

# Excused or Exempted? Seismic and Downhill Psychological Strains<sup>1</sup>

While blame is a natural reaction to wrongdoing, we can also cancel our blame after learning more about why someone behaved poorly. Sometimes, we rescind blame because a valid excuse obtains; when a wrongdoer's actions do not warrant blame because she met a common excuse. Other times, we withdraw blame because we exempt another from our reactivity altogether; one is no longer blamed for a blameworthy act because *she* is exempted from reactivity. I focus on one reason to withdraw blame: psychological strain. Watson suggested that every blame-cancelling psychological strain constituted an *exemption*. Instead, I suggest that not all blame-cancelling strains constitute temporary *exemptions*. I introduce two types of psychological strains: *seismic strains* and *downhill strains*. Seismic strains function by setting off a psychological eruption. They operate synchronically, inciting wanton behavior. Seeing this, we can exempt another from blame as we objectively view his behavior as the outcome of psychologically seismic activity. Downhill strains, on the other hand, function by tilting one's mental terrain towards acting poorly. These strains act diachronically such that misdeeds take on an akratic lens; one acts poorly even while understanding that the action is wrong at a second-order level. Understanding that a downhill strain made the slope towards acting poorly too steep to resist, we suspend our blame because a valid excuse obtains: it was just too hard to resist the downhill slide. I argue that only seismic strains invite an objectivity of attitude, an exemption from the moral community, while downhill strains do not.

## I. Stresses and Strains

Poor behavior tends to invite blame. When someone behaves rudely, unfairly, or inconsiderately, we tend to resent them, recoil from them, or even verbally reproach them. While blame is a natural reaction to wrongdoing, we can also cancel our initial blame after learning more about why someone behaved poorly. Sometimes, we rescind blame because a valid excuse obtains. Other times, we withdraw blame because we exempt another from our moral reactivity altogether.<sup>2</sup>

*Excuses* and *exemptions* can both cancel one's initial blame. Excusing pleas request for blame to be cancelled because it is not deserved—the blamer's negative reactive attitudes are not proper or fitting. As Gary Watson described, “when a valid excuse obtains, the *internal* criteria of the negative reactive attitudes are not satisfied” (1987, 123, emphasis added).<sup>3</sup> P.F. Strawson, in his seminal “Freedom and Resentment,” provided several common excusing pleas: “‘He didn't mean to’, ‘He hadn't realized’, ‘He didn't know’ ... ‘He couldn't help it’, when this is supported by such phrases as ‘He was pushed’, ‘He had to do it’, ‘It was the only way’, ‘They left him no alternative’, etc.” (2020, 113-114). When a valid excuse obtains, blame is cancelled because the target of blame is not *worthy* of being blamed on a standard *internal* to the attitude in question.

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to XXX for their insightful discussion of these ideas.

<sup>2</sup> I am adopting an account of blame that includes the experience of Strawson's reactive emotions. For a discussion of Wallace's popular “Reactive Account” of blame, see Ch 3, 51-52, 62-66, 82-83 in *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments*. I don't view blame through Wallace's specific lens, but his account aligns with a crucial aspect of blame.

<sup>3</sup> Watson refers to excusing cases as Type-1 pleas. Type-1 pleas “[correspond] to standardly acknowledged *excusing* conditions” (1987, 123).

The quintessential thought at work is such: “*Ah—I thought he was blameworthy for X, but it turns out he had a good excuse.*”

Exempting pleas, however, are cases in which one does not blame another for acting poorly *because* one suspends reactivity in general towards the other, viewing him under what Strawson famously called an *objective attitude*. One is no longer blamed, not because he had a fair excuse for what he did, but because *he* is exempted from reactivity altogether. Under this attitude, one’s view of a wrongdoer is transformed from a natural, affectively reactive stance to a cold, objective one. One views another as an object of curiosity and understanding (understanding, not with an empathetic connotation, but rather in the way one understands or *analyzes* a machine or mechanism). When an exempting plea obtains, one does not blame a bad actor because he views him as *something* that malfunctioned. The once-blamer may remain disappointed, but not disappointed *in him*.<sup>4</sup>

Exemptions from reactivity can be either temporary or permanent. For instance, in his renowned article, “Responsibility and the Limits of Evil,” Watson primarily focused on permanent exemptions—meaning that one has exempted the malefactor without the intention of reintegration into the moral community. He discussed the case of Robert Harris at great length, arguing that Harris’ tortured upbringing invites a shift in how we view both him and his heinous behavior.

However, both Watson, Strawson, and the later literature drawing on their pivotal articles deflate or ignore the significance of *temporary* exempting cases—cases in which one exempts another from the moral community (and thus one’s natural reactive stance) *with* the intention of reintegration at a later time. Watson declines to discuss these cases at any length, while Strawson—after providing a few examples: being under a great strain, being hypnotized, and not being oneself—dismissed them quite quickly: “I shall not linger over [temporary exemptions]...we may dismiss them without considering those questions by taking that admirably suggestive phrase, ‘He wasn’t himself’, with the seriousness that—for all its being logically comic—it deserves” (2020, 115).

But I believe there is quite a bit more to temporary exemptions than first meets the eye. In this investigation, I will focus on the most interesting type of temporary exemption: acting under psychological strain.

A psychological strain (or stress) is the manifestation of a single or set of *external psychological forces* (EPF’s) impinging on one’s mental state. The phrase “external psychological forces” refers to being experientially “pushed” or “influenced” in one direction or another because of a psychological cause which one does not identify with.<sup>5</sup> For instance, I may feel pushed towards being curt or ill-tempered with a friend if I am under massive strain over a paper deadline, even

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<sup>4</sup> Exemptions are Type-2 pleas in Watson’s locution. Type-2 pleas “correspond roughly to standard *exempting* conditions. They show that the agent, temporarily or permanently, globally or locally, is appropriately exempted from the basic demand in the first place” (1987, 123).

<sup>5</sup> Following a parallel with being psychically pushed by a force other than yourself.

though I do not identify with that psychological force.<sup>6</sup> There are many EPF's actually or potentially acting on us all the time: lack of sleep, concern or anxiety over any number of things, social anxiety, low blood sugar, being on the back-end of a caffeine influx, physical exhaustion, being too hot or cold, headache or sickness, a high pitched whir of a fan that can't be ignored, etc.

Following Strawson's lead, Watson suggested that every temporary withdrawal of blame because of a psychological strain constituted an *exemption* (1987, 123).<sup>7</sup> In other words, when we fail to blame someone for acting poorly because they were under a sufficiently powerful psychological strain, we do so by *exempting* them from the reactive stance altogether, temporarily adopting an objectivity of attitude.

Instead, I will suggest that not all blame-cancelling strains constitute *exemptions* which invite an objective stance. I argue that one can be temporarily *excused* for acting poorly while under an external strain without being exempted from the reactive viewpoint. I will introduce two different types of psychological strains: *seismic strains* and *downhill strains*. While seismic strains do invite an objectivity of attitude, constituting an exemption from reactivity, downhill strains constitute an excuse which does not entail this suspension.

My argument challenges the assumption that cancelling blame in light of a psychological strain requires an *exemption* from the moral community which invites an objectivity of attitude. Taking up the objective stance towards another is a psychologically and ethically weighty project; it involves a shutting off of normal reactivity which can impair the relationship (Mason 2014 ; Wolf 1981; McGeer 2012); it degrades one's view of another from an agent to an object (Strawson 2020); and it rescinds a sort of respect towards another (Korsgaard 1992; 1996).<sup>8</sup> I am not suggesting that the objective stance is inherently or insuperably unethical, but neither is its adoption a trivial endeavor. So it matters if we must adopt this view in order to cancel blame when one acted poorly under a psychological strain.

## II. Seismic and Downhill Strains

First, I should clarify that there is an obvious way in which not all strains are exemptions from blame: some strains are insufficient to create appropriate excusing *or* exempting conditions because they are too weak. Strains must be of a sufficient magnitude to properly excuse or exempt from blame. For my discussion of seismic and downhill strains, I will be referring to strains that

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<sup>6</sup> I should emphasize that while these external forces must manifest in the psychological machinations of the actor, I still refer to them as "external" forces because they originate outside the sphere of one's immediate mental space. I do not intend to make any heavy-handed metaphysical claims here. Rather, I simply mean to draw a conceptual, experiential distinction between external forces that seem to *push* on us—forces like lack of sleep or stress over a spouse's health concerns—as opposed to internal forces that seem to *pull* us—like my natural (and endorsed) desire to work out, play golf with colleagues, and watch a good movie with my partner on a rainy day.

<sup>7</sup> I will discuss only temporary excuses or exemptions for the remainder of this paper unless otherwise noted.

<sup>8</sup> C.f. see Sommers, "The Objective Attitude."

properly merit cancelling one's blame: blame-cancelling strains as I inchoately referenced earlier. Consider the following two cases of a seismic strain (case 1) and downhill strain (case 2):

**1. *Moronic Merger*:** Ben and his wife, Ruth, are driving home after a nice dinner. When a moronic merger cuts into their lane just a few feet in front of them, Ben erupts. He gratuitously lays on the horn for what feels like minutes and bellows out the harshest insults he can muster. Ruth, shocked and repulsed by Ben's unhinged behavior, prepares to reactively blame him (by angrily asking just what the hell has gotten into him). Pausing before this, though, she is struck by the reminder that Ben can be particularly irritable behind the wheel. She realizes that he's just someone who is prone to outbursts like this, and mentally shrugs off her blame towards Ben—*well, that's just who he is. The guy came out of nowhere and Ben just reacted poorly.*<sup>9</sup>

**2. *Sickly Sufferer*:** Alexis takes care of her partner, Jordan, while he is violently sick with the flu. He remains couch-ridden for several days, throwing up into an old gardening bucket that requires frequent emptying. Alexis attentively supplies him with ginger ale, crackers, soup, and tissues. While she has remained patient and kind, she grows weary of the trips back and forth from the kitchen to the living room (which is starting to smell). During day three of the ordeal, Jordan calls out, asking for his bucket to be emptied once again, and failing to suppress the urge, Alexis pointedly asks Jordan if he *really* isn't well enough to empty his own bucket at this point. Initially feeling a sharp rise of indignation, Jordan reflects on her burdensome requirements the past few days, and completely understands why she snapped. In fact, he is amazed that it took her three days to show any frustration—she has been a heroic caretaker. Realizing that she has been worn down by the past days of work, he no longer blames her.

These cases illustrate paradigmatic seismic and downhill strains. The critical difference is that seismic strains induce action that appears as an event occurring prior to reflection or deliberation, while downhill strains induce a surrender to a force that one recognizes and wants to resist, but that is so strong that one cannot be reasonably expected to resist.<sup>10</sup> Below, I explain each strain in greater detail.

### **On Seismic Strains:**

Seismic strains, as illustrated in *Moronic Merger*, function by setting off a psychological eruption. Experientially, they operate synchronically, inciting poor behavior instantaneously. The subsequent behavior takes on a wanton character; one acts without reference to any second order volition. Understanding that a seismic strain set one off, we exempt him from blame as we objectively view his behavior as the outcome of psychologically seismic activity. Because seismic strains are exemptions from blame, the act itself remains blameworthy while the person himself is exempted from blame.

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<sup>9</sup> *Moronic Merger* was inspired by Sher's example, "Hot Reactor" (2021, 387-388).

<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to XXX for suggesting this clarifying framing.

A bout of poor behavior is like a volcanic eruption, lurking beneath the surface, waiting to be set off by an event of sufficient magnitude. Seismic strain cases occur when an external psychological force (or set of EPF's) acts like smaller seismic activity, setting off a full-scale eruption. For instance, when someone cuts abruptly into my lane, this can create an instantaneous response; I will find myself exploding in a fit of road-rage at the moronic merger.<sup>11</sup>

Subjectively, seismic strains operate synchronically—there is no consciously discernable moment between the seismic activity and the eruption, no consciously held better judgement that one acts in spite of. The poor behavior just happens automatically. Wantonly behavior follows suit; there is no conscious understanding of how one wants to behave or the type of person one wants to be, one simply finds himself blowing up. This “blowing up” can take many forms depending on what vices one is inclined towards. For instance, I am prone to anger, and when I get angry, I have a tendency to “blow up” at people. But others who are also prone to anger may express it differently—with physical violence or storming out, for example.

### **On Downhill Strains:**

Downhill strains, as seen in *Sickly Sufferer*, function by tilting one's mental terrain towards acting poorly. Experientially, these strains act diachronically, inciting poor behavior over time. Subsequent misdeeds take on an akratic lens; one acts poorly even while understanding that the action is wrong and, at a second-order level, desiring *not* to succumb.<sup>12</sup> Understanding that a downhill strain made the slope towards acting poorly too steep to resist, we suspend our blame because a valid excuse obtains: it was just too hard to resist the downhill slide. The act is seen as one that could not have been reasonably resisted and is thus unworthy of blame. Objectivity of attitude is not required.

Downhill strains are diachronic, experienced over a duration of minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, or years. These strains work by weakening one's ability to resist acting poorly over time, *wearing* or *grinding* one down. They act to tilt one's psychological slope “downhill” towards acting poorly, making it more difficult to resist the slide towards one's darker nature. One akratically acts against his better judgement (Watson, 1977, 324).

The analogy to a physical slope runs deep: imagine that you are on a large platform that is slowly rotating away from you. Knowing that there is a pit of mud below, you resist, plating your feet and shifting your weight as best you can. But as the slope becomes increasingly steeper, you lose your ability to resist the slide, and at some angle, eventually fall into the water below. The same phenomenon operates at a psychological level: EPF's wear on you over time, bending your “mental slope” downhill towards acting poorly. When the psychological slope becomes too steep,

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<sup>11</sup> There are a myriad of potential external psychological forces acting upon us; we are constantly buffeted by a twinge of hunger, an abrupt pain in the lower back, a sudden reminder of an upcoming deadline, or having to quickly react to some idiot in the next lane who thinks they have the right to merge whenever they please. These EPF's push on us frequently and rarely incite an explosive reaction. But sometimes they do.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion on wantonly behavior as opposed to akratic or weak-willed behavior, see Frankfurt (1971, 12).

you cannot resist and succumb to acting poorly in the face of a second order understanding that you should not. This is an akratic experience. Unlike seismic cases' wanton nature, wherein one simply finds oneself acting poorly, downhill cases make it more difficult to resist what one knows is wrong.

### III. Excuse or Exemption?

Are seismic cases really exemptions? And are downhill cases mere excuses? I have suggested that only seismic cases fit Watson's description of true exemptions which invite the objective attitude while downhill strains do not. When we withhold blame in seismic cases, we do so because we view the wrongdoer in objective terms; we *analyze* him in order to *understand* how his behavior came about in a way that shapes our expectations of him as part of the situation, not as an agent who has a viable excuse. The wrongdoer *malfunctions* more than *misbehaves*. But under this objective exemption, we mentally withdraw from the other, separating him from the realm of reactivity in order to understand how events transpired as they did.

The analogy to geological seismic activity may serve as an explanatory aid. When we receive reports of smaller seismic activities preceding an eruption, we view the eruption as an outcome of that prior activity. Our expectations of the volcanic situation are shaped by information about events leading up to the eruption; this shapes our expectations of the seismic situation, not our expectations of the volcano. The same is true for people; when we learn or infer that a seismic strain set someone off, we change our expectations of the situation, not our expectations of him.

Recall Ruth's explanation of Ben's behavior in Moronic Merger. She assessed Ben's behavior as part of the situation at large, coming to understand why he erupted in a way that exempted him from Ruth's reproach. But the explanation—*he's just an irritable driver; I can't expect anything differently to happen in situations like this*—explains why Ruth may withhold blame for his otherwise blameworthy behavior in a way that invites a withdrawal of Ruth's reactivity. Following Watson's suggestion, in seismic cases, we think "no wonder" in an objective manner; we analyze the other and see how things work inside him. "*Ah—so he's the type of person who can't handle this because...*" Ben becomes an unfortunate aspect of the situation in Ruth's view. Analyzing another in this way invites an objectivity of attitude which exempts the other from reactive blame—it is the adoption of the objective stance that explains why we don't blame the other. But in doing so, we degrade the other from an agent we normatively expect things of to an objective aspect of the situation we descriptively expect to act in certain ways.

Consider another case of seismic strain:

**3. *Sub-par Sleep*:** Jake, Jordan, and Barrett are roommates. One day, Jordan and Barrett are having yet another conversation about free will. When Jordan suggests that Barrett's position is incoherent, Barrett is suddenly flooded with anger and snaps at Jordan before storming out. Overhearing the conversation from the kitchen, Jake views Barrett with something like minor contempt—he really can't have a critical conversation without storming out like that? Later, Jake

overhears a conversation between Barrett and his girlfriend in which Barrett opines about his poor sleep the past night—he hadn't realized that a closed vent prevented his room from cooling down. Recalling Barrett's earlier inexplicable snapping, Jake surmises that the lack of sleep must have suddenly manifested in a shorter tolerance for disagreement than both parties were accustomed to. Jake rescinds his contempt for Barrett's behavior as he comes to understand that Barrett was set off by this seismic mental activity. He comes to understand the seismic forces at work.

This second case again illustrates that seismic strains cancel blame by exemption—by transforming one's view of *individual's* blameworthiness, not the *action's*. For when Barrett stormed out, there is no reason to believe that this action was justified. In other words, while Jake comes to no longer contemptuously blame Barrett for his poor behavior towards Jordan, this shift in attitude cannot be located in a change in view of the *action*—it must be located in a change in view of the *person*. He is transformed from an agent to an object, something viewed as *affected by* his environment rather than an agent within it. The thought is not that snapping and storming out when congenially confronted with a challenge is either justified or excused, but rather a recognition that “*oh—so Barrett isn't someone who is capable of receiving criticism if he hasn't gotten his full 8 hours.*”

Downhill strains, however, do not invite an objectivity of attitude because they constitute an excuse that obtains *internal* to the standards of reasonable cause for resentment, indignation, etc. Downhill cases are excuses, not exemptions, because they provide a good reason why the other is not worthy of blame: because it would be asking too much of them to resist the slide. Being unable to complete a task which is too difficult does not require a suspension of reactivity to cancel blame—rather, blame itself is not apt in cases where the request is too difficult. Downhill strains are not a suspension of reactivity; they are an understanding that the other has met a sufficient excuse.

We often fail to blame someone for less-than-perfect behavior, not because they literally could not have done any better, but because we believe they have *reasonably* failed. In other words, they tried hard enough to get themselves off the hook and be excused (Sher, 2021, 396). Strawson mentioned coercion as a paradigmatic excuse (2020, 113-114). Imagine that someone is coerced at credible threat of death to aid in robbing a bank. We understand that it is physically possible for the coerced to resist—he could have fought or run—but we do not blame him for failing to do so because resisting at gunpoint is unreasonably difficult (Watson, 1977, 328-329).<sup>13</sup> Or consider someone who has falsely and knowingly slandered your friend's reputation. It would be incredibly magnanimous for your friend to treat this calumnious fiend with the utmost pleasantness, but we do not blame him for failing to do so because it would be unreasonably hard to expect this of him.

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<sup>13</sup> In the cited pages, Watson discussed the resistibility of internal desires—like the desire to stay in bed or a sexual desire—but the point can be made here in an external sense as well. Following Watson, I agree that “it seems unjustifiable to hold that no desires are too strong for an agent to resist” (1977, 329).

Recall the physical analogy running through the concept of downhill strains. We would not blame the person who cannot resist a downhill slope of great enough degree, not because we suspend reactivity towards him, but because we understand that there is a steep enough slope that cannot be reasonably resisted. Willpower in downhill or akratic cases, then, takes a similar shape to that of muscle power; we only have so much of it, and the various challenges of the day can deplete our reserves to various degrees (Sher, 2021, 393-394). When we become sufficiently worn out, we are liable to mentally fail as a muscle that has been overworked will also fail. Short of having an unlimited wellspring of willpower, it seems undeniable that we all have our limits and can be reasonably excused when pushed beyond them (Watson, 1977, 329).

Consider another case of a downhill strain:

**4. *Brutish Boss*:** Clint accepted a new job at an upstart architectural firm. He now drives twice as far, battles double the traffic, and finds that his new boss is something of a thoughtless brute; he assigns far too much work and demands unreasonable turnarounds. When Clint can't keep up the pace, he is berated in front of his new coworkers. After battling the Friday afternoon traffic to get home after his first miserable week, he blows up when his wife, Lisa, gently reminds him that he hasn't finished resealing the bathroom tub as he had promised. He storms out of the house, muttering "I can't deal with this right now." Furious and indignant, Lisa happens to notice the week's report from Clint's boss—it was sticking out of his briefcase. Reading it and realizing that his boss is a cruel man, she infers that he's had a worse week than he let on, and she completely understands why he blew up. She no longer blames him, thinking to herself "jeeze, that *would* be a horrible first week."<sup>14</sup>

This case, like the second, illuminates the way in which downhill strains excuse one's actions rather than exempt the person himself. Clint's week would understandably tilt his downhill slope steeply, reasonably excusing his poor behavior. When Lisa discovered the true misery of the past five days, she realized that it wouldn't be reasonable to expect Clint to handle a nagging reminder about the tub any better than he did. In short, we cannot (and often do not) expect people to behave perfectly (or even well) after a prolonged downhill strain like this. Such a request would mirror the unreasonable nature of asking someone to carry a large boulder across the yard when they have just finished struggling with one two-thirds its size. As we naturally understand that people have physical limits, so too should we recognize mental ones. This suggestion is supported by—as well as by common sense—the psychological work on ego depletion. As Sher has nicely summarized, "just as each person's physical constitution imposes an upper limit on the amount of weight he can lift or the speed at which he can keep running over a given span of time, each person's mental constitution similarly imposes a limit on how much he can concentrate or persevere over any given" (2021, 394). Holton (2009, 132) draws a similar analogy, suggesting that while a stronger desire to win a footrace results in running faster, even the strongest desire cannot result in running 100 miles per hour. If the analogy stands—and there is not, snubbing the

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<sup>14</sup> *Brutish Boss* is a psychological analog to Sher's case of physical exhaustion: "Moving Day" (2021, 388).

boldest libertarians, an obvious reason to assume we have an *infinite* supply of willpower—a similar conclusion can be drawn for mental strains: some failures to behave well are attributable, not to lack of trying, but to being genuinely beyond one’s willpower.<sup>15</sup> Thus, downhill strains, when sufficiently strong, are excuses—they change one’s view of the action, not of the agent. The blame-cancelling thought is not ‘*he wasn’t capable of the task because he’s constituted in this way*’ but rather ‘*that task was an unreasonable thing to ask of him.*’

Before concluding, I should briefly mention that I have strived to remain agnostic as to what precisely constitutes a sufficiently strong excusing strain. For now, I can say that I align with Sher’s emphasis on a normative standard set by one’s mental (and physical) capabilities as measured by the range of counterfactuals over which one would secure success (2009, 122). This range of counterfactual success sets the standard for what can be expected of one *here and now*. For instance, if I have routinely demonstrated an ability to complete a backflip on a trampoline, I can be rightly held to that standard here and now. One’s interlocking set of traits determines the rate of counterfactual success which itself determines one’s current standard.<sup>16</sup> Sher’s standard of normative expectations aligns well with my analogy to downhill akratic strains. Like one’s physical ability to resist a downhill slide will be set by his relevant rate of success, itself set by the interlocking web of his mental and physical capabilities, so too will one’s psychological expectations be set by his relevant rate of success as defined by his capabilities.<sup>17</sup>

#### IV. Conclusions

Whereas Watson, Strawson, and the literature which follows them assume that all blame-cancelling strains to be exemptions from the reactive stance, I have suggested that this need not be the case. Instead, only seismic strains invite an objectivity of attitude as one views the other as a *disappointing turn of events*, not an agent who has *disappointed you*. Downhill strains function as classic conditions of excuse when the strain meets the magnitude required to properly constitute an excuse. In both cases, we may view a bad actor with Watson’s sense of “no wonder,” but this phrase can take a very different meaning in either case. Seismic eruptions, as Watson suggested, invite a sense of “no wonder” which distances the judge from the judged, isolating the latter in an objective view. We look upon another with the aim of analyzing how things went wrong as we would a broken down car or a malfunctioning garbage disposal. Downhill pleas, though, need not take this form. When we learn of another’s depleted willpower, we can come to excuse him without suspending reactivity, as we would under other excusing conditions: for instance, when learning that someone stepped on one’s hand inadvertently or after being pushed (Strawson, 2020, 112).

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<sup>15</sup> See Sripada (2010) for more on the conversation between responsibility, the will, and ego depletion.

<sup>16</sup> For more see Sher (2009, Ch7).

<sup>17</sup> There are obvious epistemic questions about seismic and downhill strains: how we know when someone has experienced one over the other, how we know when either has occurred, etc. For now, I must sidestep these.

I hope to have shed light on a second aspect of Watson’s inquiry as well. For both temporary and permanent exemptions, there is something of a paradox for the Strawsonian focus on another’s quality of will. We can suspend blame in excusing cases,<sup>18</sup> or reactivity at large (and therefore blame) in exempting cases, even though the wrongdoer meets Strawson’s criteria for negative reactivity: lack of good will. Because certain malefactors who acted poorly can be excused or exempted under the right conditions, yet they meet Strawson’s criteria for the negative reactive attitudes—demonstrating ill will—Watson concludes that “evidently reactive attitudes are sensitive not only to the quality of others’ wills, but depend as well upon a background of beliefs about the objects of those attitudes” (1987, 125-126).

In response to this seeming paradox, Watson makes a general suggestion: “It would seem that many of the exemption conditions involve *explanations* of why the individuals display qualities to which the reactive attitudes are otherwise sensitive. So on the face of it, the reactive attitudes are also affected by these explanations” (1987, 126).<sup>19</sup> Even while an individual demonstrates ill will, this alone may fail to sustain negative reactive attitudes (as the case of Robert Harris demonstrated).<sup>20</sup> In both seismic and downhill strain cases, I argued that our negative reactive attitudes can respond not only to the quality of one’s will, but also *how* one’s quality of will came about. In seismic cases, this explanation took the form of an objective investigation of what set off the eruption. In downhill cases, this explanation took the form of discerning how difficult external psychological forces made resisting the slide towards acting poorly. When one intentionally behaves poorly, one demonstrates ill will (or at least, lack of good will). But as Watson suggested, sometimes there seems to be more to Strawson’s story.

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<sup>18</sup> Watson makes this argument only with respect to temporary exempting please. I have argued in this paper for the inclusion of akratic or downhill strains as instances wherein one can demonstrate ill will in the moment but nonetheless be excused from blame.

<sup>19</sup> Watson goes on to argue that exempting conditions are to be understood “as indications of the constraints on intelligible moral demand or, put another way, of the constraints on moral address” (1987, 126).

<sup>20</sup> Exemptions can also occur without any respect with the quality of another’s will. But because there are clearly cases in which one does demonstrate a poor quality of will, yet reactive blame can be suspended, this supports Watson’s conclusion that blame can respond to more than simply the other’s quality of will, though it need not.

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