

# “MORALITY FROM THE SECOND-PERSON STANDPOINT”

An Interview with STEPHEN DARWALL

by Darlei Dall’Agnol

**ethic@:** Would you please introduce yourself to the readers of *ethic@* and tell us why you chose to study philosophy and what your main interests in it are?

**Darwall:** I’d be happy to, thanks. My name is Steve Darwall, and I teach philosophy at the University of Michigan in the U.S. As for how I came to philosophy, I didn’t really know what philosophy was, in any formal sense anyway, until my second year as an undergraduate at Yale. I grew up in the era of the “space race” between the U.S. and the Soviet Union and, like many in my generation, was strongly encouraged to study mathematics and physics in school. (This all seems faintly ridiculous now.) This I did with some success, but in my second year at Yale, I ran into a serious mathematics course—Real Analysis taught by Shizuo Kakutani of the Kakutani Fixed Point Theorem—which made me realize that I had primarily been pursuing mathematics not because of any passionate interest, but because I had been doing pretty well in my classes so far. Well, that stopped with Kakutani. Luckily, I was taking my first philosophy course at the same time, where I discovered a subject I really wanted to think about and that had some of the same rigor that attracted me in math.

When I got to the formal study of moral philosophy in graduate school at Pittsburgh, I realized that I had been thinking about ethical

issues and questions like the relation between morality and religion for a long time. My father was an Episcopalian clergyman, and many of the males on his side of the family had been Anglican clergy in England going back to the Seventeenth Century. (One, John Darwall (1731-1789), who is my great great great great grandfather, wrote a pretty popular hymn tune: “Darwall’s 148<sup>th</sup>”.) I’ve been thinking about questions about the foundations of ethics ever since.

**ethic@:** Your new book, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* has just been published by Harvard University Press. Could you give us an overview of this work saying what do you mean by “second-person standpoint”? Is it just a metaethical view about the nature of morality or it contains a normative ethics as well?

**Darwall:** What I mean by the “second-person standpoint” is the perspective we take up when we address claims, demands, and, for that matter, requests, and the like (entreaties, reproaches, etc.), to one another. I believe that when an “addresser” puts forward such claims as legitimate to an “addressee,” she presupposes: (a) a standing or authority to address them to the addressee (second-personally); (b) that the claims give the addressee a distinctive reason to comply (a second-personal reason, as I call it)

that wouldn't have existed but for the relevant second-personal authority; and (c) that the addressee is in some way answerable or accountable to the addresser. I argue that many key moral notions cannot be understood except in such irreducibly second-personal terms. The most obvious, perhaps, is the idea of a right, which conceptually involves a standing or authority to make certain claims of others. Even a liberty-right involves the absence of others' authority to make certain demands of one. Moral responsibility is also second-personal in this sense, since it is a kind of responsibility *to*, specifically, to the moral community or, as theological voluntarists hold, to God.

Less obviously, but very importantly, I think, the concept of moral obligation is also second-personal, since as Mill argued, it is conceptually related to moral responsibility. What we are morally obligated to do is what we are morally responsible for doing, that is, what members of the moral community (or God) have (has) the authority to demand that we do. I also argue that the dignity of persons, respect for it, and the very concept of person (or responsible moral agent) are all irreducibly second-personal concepts too.

The argument for all these claims proceeds by way of analysis of these central moral concepts. I also try to vindicate these concepts, however. I argue that the second-person standpoint commits us to a common second-personal authority (to make claims of one another at all) that we have simply by virtue of being capable of entering into relations of mutual accountability (second-personal competence). And I argue that this common basic second-

personal authority shared by all persons (our dignity, as I interpret it) grounds moral obligations. Finally, I argue that such second-personal reasons can be vindicated not just within the second-person perspective, but within a theory of practical reason more generally.

**ethic@:** Could you explain better how the second-person standpoint can be a foundation for a contractualist theory in moral philosophy? What kind of contractualism are you talking about?

**Darwall:** The kind of contractualism I have in mind is that defended by Scanlon, but also suggested by Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* (what he there called "rightness as fairness"). In contrast with more Hobbesian contractarian theories, which see morality as a mutually advantageous agreement grounded in self-interest, contractualist theories take their cue from the Kantian idea of mutual respect for the equal dignity of persons. I argue that these theories are best seen as grounded in equal dignity conceived as equal second-personal authority. Scanlon initially took the desire to justify ourselves to others who are similarly motivated to be foundational, but as he grew skeptical that reasons for acting derive from desires, he appealed to the value that relations of mutual respect can have for us, for example, in friendship. I believe that attempting to ground a contractualist theory of moral obligation in either of these is vulnerable to the objection that Prichard famously raised in "Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?" They provide reasons of the wrong kind for moral obligation

and fail to justify it properly in its own terms. That can be done, I argue, only within a second-personal framework, because only there do we have available the irreducibly second-personal ideas of authority, claim or demand, and responsibility to one another.

**ethic@:** Thus, from the second-personal standpoint Kantian contractualism and consequentialism may have the same form. Could you develop more this idea?

**Darwall:** Contractualism or consequentialism can refer either to a normative moral theory or to an underlying rationale for a normative theory. I do believe it is possible to make an argument (I'm not say it would be convincing) for some form of rule-utilitarianism from the second-person standpoint. The idea would be that we have an equal authority as persons to make claims and demands of one another and that what we can demand is equal attention to our preferences, or something like that.

**ethic@:** You said that the second-person standpoint is compatible with a principle of average utility. But it seems also compatible with ethical egoism! That is to say, after respecting each other we may agree that each of us must maximize our own interests! What is the scope and status of benevolent concern in your approach after all? For example: should we care for nonpersons?

**Darwall:** What I meant is that someone might argue for a principle of maximizing average utility in something like the way I just mentioned.

What you say about ethical egoism is interesting. Is the idea that from the premise that we have the same authority to make claims and demands of one another, we might all simply renounce any such claims and mutually acknowledge something like Hobbes's "right of nature," according to which no one can legitimately demand anything of anyone else? Here again, I suppose someone *might* make such an argument. If, however, we consider what norms for mutual accountability we could sensibly endorse from a perspective that is impartial between us as equal persons, take into account normal mutual vulnerabilities and human needs, and bear in mind that we cannot avail ourselves from this perspective of any information about special advantages, it seems clear that we couldn't sensibly choose to leave ourselves at the mercy of circumstances and one another in the way that universal egoism would involve.

Although I believe that duties of mutual aid, to help others in need, and so on, can be derived within contractualism as I was just suggesting, benevolent concern does not come in as such. Our moral obligations are what we have the authority to demand from one another, not what benevolent concern might lead us to do. Caring and love also have a significant role to play in ethics, of course, but I can't see how they can be a source of moral *obligation*.

Do we have obligations toward nonpersons? I certainly think so. What my theory says is that if we do, then we are responsible to members of the moral community for how we treat these nonpersons. Are we responsible also to them? Well, I assume we and they can't be mutually responsible, since

personhood (in the form of second-personal competence) would be necessary from them to responsible to us, and I assume you are thinking of cases where this doesn't hold. Nonetheless, we might still be responsible to them; for example, they might have right that, though they lack any competence to claim for themselves, others (their trustees) have the authority to claim on their behalf.

**ethic@:** So, in your view there are two kinds of respect: appraisal and recognition respect. What are the main differences between them and which one has moral significance?

**Darwall:** What I call appraisal respect is a form of esteem for someone, her character, achievements, integrity, and so on. Recognition respect is the response to authority or dignity, and this response shows itself not in our assessment or appraisal of someone's character, but how we conduct ourselves in relation to the authority. So far, this is a perfectly general point, as relevant to epistemic authority or the law as it is to the kind of authority we have just in virtue of being persons. I argue that this latter authority is irreducibly second-personal; we show recognition respect for someone as a person by *acknowledging* it, second-personally to him. Imagine someone who scrupulously avoided injuring others, breaking promises, etc., but denied that this was anything they had any authority to demand. Such a person would not yet acknowledge the dignity of persons.

Both appraisal respect and recognition respect have moral significance. Recognition respect is what we can demand of other another,

and appraisal respect is what we might hope to deserve by how we conduct ourselves morally.

**ethic@:** Is it possible to make a place for duties to oneself or virtues from the second-person standpoint?

**Darwall:** In principle, I certainly think so. First, duties that we have with respect to ourselves, for example, not to be complicit in our own humiliation as persons, are certainly unproblematic in a second-personal framework. This is something we have the standing to demand of ourselves as members of the moral community. But are these duties yet *to* ourselves? Well, they would be only if we also had a correlative right against ourselves to this treatment. One way in which we certainly might is over time. I might rightly resent my "former self" for things I did in the past that injured myself today. And I might now forbear doing something on the grounds that my later self would rightly resent it then. But what about here and now. Can I resent myself for the way I am treating myself now? Maybe. I'm not sure.

**ethic@:** Suppose the following dilemma: a patient demands confidentiality from her therapist and seems entitled to respect, but after some sessions tells the doctor she wants to kill someone. Shouldn't the doctor give priority to public interest and release the information to the authorities or should she respect the patient's right? How you would solve this problem from the second-person standpoint?

**Darwall:** As I see it, the second-person standpoint is a foundational idea in the way I've suggested above. I don't know that it gives us special insight on specific normative moral issues, although it does suggest that we need also to take account of how actual participants might work out moral issues between them through second-personal interaction and reasoning.

As for the issue you've raised, I find it difficult to say much in the abstract. Does the therapist believe what the patient tells him? Or does he take the patient to be "saying" something else. If the therapist believes it is a sincere threat, there is still the question how credible it is. But if it is credible then it seems clear that the therapist has some obligation to see that threat is not successfully carried out, for example, by notifying the authorities. But I don't think the second-person standpoint gives any special insight into this (beyond what might available through contractualist moral theory without a second-personal foundation).

**ethic@:** **Have you thought about how to apply the second-person standpoint to other bioethical questions such as whether or not abortion and euthanasia are permissible?**

**Darwall:** No, I'm afraid I haven't. I don't know that the theory has any distinctive payoff on issues of that kind, but it might.

**ethic@:** **Finally, what happens issues of this kind, but it might if we see each other from an equal and rational point of view with**

**authority to demand respect and thus having dignity, but in fact we are not really free? For instance, suppose I came to this interview "acting" as a free agent, but in fact I am, let us say, under hypnosis. So, you gave me a kind of authority that I in fact don't have because I am not really free. It seems that you have difficulties of avoiding moral skepticism or even refuting determinism from the second-personal standpoint. Is that right?**

**Darwall:** You are right that if I give you second-personal authority I will see you as free. For example, I will take it that you are not under hypnosis. Conversely, if I believe that you are simply acting on post-hypnotic suggestions, I cannot intelligibly hold you responsible. So we are making a bet on the freedom of anyone we hold responsible and relate to second-personally. Might we be mistaken? Of course. But it's not obvious to me that it would follow that we were mistaken if determinism is true. I certainly don't think I have to be able to refute determinism, or even believe it false, to sensibly relate to you second-personally.

**ethic@:** **Thanks Professor Darwall for this interesting interview. Anything else you would like to add?**

**Darwall:** Thank you! I hope I didn't impose on you, for example, by appearing to require you to disbelieve determinism during the time you were relating to me!