

**Accountability and Then Some:  
Comments on Stephen Darwall’s “Moral Obligation and Accountability”**

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In the spirit both of my present regional home and the second-personal theme of Stephen’s paper, I’d like to thank y’all for having me and thank Stephen for a well-crafted and thought-provoking paper.

Stephen Darwall contends that one cannot account for morality’s distinctive normativity—i.e., the apparent overriding authority of moral reasons—unless one acknowledges that morality is essentially second-personal in nature. That is, the distinctiveness of a moral obligation’s normativity is grounded in the way it expresses a demand that moral agents make of one another and to which they can justifiably hold one another accountable. Darwall cites two alternatives to this view, call them the “first-person” and “no-person” accounts. According to the first-person view, morality’s distinctive normativity is grounded in self-imposed demands, perhaps, for example, the demands of one’s own rational nature. On the no-person view, morality’s normativity is generated by the ability to view oneself as one amongst equals from an imagined impartial third-person perspective beyond that of the moral community itself, perhaps, for example, that of an ideal observer who wishes to maximize the overall happiness of those in the moral community.

In the present paper, Darwall seeks to provide a foundation for showing—on another day—that morality’s normativity is supremely authoritative. The foundation to be established today consists primarily in establishing that moral obligation is second-personal in nature and, secondarily as a consequence, that the two competing accounts just mentioned must be incorrect insofar as they fail to capture this aspect of morality.

Darwall takes as his point of departure P.F. Strawson’s influential account of the reactive attitudes. These are attitudes we have toward one another that seem to presuppose demands that we regard ourselves as justified in making of one another in virtue of either simply our co-membership in the moral community at large, or perhaps further, of our more personal relationship with another member of that community. The second-personal nature of holding responsible as a form of address is most clearly illustrated in the attitude of resentment, for what is clearly expressed when I experience it is the presumption that *you* owe me something, are in a position to have recognized it and guided your behavior accordingly, but nevertheless have failed to honor this demand. Indignation is an example of an attitude that has been abstracted from this central second-personal attitude, and guilt is an inward-directed reactive attitude prompted by the recognition that one has failed to observe a legitimate demand others have made of oneself.<sup>1</sup> Darwall sums the view up nicely in a slogan: “the moral sense of ‘responsible for’ is conceptually tied to ‘responsible to’”(3).

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<sup>1</sup> I’m not sure that Strawson himself thinks that the kind of justification that seems implied in the demands expressed in the reactive attitudes is, in fact, rationally justified. Sometimes, the authority of these demands seem for him to be grounded in nothing more than that we are psychologically so constituted as to expect a certain degree of good will from one another.

The next step in Darwall's argument is to map the conceptual connection between moral accountability and moral obligation via an account of wrongdoing. To charge someone with wrongdoing on this view just is to imply that she had good and sufficient reason to behave otherwise along with the capacity to recognize and guide her behavior accordingly so that absent an exculpating excuse, *it is appropriate to hold her accountable*. Working backward from this account of wrongdoing suggests that we think of a moral obligation—that which is violated in wrongdoing—as a standard of behavior that members of the moral community have the authority to demand compliance with through the expression of the reactive attitudes and their associated practices (9-10).

In a nice illustration of the explanatory power of the preceding analysis, Darwall shows how its presuppositions underlie the objection to act utilitarianism that its conception of obligation can't be correct in virtue of being too demanding. The objection would seem to have no purchase at all unless it is plausible to think that moral obligations express that for which we have the authority to hold one another responsible (11-12).<sup>2</sup> Darwall also claims that his analysis illuminates the debate about whether moral reasons are supremely authoritative, for as he points out, even those like Bernard Williams who are skeptical that moral reasons are supremely authoritative agree that this is implied in our blaming practices (12-13). What could explain this presumed authority of moral reasons? Again, according to Darwall, it is the presumption that if we do not respond to such reasons, the other members of the moral community may justifiably hold us accountable.

Darwall acknowledges that this general view of *morality as accountability* can be accommodated within more than one normative framework. However, he argues that this is not so with consequentialist theories of moral obligation. The objection here mirrors one offered by Strawson of consequentialist accounts of responsibility. In both cases, the objection charges that consequentialism is unable to properly reflect the genuinely intersubjective nature of our moral experience. In this case, the problem is that consequentialism seems committed to the no-person view of morality's normativity—the view that we recognize the normative priority of moral reasons by inhabiting the impartial perspective of one completely outside the moral community. But if morality is essentially second-personal in the manner previously argued, then this is the wrong sort of explanation of the distinctive normativity of moral reasons, for it ignores the fact that morality has its distinctive claim on us because of the authority other members of the moral community have to hold us accountable to its demands (15).

Having sketched what I take to be the main argument of Darwall's paper, I admit to being in agreement with quite a bit of it. However, what I want to do in my few remaining minutes is to raise a question about the scope of what has been established—i.e., whether its scope may be restricted in a significant way. I think one could come at the issue of this restriction in scope from either of two directions—from consideration of the nature of moral obligation or from consideration of the nature of responsibility. Simply given my own interests, I'll choose the latter.

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<sup>2</sup> It's interesting to note here that Peter Singer seems to accept this conceptual point when in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" he argues that one of the implications of his argument is that the prevailing distinction between what one is obligated to do vs. what is charitable to do cannot be sustained.

During his discussion of responsibility, Darwall notes that there are, of course, multiple uses of the word, “responsible,” and mentions, for example, that sometimes our use of the word is motivated simply by an interest in causal attribution. In order to focus attention on the relevant usage, he tells us he will often prefer the term, “accountable.” I think this decision may be more important than it first appears, for I think there is another moral sense of “responsible” that may be relevant to the present topic as well. As a happy coincidence given our occasion for meeting, this is a sense of moral responsibility that Gary Watson highlights in “Two Faces of Responsibility.” There, Watson contrasts responsibility as accountability with what he calls “*aretaic*” responsibility (*Agency and Answerability*, pp. 263-6). When we attribute responsibility in this sense we are not merely assigning the agent a causal role in bringing about what is then to be evaluated from the perspective of accountability, for assigning responsibility in this sense involves an ethical appraisal of the agent in addition to the assessment that the object of appraisal belongs to the agent in the appropriate sense. The difference between this form of responsibility and responsibility as accountability is that the standard of appraisal is not the sort that spells out demands that we justifiably make of one another as co-members of the moral community. Thus, Watson says that while we do regard one another as being responsible for the target of evaluation in this form of responsibility we do not so much hold *one another* responsible for it since it is not the sort of thing for which they are accountable *to us* (266). For example, consider how one might regard another as responsible for a lack of integrity, understood as the virtue of living consistently in relation to one’s values. Though we, as co-members of the moral community, may have an interest in how the agent behaves in relation to us, it’s not obvious why we should care whether that behavior lines up internally with the agent’s most-prized values. And, as Watson notes, this sort of thought often seems to lie behind a reluctance to express appraisals of this sort, it being not uncommon to think to oneself or say to others, “that’s nobody’s business but his own (266).”

Now, though Watson doesn’t say this, I would go further and suggest that with these *aretaic* responsibility appraisals, go a distinctive set of reactive attitudes, attitudes that Darwall seems reluctant to call reactive, for example, disdain and shame. If we regard another as responsible for his lack of integrity, then it seems that he is an apt candidate for disdain on our part and shame on his own. Here, it’s important to remind ourselves that there is a difference between the appropriateness of the experience of the reactive attitudes and the appropriateness of expressing them and perhaps pursuing further sanctions. It very well may be the case that I should keep my disdain to myself, especially if I stand in no close personal relation to the individual in question, but this does not mean that it would be inappropriate for me to experience disdain. Moreover, it seems plausible to me to regard these as reactive attitudes in the Strawsonian--if perhaps extended--sense because they are attitudes that are appropriately reserved for co-members of the moral community. Consider the apparent inappropriateness (though humorousness) of my responding to my dog’s fear in the face of a cat with “Have you no shame?!” So, note here that I don’t share Darwall’s characterization of disdain and shame as involving an “objective” view of the target (5).<sup>3</sup> What sets these reactive attitudes apart from those central to Strawson’s discussion is not that they fail to be forms of moral address but again the fact that they seem to be responses to an ethical standard that is independent of our demanding a minimal degree of good will from one another.

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<sup>3</sup> And why I don’t think one should dismiss them as non-reactive simply because they are not typically expressing second-person-based demands (Darwall, *fn*. 7)

So what might be the import of all this? Well, if I am correct and we follow Darwall's strategy of discerning something important about the nature of moral obligation from a close examination of moral responsibility, then it looks like in addition to those grounds of moral obligation that he has highlighted for us, there may be other grounds as well—perhaps even grounds with overriding authority—that are not second-personal in nature. At least at first glance, the grounds for an obligation to maintain one's integrity seems first-person, and I myself find it plausible to think that we do sometimes—not all the time--have an obligation to try to maximize happiness or minimize harm. If so, then it looks like there sometimes would also be grounds that purport to derive their normativity from the no-person perspective as well. That is, what Darwall's objection to consequentialism establishes, if correct, is simply that it can't account for a certain class of moral obligations that we have, not that it fails as a basis for any moral obligations at all.

I frankly admit to being puzzled about how first-person and no-person grounds for moral obligation would generate supreme normative authority, but it seems clear to me that such ethical appraisals sometimes do purport, like their second-person counterparts, to possess such authority. On the other hand, I suppose I should also say that it wasn't quite clear to me on Darwall's own account how the appearance of being provided a *decisive* reason to act or not act is explained by the fact that I might regard it as legitimate for others to hold me accountable for what I do. To cite the legal parallel, I might regard it as entirely appropriate for the state to hold me accountable for what I am about to do, yet this *by itself* doesn't seem to create the appearance, let alone reality, of a decisive reason to refrain from it.

Now, finally, I'm not sure whether pointing out that there might be grounds of morality's purported overriding normativity that are not second-personal is a criticism of Darwall's argument or simply a matter of highlighting a narrowness in his focus of which perhaps he himself is fully aware. For, of course, he himself acknowledges that one could interpret "morality" in a broader sense to include ideals and goals not captured in the sense of the term as he is using it (10). But if this is correct, and those additional considerations also purport to possess overriding authority, then it's worth noting that the normative landscape may be much messier than it first appears.

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