



## The Moral Functions of Resentment

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Resentment is a much more complex emotion than it may appear at a first glance. It may play a crucial role in determining how a victim reacts to a wrong done to him or her. As it impacts human choice and judgment, it may influence the lives of the victim and the wrongdoer alike. Because it is manifested in actions that affect others, its significance cannot be underestimated, and its nature and moral function must be understood. Although resentment is commonly attributed to a list of negative or “evil” emotions, a further analysis must be made before it is dismissed as being absolutely morally wrong. This essay will examine and juxtapose several alternative views of resentment, as presented by Nietzsche, Butler, Oakley, and Strawson in their respective works. First, it must be made clear that these philosophers have differing conceptions of the limits of what kinds of emotion can be called resentment. Their views of the moral functions of resentment diverge as well. Based on these views, resentment may be regarded as a fundamentally good, bad or neutral emotion.

Friedrich Nietzsche bases his conception of resentment (or *ressentiment*, as he calls it) on relationships between the “weak” and the “strong” in society. For Nietzsche, this emotion has definite negative connotations, as being resentful for long may poison a person’s mind (Nietzsche

1994, 23). The weak and the strong react to *ressentiment* quite differently: While the weak may brood over what they perceive as an injury to themselves for a long time, the strong are much quicker to recover. As Nietzsche writes, in the strong, "it is consumed and exhausted in an immediate reaction" (Nietzsche 1994, 23). Where the weak feel resentment, the strong often feel no resentment at all. Nietzsche also considers *ressentiment* to be central to understanding how the weak attempt to elevate themselves falsely and deceitfully above their masters. When the weak resent their enemies (e.g., the strong), they automatically ascribe the label of evil to them, making them "evil enemies." Because their enemies are "evil," the weak then label themselves as "good" (Nietzsche 1994, 24). This is how *ressentiment* clouds the weak ones' idea of morality. It is "a creative way of saying 'no' on principle to everything that is 'outside'" that directs the weak ones' attention away from accurate moral introspection (Nietzsche 1994, 21). Conversely, the strong begin with forming a "good" idea of themselves, and then proceed to call those things that deserve it "bad" (not the same as "evil"). There is little *ressentiment* in the strong ones' understanding of the world: While the categorization of something as "evil" automatically calls for hatred, the idea of "bad" merely calls for objectivity in distinguishing right from wrong. The weak, under the constant effect of *ressentiment*, have formed a system of justice based on reactionary attitudes (Nietzsche 1994, 31). This system is dedicated to supporting passive emotions (*ressentiment* among them) and opposing any signs of active emotions that involve attaining greater power (Nietzsche 1994, 52). This system, created by the weak, would clearly oppose the actions or intentions that Nietzsche would consider

virtuous. The weak have contempt not only for the strong but for the values of the strong as well (Nietzsche 1994, 167). It should be clarified, however, that according to Nietzsche, the strong normally enjoy engaging in such “virtuous” activities as murder, rape, arson, and torture (Nietzsche 1994, 25).

Nietzsche proceeds to compare the relationship between the weak and the strong to that of sheep and birds of prey, respectively. This metaphor serves to emphasize that each human being has a nature that cannot be altered. Some are weak by nature, while others are strong and destined to dominate. If birds of prey would feed on the sheep, the sheep might consider this to be unfair or evil (Nietzsche 1994, 28). If a sheep would be killed by a natural disaster, the surviving sheep would not be resentful, as they would understand that it could not be helped. The difference between natural events and predators is that the latter actually choose to kill, or so the sheep believe. In other words, the weak can only feel *ressentiment* towards their masters if they prove that these are moral agents with moral responsibilities. On the other hand, if it is assumed that it is in the nature of the strong to be strong, they cannot be blamed (or praised for that matter) for their actions. Therefore, the only way for the weak to ensure that the strong bear moral responsibility is to promote the idea of free will. Nietzsche emphasizes that the weak use this idea to blame the strong for choosing to be strong and “evil” when they could be weak and “good” (Nietzsche 1994, 29). Hence justice and free will are both ideas created by the weak to make continuous *ressentiment* for the strong possible. It is nothing but a veil of lies surrounding the weak, so that they may never see that they are weak and inferior.

Through free will and blame, the weak also attempt to pollute the minds of the strong. Since (according to the weak) the strong are morally responsible for their actions, the strong should feel guilty for taking advantage of the weak. In fact, Nietzsche believes that the weak can, by their mere existence, produce guilt in the minds of their masters. When the strong look down at the weak, they see that strength brings happiness, while weakness brings infinite misery. They might then think to themselves, "It's a disgrace to be happy. *There is too much misery!*" (Nietzsche 1994, 97). Due to the idea of free will and the imbalance of happiness, the strong are constantly made to question the moral value of their lives. At the same time, the weak feel better and more confident in their moral worth due to *ressentiment*. Therein lies the logical paradox of *ressentiment*: The weak find it fulfilling and satisfying, while it poisons their minds and prevents them from becoming stronger. Nietzsche calls it "a dissidence which wills itself to be dissident" leading to the satisfaction of "failure, decay, pain, misfortune, ugliness, voluntary deprivation, destruction of selfhood, self-flagellation and self-sacrifice" (Nietzsche 1994, 91). At its root, *ressentiment* is a natural instinct to anaesthetize pain through emotion. When the weak are wronged, a feeling of *ressentiment* reduces their feeling of pain and loss by redirecting their attention towards the wrongdoer (Nietzsche 1994, 99).

Joseph Butler approaches the question of the moral value of resentment from a very different angle. While for Friedrich Nietzsche God is dead, for Butler he is still very much alive. Butler believes that it is God who has implanted human beings with all of their emotions. As God is necessarily a good being and is incapable of morally bad action, Butler faces the dilemma of explaining

the positive moral significance of seemingly negative emotions (Butler 1804, 137). It must therefore be made clear why God would implant the feeling of resentment into human beings. Butler begins by distinguishing between two kinds of resentment: hasty and sudden as opposed to settled and deliberate. Hasty anger is a quick reaction to an unfavorable situation, and Butler sees it as a “self-defense” mechanism against a direct assault from another person (Butler 1804, 140). In a quick bout of anger, the victim does not consider the true moral merit of the offender. This lack of objectivity of what Butler calls “hasty resentment” seems only to serve as a very rough and indiscriminate mechanism for punishment of wrongs. Settled anger serves a similar purpose but involves a more calculated reaction to a wrong committed. Butler’s interpretation of resentment seems to suggest that different kinds of anger are initiated by different kinds of offence. While getting punched in the face might instigate a bout of hasty anger in a peasant, that same peasant might feel settled resentment for their vassal who systematically robs them of their harvests. It seems then that more calculated crimes call for more calculated feelings of resentment. This dichotomy of resentment may be paralleled with Nietzsche’s view of resentment in the strong and the weak. As described above, Nietzsche believes that settled anger is common among the weak, while hasty anger is more common among their masters. Nietzsche would favor Butler’s idea of “hasty anger” over “settled anger” because the latter would poison a person’s mind over time. Hasty anger would provide for a quick release of emotion, settling the issue of the injury instantly.

For Butler, the moral purpose of resentment is to deal properly with injury and wickedness. In this capacity, it

may be used as “righteous rage” to assert good moral principles and reduce the likeliness of a wrong being done by another. In order to explain further the practical benefits of resentment, Butler argues that resentment against wrong would ensure that justice is upheld (Butler 1804, 140). When a criminal contemplates committing a crime, he or she has to take into account the possible resentment that the victim would feel towards him or her. A fear of retaliation may prevent the criminal from committing a crime in the first place (Butler 1804, 148). In the same way that fear of a legally sanctioned punishment may discourage violations of the law, a fear of morally established resentment may discourage one from violating the moral code of conduct. Here, the moral function of resentment may be interpreted based on one’s moral understanding of justice. Butler presumes that a system of justice that prevents injury is morally sound, and, therefore, resentment is a morally good emotion by virtue of the fact that it serves to preserve justice. Nietzsche, on the other hand, believes that justice (insofar as it is understood by Butler) is a morally unsound system because injuries to others are a part of the natural order of things, and should not, therefore, be prevented. Because the weak ones’ idea of justice is morally wrong for Nietzsche, resentment is morally wrong for him as well.

Butler concludes his sermon on resentment by stating that resentment may not only assist justice, but balance out pity (Butler 1804, 146). If pity and compassion would be the only emotions guiding people in passing judgments, all wrongdoers would be immediately pardoned without a question. As a result, resentment serves to control the manifestation of other human vices. There are many similarities between Butler’s and Nietzsche’s accounts of

resentment. Both philosophers distinguish between “hasty” and “settled” resentment and consider the role of resentment in enforcing justice; however, Nietzsche’s system of moral values is almost directly opposed to that of Butler’s. Where Butler sees virtue, Nietzsche sees vice, and vice versa. This juxtaposition serves well to illustrate that even with identical arguments, the moral “background” of different philosophers may influence how they judge the moral value and function of an emotion.

In his book entitled *Morality and the Emotions*, Justin Oakley makes a clear distinction between rational and moral justification. According to Oakley, human emotions might be analyzed from either a moral or a rational viewpoint, and the fact that an emotion is rationally sound does not necessarily imply that it is also morally sound (Oakley 1992, 41). This approach to the analysis of emotion may call for a reevaluation of the arguments presented by Nietzsche and Butler. For Oakley, resentment belongs to a group of emotions that are morally significant. Oakley attributes this significance to an emotion based on the emotion’s ability to instigate morally significant action (Oakley 1992, 57). As resentment may cause a moral agent to have his or her revenge through reciprocal injury, it bears moral significance as an emotion. As was discussed earlier, while Nietzsche seems to see resentment as a profoundly bad emotion, Butler instead concentrates on the good that it may bring. Justin Oakley considers both sides of resentment in his book: According to him, its moral value is dependent on the circumstances. Oakley states that resentment may be morally justified at times; for example, when we resent our friends for participating in morally wrong acts (Oakley 1992, 63). In these cases, just

as Butler suggested, resentment may help to improve another individual by warning him or her against doing wrong. On the other hand, mere rational (and utilitarian) justifications for resentment do not equate to moral worth. Oakley believes that under certain circumstances, rationally justified resentment may deter love and friendship (Oakley 1992, 63). An opportunity to blame someone is not reason enough to resent them (Oakley 1992, 169). As Butler considers resentment to be a "blunt" tool of justice, he would not consider resentment unsound as long as there were rational reasons for it. Unlike Butler, Oakley thus places a greater responsibility on a moral agent to be "selectively resentful."

Oakley further argues that resentment is morally wrong when it undermines our sense of self-worth. This happens when a moral agent resents someone for being more successful (Oakley 1992, 68). This argument may be paralleled with Nietzsche's *ressentiment*, because in this meaning it is almost synonymous with envy. In this capacity, resentment will work to destroy relationships between people (Oakley 1992, 79). In order to justify his dichotomy of moral and rational worth, Oakley explains why human beings are responsible for their emotions, and how they are manifested. Resentment, and many other emotions, cannot be summoned at will. When a person attempts to recollect a painful experience of being injured by another, he or she will still not necessarily feel resentment towards the wrongdoer. Instead, emotions "act on us," as if of their own accord (Oakley 1992, 126). When one is punched in the face, one at times cannot help but feel resentful. However, being punched in the face does not guarantee that a certain emotion will be summoned. This argument may be explained by the assumption that



various emotions compete for dominance over a human being at the same time. For example, an injury that may cause resentment may also cause fear, pain, or distress. These competing emotions might overtake a person's mind, preventing the individual from being resentful at that moment. Either way, according to Oakley, when a person is influenced by emotions, he or she is in a "state of passivity" (Oakley 1992, 126). This statement inevitably leads to a question of free will: If a person loses control of his or her actions whenever he or she is under the influence of emotions, how can the person still be regarded as a moral agent? Oakley responds to this dilemma by arguing that this effect of emotions does not diminish the "blameworthiness" of human actions (Oakley 1992, 95). Although people cannot control an emergence of an emotion, they may always train themselves to be more compassionate and peaceful. This reduces the strength of a negative emotion when it appears and may prevent it from appearing in some situations. Oakley concludes that it is "creditworthy" to try to reduce feelings of resentment by being more compassionate in general (Oakley 1992, 165). Oakley's argument seems to be more objective than Nietzsche's and Butler's, as it takes into account the negative and the positive aspects of resentment. Just like Nietzsche, Oakley believes that the existence of free will plays an important role in explaining resentment. Both philosophers see free will as a reason to consider resentment a "blameworthy" emotion. However, Nietzsche sees this concept of free will as an illusion put forth by the weak to elicit guilt in their masters, while, for Oakley, free will is quite real, and may be exercised by controlling one's emotions.

In order to better understand the connection between free will and resentment, it would be useful to examine Peter Frederick Strawson's essay entitled "Freedom and Resentment." In this essay, Strawson contemplates the effect of determinism on moral responsibility and resentment. Just like Oakley, Strawson emphasizes the ability of a moral agent to stand outside of the effects of his or her emotions and take a more objective, impartial look at an injury done to him or her (Strawson 1974, 9). He also covers several factors that might attribute resentment to the realm of causation. Strawson distinguishes between two ways to "modify" resentment. The first way is to justify the wrongdoer's action by presuming that it was caused by unrelated events. Statements such as "he had a bad day" or "he didn't mean it" fall into this category (Strawson 1974, 7). According to Strawson, statements such as these deprive actions of moral significance but leave the moral agents intact. On the other hand, justifications like "he wasn't himself" or "he is outright crazy" target the moral agent specifically. Statements such as these imply that the agent is morally undeveloped and is, therefore, incapable of making moral actions that can be morally evaluated (Strawson 1974, 8). Just like Butler, Strawson sees a connection between the injury and the resentment that it generates. Strawson believes that the degree of resentment depends on the degree of the injury caused, so that an injury of a greater (perceived) significance will generate a greater feeling of resentment (Strawson 1974, 21).

The central question of Strawson's paper is whether the moral significance of resentment may be preserved in determinism. Throughout the essay, Strawson considers possible arguments that may be put forth by an "optimist"

and a “pessimist” of determinism. Strawson argues that an optimist would miss the “human factor” in explaining crime, i.e., he would neglect the emotions and reactions that the victim and the wrongdoer would have, and how these would manifest themselves in actions. However, Strawson concludes that the optimist’s position is in the end the sounder one (Strawson 1974, 25). Resentment may have moral significance in determinism insofar as it may correct the wrongdoers and prevent further wrong from being done. However, Strawson states that the optimist could only prevail in this argument if he or she was to accept the human role in injury, as described above.

This essay has examined several key aspects of the moral significance of resentment. The connections between resentment and objectivity, justice, determinism and free will may all play a role in determining whether and when resentment is a morally bad or good emotion. It is very important to recognize that this assessment further depends on the system of moral values used: One philosopher’s vice is another’s virtue. Both Nietzsche and Butler have had to defend general theories of the world in their analyses of resentment. Butler had to agree with Christianity in all of his arguments, and, as a result, concentrated on the positive aspects of resentment (as God would not give us a morally bad emotion). Nietzsche, on the other hand, checked his arguments against his theory of the weak and the strong. Perhaps because of this, Nietzsche’s definition of resentment was limited to envy.

Despite their differences, all of the philosophers mentioned above would agree that resentment is a morally significant emotion that may have an important impact on moral assessment in the aftermath of a crime. Furthermore, these scholars all agree that resentment cannot be

objective. At its best, the feeling of resentment may play the role of “righteous rage” and aid us in prosecuting criminals and punishing wrongdoers. At its worst, resentment may play the role of envy or explosive anger and cause us to commit crimes against others. As Oakley argued, it is not always possible to prevent the feeling of resentment from emerging in one’s mind; however, we can learn to control it, either by suppressing or cultivating it. Whether we want to satisfy our will to power or uphold justice in the world, resentment is a powerful tool that can be used to achieve our ends as moral agents, as long as we are careful about when and how we use it.

#### REFERENCES

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