

Comment on Stephen Darwall's The Second Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect and Accountability

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An adequate moral philosophy must describe and explain the sense in which morality imposes necessary requirements on us and it must do so in a way which unifies a wide range of other features of morality including, to name just two examples, the fact that familiar conditions excuse agents from responsibility and the fact that emotion plays a central role in moral experience. An old strategy for meeting this demand is to derive moral requirements from the nature or essence of something that is not, itself, optional for persons and the nature of which explains the diverse additional features of moral experience. Those who adopt this strategy differ from one another in their choice of that special non-optional thing the essence of which is to do the needed work in the theory. God's will, human nature, the end or telos of a human being, pleasure and pain, the human will, and practical reason have all been, at various times, thought to be that unavoidable part of the human condition the essence of which supplies and explains the sense in which morality makes demands. In his wonderful recent book, Stephen Darwall pursues this old strategy not by appeal to any of these things, but by appeal, instead, to a particular form of social human interaction, what he calls "the second personal address of second personal reasons". As I understand it, for X and Y to engage in an act of second personal address of a second personal reason, there must be relations of authority and accountability between X and Y such that X has the power to create a reason for Y to act merely by expressing to Y that he has a reason to act. If X can legitimately command Y to A, for instance, then merely by telling Y that he has a reason to A, that he is commanded to A by X, it comes to be the case that Y has

a reason to A. Darwall's idea is that it is from the nature of interactions of this familiar kind that the set of requirements and preconditions that comprise morality can be derived. Moral phenomena are the products not of facts about individual human beings, or facts about our creator, but of facts about our sociality.

This is a very ambitious work and no brief discussion can do justice to its many layers. It is a book that is worthy of study and rewards it. I'm going to focus here on one of the important claims that Darwall makes in the book: the claim that an agent possesses the kind of freedom that is necessary for moral responsibility just in case she possesses the capacities necessary to be the addressee of a successful act of second-personal address of a second-personal reason, what Darwall calls "second personal competence". As will emerge, I have some doubts about this; it's in the close neighborhood of the truth, I think, but it is not the truth itself. There is substantial overlap between the class of second-personally competent agents and the class with freedom of will, but second personal competence is not sufficient for freedom of will.¹ As we'll see, what I see as an error on Darwall's part here is connected to what I see as an error in his interpretation of Thomas Reid's response to Hume's view of promising. The view Darwall attributes to Reid is, similarly, in the neighborhood of Reid's view, but not at quite the same address.

We find Darwall making the claim that concerns me here in passages such as the following:

Second personal competence...is what autonomy of the will must be if we are accountable to one another simply as rational agents who are apt for second-personal address. (p. 276)

Darwall's view implies that those interested in filling in the blank in "S has freedom of will with respect to A iff _____" might go about it by first filling in the blank in "S has the capacities necessary to be the addressee of a successful act of second personal address of a second personal reason to A iff _____". If Darwall is right, the two blanks are to be filled in the same way. So, if Darwall is right, there is a road to the necessary and sufficient conditions of freedom that has been, as far as I know, untravelled, a road that begins

¹ I also don't think it's necessary, but lack of space prevents me from making the full argument for that claim here. Basically, the problem is that psychopaths, and other agents who are disabled in a way which undermines their participation in acts of second personal address of second personal reasons seem to be autonomous. The psychopath's problem, in fact, seems to be that he's *too* autonomous; he fails to recognize the claims that others make on him and so is ruled only by himself and not at all by others. For a brief discussion of psychopathy in Darwall, see pp. 89-90.

with the question, “What capacities does an agent need in order to be second personally competent?”

Is second personal competence sufficient for freedom of will? To see why it is not, consider cases in which the following two conditions are met: (1) X is the addressor and Y the addressee of a successful act of second personal address of a second personal reason to A, (2) Even taking into consideration the reason that X has given Y to A, Y has greater reason not to A. For instance, people sometimes stand in relations of authority and accountability such that the fact that one requests that the other do something gives that other a reason to do it. But the reason given in such a case need not be sufficient. If my wife requests that I deliver a letter for her, I have a reason to do it. But there might be other things that I need to do that are more pressing and incompatible with doing as she asks. Now it is true that there are a variety of capacities I need in order for her to successfully generate a reason for me to deliver the letter by requesting that I do: I need to be capable of appreciating that the authority and accountability relations in which we stand confer on her a power to create reasons through certain acts of address; I need to be capable of appreciating that the reasons generated by such acts are reasons that provide grounds for action independently of any further outcomes that might or might not be obtained through my acting as she directs; and so on. These are the capacities that add up to second personal competence. But since I do not have sufficient reason to do as she asks, even taking into consideration the reason she gives me to do so, why should I need any *volitional* powers with respect to the act she requests that I perform in order to be second personally competent? Freedom of will might or might not require the capacity to act contrary to the dictates of Reason. But a narrower ability, what we might call “cognitive and volitional appreciation of what Reason dictates”, can at most require the capacity to act *as it dictates*; it cannot require the capacity to act contrary to it. But it is hard to see any reason why the success of an act of second personal address of a second personal reason requires some set of volitional capacities over and above the appreciation of what Reason dictates. Even if it requires that I be *motivated* to do as she requests, it does not require that I actually have the capacity to choose in that way. When I say to my wife, in response to her request, “I have to teach this morning”, I am indicating that I fully appreciate that she has given me a reason to go to the post office, but that I have other stronger reasons not to. But I have not implied either that I am capable of choosing to go or that I am not so capable. My reply will be adequate even if, unbeknownst to her, I have a paralyzing phobia of postal workers and wouldn’t have been able to choose to go even if I had nothing else that I had to do. Since Reason doesn’t require me to go, the fact that I lack the freedom of will

to do so, in this elaborated version of the example, is no obstacle to my second personal competence. Second personal competence, then, is not sufficient for freedom of will.

Here's a speculation: Darwall's quite understandable interest in the moral case, in which the reasons addressed are typically sufficient or even overriding, and in which we find at least substantial overlap between the capacities required for accountability and the capacities required for address, has led him to equate second personal competence with freedom of will. But once we recognize the very wide range of acts of address that fall into the category of second personal address of second personal reasons, we start to see ways in which second personal competence and autonomy come apart.

As I see it, Darwall's focus on the moral case bleeds into his interpretation of Reid's response to Hume's view of promising, as I explain. Hume formulates a powerful puzzle about promising: it is far from clear how the acts of a single individual, the use of the words "I promise" together with accompanying mental acts like a resolution to be obligated or an intention to act as promised, could all by themselves generate an obligation. It just seems incredible that we could change the moral facts simply by fiat. It is explicit in Reid's critique that he takes the puzzle to be dissolved once we realize that there are what Reid calls "social acts". He thinks there's nothing puzzling about the idea of generating an obligation through the performance of certain kinds of social act, and he takes promising to be the best example. There is a great deal to unpack here—why, to take the most obvious point, should the possibility of social acts help to dissolve the puzzle?—and I can't make any progress on that task here.² The point that I'm concerned to make, rather, concerns the way Darwall characterizes the nature of Reid's response to Hume. Here's Darwall:

Reid stresses throughout the necessity of a pre-conventional, second-personal form of reciprocal obligation that individuals must already implicitly recognize in order for them to come to have genuine conventional obligations at all. For this point, it doesn't much matter whether or not we reserve the words 'promise' and 'contract' for undertakings that require specific conventional contexts. If we do, then the point will still remain that we could not come to have the conventionally established obligations of promise and contract unless we were capable of pre-conventional second-personal obligations that make conventional obligations generally possible in the first place. (p. 195)

² For a start, see Gideon Yaffe, "Promises, Social Acts, and Reid's First Argument for Moral Liberty" in *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 45, no. 2 (2007) 267–89.

According to Darwall, then, Reid's critique of Hume could go forward even while granting to Hume that promises generate obligations only when social conventions are in place. As Darwall sees it, the philosophical import of Reid's critique does not depend on anything about promising as distinguished from other social acts. What matters is just that Hume overlooks the possibility of social acts generally, not that he overlooks that promises are a kind of social act with some additional special features of their own. By contrast, it seems to me that Reid's critique of Hume draws on both the idea of a social act and on the features of promising that distinguishes it from other social acts. To see this, first consider Reid's definition of a social act given in (among other places) the following passage:

Some operations of our minds, from their very nature, are *social*, others are *solitary*. By the first, I understand such operations as necessarily suppose an intercourse with some other intelligent being. A man may understand and will; he may apprehend, and judge, and reason, though he should know of no intelligent being in the universe besides himself. But, when he asks information, or receives it; when he bears testimony, or receives the testimony of another; when he asks a favour, or accepts one; when he gives a command to his servant, or receives one from a superior: when he plights his faith in a promise or contract; these are acts of social intercourse between intelligent beings, and can have no place in solitude. They suppose understanding and will; but they suppose something more, which is neither understanding nor will; that is, society with other intelligent beings. They may be called intellectual, because they can only be in intellectual beings: But they are neither simple apprehension, nor judgment, nor reasoning, nor are they any combination of these operations.³

The idea seems to be that in the social acts, in contrast to the solitary, the performance of the act by one party depends upon another party's exercising his intelligence in a particular way; each social act requires some kind of uptake by another that itself involves an exercise of intelligence. To request a favor, for instance, is not something that a single individual can do; even to request it requires acknowledgement by the person to whom the request is made. Darwall's acts of second personal address of a second personal reason comprise a proper subset of Reid's social acts. They are all of them instances of social acts since their performance depends on a quite complicated exercise of intelligence on the part of the addressee: the addressee must, among other things, recognize that there are relations of authority and accountability between himself and the addressor such that the addressor can generate a reason

³ Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Brookes, D. (ed.), Pennsylvania State University Press: University Park, 2002, p. 68.

for the addressee to act through an act of address. But they depend on more than this, for they also depend for their success on the presence of authority and accountability relations between addressor and addressee that confer on the addressor the legitimate power to generate a reason through the act of address for the addressee to act. As a result, they comprise merely a *proper* subset of the social acts since there are social acts that do not require the presence of such relations of authority and accountability. Take, for instance, the case of a request stated as “Please pass the salt.” This is still a *request* even if the addressor is a child and the addressee an adult and even if children are not to speak until spoken to. The child in this case has made a request—although he wouldn’t have done so had there not been uptake by the adult, which is why this is a social act—but, if children really are not to speak until spoken to, he has not thereby generated any kind of reason for the adult to pass the salt. Not all social acts are reason-generating in the sense that matters to Darwall.

It follows that Reid could not respond to Hume by noting merely that conventions require prior pre-conventional social acts. There would still be the possibility that the pre-conventional social acts failed to generate any reasons for anybody to do anything until the conventions were put in place through them. Rather, Reid’s point is that promises, in particular, don’t require merely the exercise of intelligence on the part of the promisee; they require a *particular kind* of exercise of intelligence: namely an exercise of the promisee’s moral sense. For there to be a promise on the part of the promisor, the promisee must recognize that the promisor is obligated to act as promised; such recognition is an exercise of the promisee’s capacity to “perceive” moral obligations, or his moral sense. This distinguishes promises from many other kinds of social acts, like requests, and so serves, Reid thinks, to respond to Hume’s puzzle. Another way to put it: there is no comparable puzzle about requests, and this fact itself needs to be accommodated by a solution to the puzzle that Hume raises about promises.

How different, in the end, is this view from the one that Darwall ascribes to Reid? Not very, but different enough to matter to Reid. Among other things, as I’ve argued elsewhere, Reid thinks that he can establish that people have freedom of will, as he understands it, from the premise that we make and receive promises *in the absence of social conventions*. He doesn’t think that he can establish this from, say, the fact that people make and receive requests in the absence of social conventions. It requires a good deal of explanation that can’t be provided here to explain how this inference is supposed to go, but the point for our purposes is only that it is an inference Reid wishes to make and which wouldn’t be available to him if he were to hold the view Darwall

attributes to him. To connect the last few paragraphs to those that preceded it, we might put the point this way: Reid doesn't think that being competent to play one's part in a social act generally is sufficient for freedom of will; there are social acts that one can play one's part in while lacking it. Rather Reid thinks that competence *to be a promisee, in particular*, includes freedom of will. Reid then doesn't overstate the primacy of the moral case in his notion of a social act, and so doesn't equate competence to play one's part in one with freedom of will.

For some readers I suspect that the last few paragraphs' discussion of Reid will seem like a digression from the main point of this remark. And, in a sense, it is: arguing that Darwall is mistaken to equate second personal competence and freedom of will does not require any Reid interpretation. But Darwall (like me) cares deeply about the views of historical figures, and with good reason. Darwall's exegetical interests are driven by his philosophical interests; he finds in the works of historical figures ways of stating claims, and ways of arguing for them, that help him to explain his own claims and arguments. I am a great admirer of this kind of history of philosophy, but in it lies the danger of taking affinity for identity, of ascribing a view to a figure that is, rather, the view of someone who thinks similarly to, but also differently from, the way that figure actually thinks. There is a hint of this in Darwall's interpretation of Reid's critique of Hume. But it doesn't prevent Darwall's book from being a contribution of the first importance both to moral philosophy and to the study of the history of thought about sociality and its relevance to morality.