the Standard Reading, but quite the contrary.

Proponents of the Standard Reading might also wish to invoke Strawson's claim (see above) that the responsibility skeptic's scenario is ruled out because "[t]he human commitment to participation in ordinary inter-personal relationships is [...] *too thoroughgoing and deeply rooted*". But need this mean, as it might mean for Hume and has been assumed to mean for Strawson, that this commitment is

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psychologically well-entrenched and *incorrigible*? (cf., Shoemaker 2020: 212) At best, this reading remains underdetermined by the text.

At worst, however, to so understand Strawson might be in conflict with what we do know about his naturalism. Considering the rational relevance criticism, we should ask: what anti-skeptical force does the Inescapability Claim even *purport* to have? If the Inescapability Claim is that our "human commitment to participation in ordinary inter-personal relationships" is psychologically well-entrenched and incorrigible, then, if the Inescapability Claim is true, this may affirm a sense of relative or subjective certainty (Glock 2016). And such certainty may indeed provide at least one sense in which the claim displaces skeptical doubt, in which the relevant commitment is immune to any (abstract or theoretical) argument. However, while that kind of claim would be befitting W. V. Quine's project of a naturalized epistemology (cf., Glock 2016: 276), the conformity to Quine's project should trouble us: Strawson (e.g., 2008b: 8, 15f., 72) is explicit that *that* naturalizing project and *that* naturalistic way with skepticism is not *his* naturalistic project and not *his* naturalistic way with skepticism. Thus, on at least one plausible way of unpacking the claim that something is psychologically well-entrenched and incorrigible, the Standard Reading stands in conflict with how Strawson himself presents his naturalistic project.

With respect to the relevance criticisms ((c)–(d)), I think we should say that, while these criticisms take Strawson's naturalistic approach to miss the point, it is these criticisms themselves that, in different ways, miss the point of Strawson's naturalistic approach. Strawson did not *attempt* to provide a justification of our responsibility practices (Campbell 2017; De Mesel 2018; Heyndels 2020). But he is not therefore unresponsive to the fact that the skeptic is in effect calling into question the grounding or justification of our responsibility practices. To the contrary. The point of Strawson's naturalistic approach is to address precisely this demand for a justification, while still not answering it on its own terms. He makes this explicit: "one who presses this question has wholly failed to grasp the import of the preceding answer, the nature of the human commitment that is here involved" (Strawson 2008a: 19f.). This is not to say that Strawson is right; that the demand for a justification of our engagement in responsibility practices, which is central to the responsibility skeptic's doubt, is mistaken or confused. It is only to say that an *interpretation* of Strawson's claim as being, what we may call, a *direct* answer to the responsibility skeptic's question is, as such, implausible. Strawson (2008b: 8) is very explicit that this is not his way with the skeptic. This too suggests that the reading of Strawson presupposed by the standard criticisms is mistaken.

The Standard Reading is not only interpretatively unsupported and in conflict with other aspects of Strawson's approach, as I have so far argued. That the Inescapability Claim is to be understood as the Standard Reading understands it is, moreover, *explicitly denied* by Strawson himself. In his "Reply to Ernest Sosa" (cf., Sosa 1998; Strawson 1998), Strawson rebuts the suggestion that this is how to understand his naturalistic approach:

> It is not merely a matter of dismissing the demand for a justification of one's belief in a proposition on the grounds that one can't help believing it. That would be weak indeed. (Strawson 1998: 370)

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But according to the Standard Reading, the Inescapabilty Claim is precisely that—*viz.*, that we are *simply stuck with* our responsibility practices and *cannot help but* to have reactive attitudes to other people's behavior and our own, "whether or not it is correct" to do so. This *cannot* be Strawson's position: he explicitly denies that it is and agrees that such a dismissal of the skeptical worry "would be weak indeed". This clearly undermines the Standard Reading of the Inescapability Claim.

There is a possible objection that should be considered. It may be remarked that, here, Strawson is not quite denying the Standard Reading of the Inescapability Claim as we find this claim in 'Freedom and Resentment', but something slightly different. Above, Strawson talks about "one's *belief in a proposition*"; not about one's *engaging in a practice* or *having reactive attitudes*. The "beliefs" that Strawson is concerned with here include, *inter alia*, the belief that there are other minds, that there are material objects, and that there is a determinate past (cf., Sosa 1998: 362). Whether Strawson can be said to explicitly deny the Standard Reading of the Inescapability Claim as we find this in 'Freedom and Resentment' may thus be said to turn on whether his approach to skepticism about, for example, material objects and other minds is relevantly analogous to his approach to skepticism about responsibility. Unless the parallel holds, this does not count as a decisive point against the Standard Reading.

Does the parallel hold? I think it does. Here is just one example of Strawson being rather explicit about this point:

> [...] just as we are naturally committed, and inescapability committed, to belief in the material world and other people, so we are naturally committed to certain kinds of reaction to other people's behaviour and our own, which imply our readiness to take disapprobative or approbative attitudes both to other people and our own. (Strawson, Ezcurdia, Sainsbury, & Davies 2008: 93)

Strawson here readily equates the sense in which we are naturally and inescapably committed to, for example, belief in material objects and the sense in which we are naturally and inescapably committed to the reactive attitudes. We see the same general unity to Strawson's anti-skeptical naturalistic approach in *Scepticism and Naturalism* (2008b).[6] And Strawson's comparison to the justification of induction in 'Freedom and Resentment' (2008a, n. 7) also suggests a fundamental unity to his approach to these forms of skepticism.[7]

The Standard Reading faces something of a dilemma with respect to this issue. Recall, the most credible interpretative support for the Standard Reading is Strawson's recurrent references to Hume. However, these primarily occur precisely when Strawson suggests that there indeed is the relevant parallel between

[6] Not that there are *no* differences between these two commitments, according to Strawson. There are; for example, in the latter case there is a kind of relativism that there is not in the former (cf., Strawson 2008b, ch. 1 & 2). The claim is only that the sense in which they are inescapable is analogous.

[7] See also Strawson (2008b) and Strawson's reply (1958) to Wesley Salmon's (1957) criticism of his (1952) account of induction.

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his naturalistic approach to skepticism about, for example, material objects or induction and his naturalistic approach to skepticism about reactive attitudes or responsibility (e.g., Strawson, 2008a, n. 7; 2008b, *passim*). Thus, if the relevant parallel does not hold, the Standard Reading loses its only credible basis for interpretative support. On the other hand, if the relevant parallel indeed holds, then it must be admitted that Strawson explicitly rejects the understanding of his claim that the Standard Reading presents. Either way, then, we would have no reason to assume the Standard Reading, but only reason to resist it.

4. The Metaphysical Reading

In this section, I outline an alternative reading of the Inescapability Claim. On this reading, the Inescapability Claim is *a metaphysical claim*, in a recognizable sense of 'metaphysical': the claim is, centrally, that the concept of responsibility is one of those categories and concepts that form the fundamental general framework of any human conceptual scheme. Let's call this *the Metaphysical Reading*. In contrast to the Standard Reading, on the Metaphysical Reading, the responsibility skeptic's doubt is "idle, unreal, a pretense" (Strawson 2008b: 15), not because their doubt is psychologically inefficacious, but because the skeptic is failing to recognize the bounds of sense; their doubt is, in a particular sense, *unintelligible*.

I suggest that we think of Strawson's Inescapability Claim as having *two sides*: 'the conceptual side' and 'the practical side'. It is tempting to say that the mistake of the Standard Reading is to lay exclusive stress on 'the practical side' of the claim. But the more fundamental mistake manifested by the Standard Reading is in fact that of assuming that these two sides are wholly independent; not sides of the same thing. Engagement with Strawson's other work should make one suspicious of this assumption. It is because of this assumption that the Standard Reading fails not only to recognize both sides of the claim and to see how they relate to each other, but fails, more fundamentally, to even properly grasp 'the practical side' of the Inescapability Claim.

On the Metaphysical Reading, the Inescapability Claim is the claim that employing a concept of responsibility is *conceptually necessary* in the sense that the concept of responsibility is part of any *conceivable* human conceptual scheme; and it is part of any conceivable human conceptual scheme because, for any human society that we can recognize as such, it is *practically necessary* that it engages in some practice of responsibility. As such, what is inescapable for beings like us, according to Strawson, is not in the first instance that we *have* a concept of responsibility (in the sense that we possess at least some conception of it), but that we, as a matter of fact, *engage* in some practice of responsibility, where a responsibility practice is understood as a conceptual practice structured by a concept of responsibility.

Since Strawson often talks, not in terms of 'conceptual practice', but in terms of 'conceptual scheme', I will, for ease of expression, sometimes employ this terminology too. Talk of the concept of responsibility *being part of* a conceptual scheme is then a way of saying that there actually is, among the relevant community of concept-users, a conceptual *practice* which is structured by the concept of responsibility. It might also be worth noting that, for Strawson, our responsibility practices are characterized by us

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having reactive attitudes, so, for him, the inescapability of the former implies the inescapability of the latter. For present purposes, however, we may leave the issue of whether reactive attitudes are necessarily part of a responsibility practice to the side.

Immediately preceding the passage most commonly associated with the Inescapability Claim in 'Freedom and Resentment' that was cited earlier on—which states that our commitment to responsibility practices is "too thoroughgoing and deeply rooted for us to take seriously" the skeptic's suggestion that we abandon such practices—Strawson talks of the *conceivability* or *intelligibility* of the skeptic's suggestion. He is explicit that he is *not* saying that it would be "self-contradictory" to think that the truth of determinism would or should change our world such that there were no longer any practices of responsibility. It is because he is not ready to say *this* that he also abstains from saying that it is "*absolutely* inconceivable that it should happen" (emphasis added). What he does say, however, is that he is nevertheless "strongly inclined to think that it is, for us as we are, *practically inconceivable*" (Strawson 2008a: 12, emphasis added). Indeed, that it is 'practically inconceivable' (as opposed to 'absolutely inconceivable') has to do with—as the immediately subsequent sentence signals—how utterly "thoroughgoing and deeply rooted" our human commitment to such practices is. But the Inescapability Claim cannot be reduced to this (as I propose to call it) 'practical side' of the claim. We need to bear in mind that the claim is, in the first instance, a claim of *conceivability*.

That the claim is one of conceivability or intelligibility is supported by textual evidence beyond this single statement. Towards the end of 'Freedom and Resentment', for example, Strawson says, similarly:

> an awareness of variety of forms should not prevent us from acknowledging that in the absence of *any* forms of these attitudes it is doubtful whether we should have anything that *we* can find intelligible as a system of human relationships, as human society. (Strawson 2008a: 26, original emphasis)[8]

Here, as before, the matter concerns whether the scenario that the skeptic asks us to envisage is even *intelligible*—not whether it is practically or psychologically possible. The point is moreover echoed, most clearly, in a (for present purposes) very suggestive passage in *The Bounds of Sense*:

> The set of ideas, or schemes of thought, employed by human beings reflect, of course, their nature, their needs and their situations. They are not static schemes, but allow of that indefinite refinement, correction and extension which accompany the advance of science and development of social forms. At the stage of conceptual self-consciousness which is philosophical reflection, people may, among other things, conceive of variations in the character of their own situations and needs and discuss intelligibly the ways in which their schemes of thought might be adapted

[8] As noted, Strawson talks as if reactive attitudes are constitutive of responsibility practices, but we need not accept this claim in order to accept the Inescapability Claim.

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> to such variations. But it is no matter for wonder if conceivable variations are intelligible only as variations within a certain fundamental general framework of ideas, if further developments are conceivable only as developments of, or from, a certain general basis. (Strawson 2019: 34)

Two points are explicit in this passage that are central for the reappraisal of the Inescapability Claim at issue: first, according to Strawson, our conceptual scheme reflects the needs we have and the situations we face. In other words, "Our practices do not merely exploit our natures, they express them" (Strawson 2008a: 27). What our conceptual scheme is like, and what it *can* be like, depends on our nature, the needs that we have and the situations that we face. This is 'the practical side' of the claim. It is, however, not enough to recognize that our natural or practical condition *determines* the limits of thought, as the Standard Reading might be said to do. What is important is that the practical condition is indeed *reflected* at the conceptual level: the practical and the conceptual are *two sides of the same thing*—not two separate things. That is what is not recognized on the Standard Reading.

Second, according to Strawson, this 'fundamental general framework of ideas' constitutes the bounds within which any variation of conceptual schemes, such as a development of our current (socio-historically local) conceptual scheme, is *conceivable* or *intelligible* as such. It is not the case that 'the fundamental general framework of ideas' refers to some psychological base that delimits what is psychologically possible. It rather refers to what Kant, before Strawson, called *the bounds of sense;* that is, the conceptual structure that is presupposed on any conceptual scheme. The laying bare of that fundamental general framework is the objective of what Strawson calls *descriptive metaphysics*: the project of uncovering "the massive core of human thinking which has no history—or none recorded in histories of thought" (Strawson 1959: 10). This provides the sense in which the Inescapability Claim is, on the present reading, a *metaphysical* claim: it is a description of that core of human thinking which responsibility, in its fundamental form, is a part of.

The anti-skeptical force of the Inescapability Claim is that the skeptic's doubt is "idle, unreal, a pretense" (Strawson 2008b: 15). This is so because the scenario on which the responsibility skeptic's doubt is premised—that we abandon our responsibility practices—is, in a particular sense, *inconceivable* or *unintelligible*. The particular sense in which the skeptic's suggestion is unintelligible or inconceivable is that it is "practically inconceivable".

This does not mean that it is *almost* inconceivable. On the Standard Reading, as Coates rightly notes, Strawson would seem to be saying that "it is practically inconceivable that we could abandon our responsibility practices in just the same way it is practically impossible that I could run a 5 minute mile. It is not *literally* impossible of course—just really, *really* hard given my current level of fitness, […] etc." (2017: 804, original emphasis). In contrast, on the present reading, if it is *practically* inconceivable, while it might still not be *absolutely* inconceivable, it is nevertheless, according to Strawson, *not really* conceivable. In Strawson's own words, the Inescapability Claim is that "we cannot, as we are, *seriously envision*

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ourselves adopting a thoroughgoing objectivity of attitude" (2008a: 14, emphasis added).

The 'practical', as opposed to the 'absolute', nature of the inconceivability or unintelligibility that Strawson here invokes means, at bottom, that it is inconceivable how there could *actually* or *in practice* be a conceptual scheme like the one that the responsibility skeptic is suggesting. But this does not reduce the point to a non-conceptual (say, merely psychological) point; to adapt a slogan from Sars (2022a: 80), "inconceivability should not be confused with incapacity".

The contrast to 'absolute inconceivability' may be illuminated by considering the *status* that Strawson took the descriptive metaphysician's claims to have. As Anil Gomes (2024) has shown, according to Strawson, the claims that describe the fundamental general framework of any conceptual scheme are best understood as claims of *non-analytic but still conceptual necessity*. In light of the distinction between *analytic* necessity and *conceptual* necessity, the claim that the skeptic's suggestion is not self-contradictory (so perhaps not *absolutely* inconceivable) may be taken to mean only that it is not *analytically* false, not defying an *analytic* necessity. However, this leaves it perfectly open that the skeptic's suggestion may, nevertheless, *attempt to tread beyond the bounds of sense*, in the sense that the suggestion still defies a *conceptual* necessity.

I think we find the very same idea of practical inconceivability in Strawson's 'Social Morality and Individual Ideal':

> it is [...] important to recognise that certain human interests are so fundamental and so general that they must be universally recognised in some form and to some degree in any *conceivable* moral community (Strawson 2008c: 41, emphasis added)

That these interests are reflected is essential if a moral community is even to be *conceivable* as such. The point is that what the bounds of sense are is not independent of what *we*, human beings, are like.

This is Strawson's naturalism. It is not detached from his metaphysics but is rather at the foundation of it. Again, looking beyond 'Freedom and Resentment', Strawson is explicit about this: in order to be able to "arrive at such properly metaphysical conclusions" (2011a: 89) as what the fundamental general framework of ideas that underlies any human conceptual scheme is like, we need to recognize "the foundation of our concepts in natural facts" (1963: 517). Strawson (1963, 2011a, 2011b) calls this 'the explanatory task' of the philosopher (see Heyndels 2019; Bengtson 2019, 2020; De Mesel forthcoming). This philosophical study into the natural history of our conceptual scheme allows us to recognize that certain human interests, needs, and situations are *so fundamental* and *so general* that they are bound to be reflected on *any* human conceptual scheme.[9] In this way, a naturalistic explanation informs a metaphysical conclusion.

[9] For this conclusion, though Strawson is not explicit about this, 'the explanatory task' needs to be complemented by what Strawson (1963, 2011a, 2011b) calls 'the creative task', that of imagining alternatives to our conceptual scheme.

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An alternative to our present conceptual scheme is in the relevant sense inconceivable or unintelligible if it is not within that fundamental general framework of ideas that provides the basis of any human conceptual scheme. According to Strawson, what the responsibility skeptic's doubt (implicitly) does is invite us to envision an alternative to our current conceptual scheme that is not within that fundamental general framework of ideas, and which is therefore inconceivable as a human conceptual scheme. The charge is not that the responsibility skeptic is suggesting that we should, rationally speaking, do something that we cannot, psychologically speaking, bring ourselves to do (as on the Standard Reading). Rather, the charge is that the responsibility skeptic's doubt is, in a particular sense, *unintelligible*: the skeptic is failing to see that they are, in fact, treading beyond the bounds of *sense*.

Put differently, Strawson should be seen as engaging in what Robert Smithson calls "conceptual cartography", the mapping of those features of our conceptual scheme which are necessary in the sense that "we cannot imagine humans accomplishing their basic projects without having a conceptual scheme with these features" (2021, p. 97). And, as Miranda Fricker notes, a central point of such projects is to show "how some kinds of criticism of our practice are worth making, and how some are *senseless*" (1998, p. 165, emphasis added).

While this anti-skeptical claim is not based on a transcendental argument (cf., Coates 2017; Hieronymi 2020), the Metaphysical Reading nevertheless shares with such readings that the skeptic's mistake is an *intellectual* one—a conceptual or rational mistake. But, by contrast, on the Metaphysical Reading, the anti-skeptical claim is based on the conjecture that our human nature renders it indispensable that we engage in responsibility practices; there is, the idea is, a naturalistic explanation of why we have the concept of responsibility. In this respect, the reading might be said to share something with readings that take the concept of responsibility to be somehow determined by our practices of holding each other responsible (e.g., Beglin 2018; De Mesel 2022; Shoemaker 2017, 2022).

On the Metaphysical Reading, the Inescapability Claim is that the very concept of responsibility is an inescapable part of our conceptual scheme, as on any conceptual scheme we can make intelligible to ourselves as such, because the concept is *indispensable* for beings like us. It is indispensable for beings like us in the sense that it is *practically necessary* for beings like us that we engage in some form of responsibility practice, where this is understood as a conceptual practice structured by a concept of responsibility. Our practical condition grounds a *conceptual need*: we need some concept of responsibility simply in virtue of being the kinds of beings that we are (cf., Queloz 2025, ch. 7). In suggesting that we adopt a conceptual scheme that does not employ any such concept, the responsibility skeptic fails to recognize that the concept of responsibility is not a contingent component of our conceptual scheme, but is, in its fundamental form, among those categories and concepts that form the core of human thinking, the fundamental general framework of ideas that underlies any conceivable human conceptual scheme. Hence, what they are purporting to envision, they cannot, in fact, *seriously* envision; such a conceptual scheme is really *inconceivable* or *unintelligible*; their doubt is, in that sense, "idle, unreal, a pretense" (Strawson 2008b: 15).

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5. Reevaluating the Inescapability Claim

Simply in virtue of the fact that the Inescapability Claim is *not* an empirical claim—*not* a psychological thesis—as I've argued above, the main criticisms levelled against the claim are, at bottom, misguided. Of course, this does not mean that the Inescapability Claim, properly understood, is not open to challenge. Indeed, we may reconstruct the empirical plausibility challenge, the naturalistic plausibility challenge, and the dialectical relevance criticism as, respectively:

(e) the fundamentality challenge,
(f) the concept-application challenge, and
(g) the contemporary relevance challenge.

Let's review each in turn and consider how they might be addressed on Strawson's behalf.

(e) The *fundamentality challenge* questions the *fundamentality* of the concept of responsibility, and thus the correctness of Strawson's metaphysics. There are at least two different ways of pushing this challenge. For one thing, one might question Strawson's idea of our human nature—his idea of our practical condition, the needs and situations which render the concept of responsibility an indispensable part of any human conceptual scheme. Alternatively, holding Strawson's idea of human nature fixed, one may question whether the concept of responsibility is in fact rendered indispensable in virtue of those fundamental needs and situations. Indeed, to question whether we cannot, with enough time and effort, be brought to not engage in any responsibility practice, as the empirical plausibility challenge asks, might here be understood as asking whether the relevant needs and interests really are as fundamental and general as Strawson supposes. Alternatively, it could be understood as asking whether there could not be some other conceptual practice or set of conceptual practices that would adequately address these needs and interests (for relevant discussion, see De Mesel & Cuypers 2023; Russell 2017a, 2024; Sars 2023; Wallace 1996: 25–40, 62ff.; Watson 2014: 27–31).

(f) The *concept-application challenge* questions what follows for the *applicability* of the concept of responsibility given that we (inescapably) *have* that concept.[10] Take, for example, the concept 'witch'. We do *have* this concept. That, however, does not imply that we *engage* in practices of witch burning, nor does it imply—which is why we do not engage in such practices—that we think the concept ever *applies*. By analogy, might not the skeptic concede that we inescapably *have* the concept of responsibility while nevertheless contending that this concept lacks any application—just as the concept of witch lacks application? This challenge transposes the main point of the naturalistic plausibility challenge to the conceptual level: just as being *prone* to reactive attitudes does not by itself imply that we *manifest* reactive attitudes, *having* a concept of responsibility does not by itself imply that we actually *take* people to be responsible.

[10] I'm grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising this challenge and for the illustrative example.

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(g) The *contemporary relevance criticism* focuses on what the skeptic is (assumed to be) saying. For Strawson's argument to go through, it needs to be the case that the skeptic is not merely suggesting that we adopt a *different* practice of responsibility, but rather no practice *of responsibility* at all—that what they are suggesting is that we do not engage in *any* responsibility practice. But contemporary responsibility skeptics are usually explicit about the fact that what they are skeptical about is only *one form* or *one kind* of moral responsibility—say, 'robust moral responsibility', 'accountability', or 'moral responsibility in the basic desert sense' (see, e.g., Pereboom 2014, ch. 6; 2021a; 2021b). As such, a version of the dialectical relevance criticism reappears: is Strawson's Inescapability Claim irrelevant to the argument most contemporary responsibility skeptics are making?

We will not, here, be able to fully review the ways in which one might go about addressing these challenges. But something, if only rather preliminary, should be said in Strawson's defense.

In response to the concept-application challenge, it should first be noted that what is inescapable, on the Metaphysical Reading, is not that we *have* a concept of responsibility, but that we *engage* in responsibility practices—that we *use* a concept of responsibility and, moreover, that we in fact *conceptualize* people as responsible. An unexercised ability—i.e., the mere having of some concept—would not address the needs and situations that render the concept practically indispensable. This has force against the skeptic since the truth of the generic 'we conceptualise people as responsible' is incompatible with it being the case that we *never* so conceptualize people, even if it does not require that we *always* conceptualize people as responsible or that we conceptualize *everyone* as responsible. The skeptic's claim is not that the concept of responsibility *sometimes* does not apply, but that it *never* applies.

That said, the concept-application challenge is not thereby rendered mute. For one thing, it may still be objected that the consequences, by way of thought and action, of applying a concept are underdetermined by the mere fact that a concept applies. That a concept of responsibility applies in a given case does not by itself mean that it is appropriate to blame the person to which it applies. And, more generally, that a concept of responsibility at least sometimes applies does not by itself mean that there is anyone whom it is appropriate to blame.

But this does not save the skeptic. Not only blaming, but also excusing and justifying someone's doings are salient ways in which we engage in responsibility practices. (This is Strawson's (2008a, p. 11) point when he notes that the skeptic cannot argue from considerations that tend to, and appropriately do, inhibit reactive attitudes in particular cases.) To continue with the example of 'witch': There is a world of difference between, on the one hand, thinking that some women are witches but that we shouldn't therefore burn them and, on the other hand, to *not* think that women are witches—and, indeed, not even think *whether* they are witches—and thus not even consider whether it would be appropriate to burn them.

However, the concept-application challenge may also be taken in a different direction. It may be objected that even if we grant that we necessarily use *a* concept of responsibility, this does not entail that, with respect to some particular concept of responsibility, we are necessarily using *it*. It remains possible that *some* concept of responsibility does not only sometimes not apply, but that *this particular*

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concept of responsibility in fact *never* applies. As such, the skeptic about a particular concept of responsibility—which, as noted, many contemporary responsibility skeptics explicitly are—can still hold that at least *that* concept does not apply. (I think that Strawson, in a way, saw this limitation of his metaphysical project, too; see De Mesel (2022).) This point should be conceded. But to concede this is only to concede the pertinence of the contemporary relevance criticism.

The force of the contemporary relevance criticism turns on whether there is any alternative concept of responsibility, unobjectionable to the skeptic, which is not practically inconceivable for beings like us. In other words, whether what the skeptic is skeptical about is really only a particular concept of responsibility and not *any* concept of responsibility. And this issue turns, centrally, on *what* the concept of responsibility, in its fundamental form, is. That is, what the form is that any conception of responsibility is a variation of, if it is indeed to be intelligible as a concept *of responsibility*. For example, if the responsibility skeptic will only accept a concept that justifies us in holding people responsible primarily or exclusively in instrumental or forward-looking terms, but the concept of responsibility *in its fundamental form* is not like that, but one that justifies holding people responsible primarily or exclusively in non-instrumental or backward-looking terms, then the Inescapability Claim is not irrelevant. By Strawson's account, then, the responsibility skeptic would, in fact, be making an unintelligible or inconceivable suggestion.

I think the current pertinence of both the contemporary relevance criticism and the fundamentality challenge, reflects not a flaw in Strawson's approach to responsibility skepticism, but a limitation of the account of Strawson's approach as provided here. What is missing is a naturalistic explanation that buttresses Strawson's Inescapabilty Claim by illustrating how our conceptual scheme might be said to reflect our practical condition. To address the current concerns ((e)-(g)), such a naturalistic explanation would have to show how some fundamental needs and situations render engagement in responsibility practices practically necessary, such that a concept of responsibility is indispensable for beings like us. Moreover, it would need to do so in terms of needs and situations that are so fundamental and generic that they would present themselves within any conceivable human society. And show, furthermore, that the concept of responsibility that is practically necessary for beings like us is, in its fundamental form, what the contemporary skeptic in effect proposes that we do away with.

While undoubtedly an ambitious project, I do think that such a naturalistic explanation can be provided. Elsewhere (Emilsson manuscript), I make the case for what such a naturalistic explanation should be within a Strawsonian framework (for a related account, see De Mesel forthcoming). At this point, however, while the Metaphysical Reading of Strawson's Inescapability Claim has the clear advantage over the Standard Reading that it does not simply reject skepticism as inefficacious but rejects it, rather, as inconceivable or unintelligible, it must also be admitted that more needs to be said in order to actually establish Strawson's Inescapability Claim and to prove its anti-skeptical force.

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