

Relationality Without Obligation

Abstract: Some reasons are thought to depend on relations between people, such as that of a promiser to a promisee. It has sometimes been assumed that all reasons that are relational in this way are moral obligations. I argue, via a counter example, that there are non-obligatory relational reasons. If true, this has ramifications for relational theories of morality.

1. Introduction

Individual deliberation about action is not always a private affair. Sometimes one person's reasons for action (their *practical reasons*) are significant for others. Some practical reasons make essential reference to the relations between the agent for whom they are reasons, and others whose lives are entwined, in one way or another, with the predicament in which the agent finds themselves. These reasons can be thought of as *relational*. The most familiar example of such relational reasons are those represented by the moral rights of others. But in this paper I will argue that the scope of relational practical reasoning is broader than the domain of moral rights.

A school of thought that has recently gained traction in moral philosophy can be labelled Relational Deontic views. Prominent advocates of Relational Deontic views include Stephen Darwall (2006, 2013), R. Jay Wallace (2019), and Ariel Zylberman (2019). These views are united around the core claim that at the heart of morality are duties that people owe to one another, where it is the authority that others have – to claim what they are owed – that underpins the justification of moral conduct. Put another way, they claim that moral reasoning is relational.

In this paper I will press a criticism, not against this core claim of the Relational Deontic views, but against a picture that is sometimes suggested by their accounts, and which might be seen to favour them. The picture to which I will object is one in which not only are moral obligations fundamentally relational, but relational reasoning is fundamentally a matter of moral obligations. It depicts the domain of relational practical reasoning – where our actions matter for others in ways that license interpersonal reactive attitudes – as a domain that is centred around and explained by interpersonal obligations. Thus, the specific view at the heart of this picture, the rejection of which will be my goal, is this:

Deonticism: deontic interpersonal relations fully ground practical relationality.

Setting out what is entailed by the notion of *practical relationality* will be my first task, undertaken in the next section below. After that, I will explain the attraction of deonticism and discuss the role that it plays in the accounts of the Relational Deontic views. Then I will press my objection to deonticism, providing a counterexample which illustrates that practical relationality is broader than interpersonal deontic relations.

2. *Practical Relationality*

Practical relationality is that aspect of the lives of agents in which one's conduct directly affects one's status in relation to others in such a way as to affect the appropriateness of reactive attitudes between people. More specifically, practical relationality can be defined as consisting of the following four analytically connected phenomena.¹

(i) Standing

The normative status of being the source of relational reasons for another person, e.g. possessing a claim right.

(ii) Relational reason

A practical reason grounded in another person's standing, e.g. a directed duty.

(iii) Normative Injury

The normative status of having one's standing go without due recognition, e.g. a wronging.

(iv) Accountability relations

The sequences of reactions and transactions made appropriate only by normative injuries, e.g. resentment, apology, forgiveness.

Our lives as agents involve practical relationality when we are faced with reasons to act that are grounded in other people's standing, where the ignoring or flouting of those reasons would constitute normative injuries, and where such normative injuries make appropriate sequences of reactions and transactions.²

¹ In articulating relational reasoning in terms of these four elements I am loosely following Wallace (2019: 5-11).

² The definitions I provide here are circular, but the argument of this paper is neutral on the question of whether non-circular, reductive accounts could be given of relational normative concepts. Darwall (2006: 11-15) and Wallace (2019: 159) both deny that relational notions are reducible to non-relational notions.

The most familiar examples of this set of phenomena are deontic examples of rights and obligations. For instance, consider the right of a person, A, not to be wantonly harmed by B. It may be that B has a variety of reasons not to harm A, some grounded in the simple setback such harming would bring to A's welfare, others, perhaps, grounded in the negative consequences that might befall B themselves were they to harm A. But besides these B also should not harm A simply because A has a certain normative status that provides reason not to harm them. In this case, that status is that of having a right not to be harmed, which is a standing that consists in being the source of obligations for others not to wantonly harm A. Deontic standing is the authority to claim, demand, and insist on what is owed. Correspondingly, a deontic relational reason is an obligation owed to another person.

If A's right is violated by B, then this entails a normative injury to A. A distinctive quality of normative injuries – pointed out by Wallace (2019: 9) – is that they are not straightforwardly reducible to the harms brought to agents by the actions in question. In the deontic example, where B has wronged A, having owed it to A to ϕ , but having failed to ϕ . B's action (or lack thereof) changes A's normative status to that of having been wronged by B. And this status is not reducible to whatever harm the failure of B to ϕ might have brought to A. Indeed, it may be that in fact it is good for A that B did not ϕ , but this would not alter the fact that A was wronged by B's behaviour. For instance, I was secretly very glad to realize that my cousin had forgotten his promise to visit me; but in forgetting, he wronged me nonetheless.

When normative injuries are incurred in the deontic sphere, the ensuing accountability relations are characterized by the appropriateness of a familiar set: resentment, apology, moral repair and forgiveness.³ The deontic example makes clear that it is common in our practical lives for our agency to be linked in this array of ways with the normative statuses of other people.

However, contrary to the convention established by the treatment of these topics by the likes of Darwall, Wallace and Zylberman, I want to emphasize that such interpersonal rights and obligations are only that: *examples* of relational reasons. It is at least conceptually possible that each

³ Among proponents of Relational Deontic views, there is some disagreement about whether these positional standings that individuals have – to expect apologies and to forgive – are features of the most fundamental sort of moral duties owed to one another (Wallace, 2007, 2019), or whether they are rather features only of the distinctively bipolar subset of moral duties (Darwall, 2013: 23).

of the categories (i)-(iv) could include entities that are unrelated to obligations and duties. That is, it is conceivable that a relational reason could be merely a *pro tanto* reason, to be weighed in favour of an action, but without purporting to provide conclusive reason for that action.

Non-obligatory relational reasons would be grounded in the standing that another person had to be the source of such non-obligatory reasons. If such reasons were ignored or otherwise flouted, then the standing of the other person would be violated, constituting a normative injury. Non-deontic normative injuries would make appropriate their own sequences of accountability-holding reactions and transactions.

Before moving on, I would like to note an important point about practical relationality on which I think the proponents of Relational Deontic views are correct. Namely, that this bundle of phenomena require an explanation. Or perhaps they require several explanations. One explanandum which my scheme must deal with is why all and only these four features should be bundled together. The answer to that lies in the deep conceptual connections between them, where each is defined in terms of the others. A deeper explanandum, though, is why it is that our practical lives appear to contain such relational considerations as those included in practical relationality.

This latter explanandum invites a pressing line of scepticism. We can well entertain the possibility of a form of moral scepticism that does not deny that some actions are good and others bad, but asks why it is that any actions should be thought to be owed to others. And on the back of their scepticism about relational duties, this sceptic could ask why we should ever think that other people have legitimate claims on us, that there are any such things as wrongs, or that interpersonal practices of accountability relations are anything more than quaint, contingently constructed absurdities – to be dispensed with.

A satisfactory treatment of this explanandum could debunk it, by making full sense of its appearance without confirming its appropriateness. The alternative to a debunking explanation would be a vindicatory one, and since that would call for no revision of our customary and deeply ingrained moral sentiments, a vindicatory account would be preferable, other things equal. Such an account would show the customs of practical relationality to be appropriate features of moral life. The

explanans would be a foundation in practical thought for thinking that relational reasons exist, along with the concomitant standing, normative injuries, and the legitimacy of relevant reactive attitudes.

3. *The Deonticist Picture*

A vindicatory explanation of practical relationality is offered, putatively, by the deonticist picture – the picture which it is my goal in this paper to dispel. It says that relational reasons, and the array of relational phenomena that they generate, are grounded in deontic interpersonal relations, that is, relations of right and duty between people. In other words, it is the fact that we owe things to others that explains the appearance of a relational form to some of our practical reasoning. The vindicatory argument goes like this:

- (1) Relations of right and duty are normatively well-founded (supported by Relational Deontic views)
- (2) Practical relationality consists only in relations of right of duty (supported by deonticism).
- (3) Therefore, practical relationality is normatively well-founded.

On the face of it, this is an attractive view because it draws on a detailed theory of interpersonal normativity, as is provided by the Relational Deontic views, to give an adequate explanation of practical relationality.

In the course of vindicating the relational structure of some practical considerations, deonticism also specifies which considerations have that structure. On this picture, all and only interpersonal obligations have the relational features identified above. As a consequence, if there is a situation in which a person seems to have a relational reason (or any other feature from (i)-(iv)), deonticism is committed to the following disjunctive claim: either that apparently relational reason is not really relational, or it is an obligation.

Defenders of Relational Deontic views have at times, between the lines, suggested the view that all reasons that are relational (in the rich sense at issue here) must also be obligatory. For instance, in the well-known opening sections of *The Second-Person Standpoint (SPS)*, Darwall (2006: 11) says that '[s]econd-personal reasons are invariably tied to [...] the authority to make a demand or claim'. It is clear from the passages preceding this quote that Darwall's conception of a 'second-

personal reason' is supposed to match what I have called 'relational reasons'. The notions of claims and demands typically express an obligation – both in *SPS* and in more general usage. It is thus easy to see how one could be led to think that Darwall's Relational Deontic account of morality involves the espousal of this part of the deonticist picture, that all relational reasons are obligatory.

However, the connection between the Relational Deontic views and deonticism is more complicated than it first seems. Earlier in *SPS*, Darwall identifies requests among the forms of address that typically imply second-personal reasons, and since requests (presumably) present non-obligatory reasons, this suggests that Darwall thinks there can be non-obligatory relational reasons. Indeed, in a series of papers about topics that he calls 'second-personal attitudes of the heart', Darwall (2016, 2017) has expressly addressed the matter of non-obligatory relationality. Clearly, then, it is not the case that proponents of Relational Deontic views always expressly endorse the picture that follows from deonticism. Nor is it obvious that this picture is an inadvertent commitment of their moral theories.⁴ So, the point of objecting to deonticism is not to correct a deep error in the Relational Deontic views.

The point that is more deeply relevant to Relational Deontic views is about the explanation of relational practical reasoning. If deonticism were true then Relational Deontic views would provide an exhaustive, vindicatory explanation of practical relationality in general. That is, they tell us why it is that there appear to be relational considerations of the sort discussed above (and, while they are at it, why this is as it should be). But if deonticism is false – if not all of practical relationality is fully grounded in deontic interpersonal relations – then the explanatory adequacy of Relational Deontic views is more limited.

At the least, some further explanation must be given to make sense of the apparently relational structure of those parts of our practical lives that are not connected to interpersonal

⁴ Besides Darwall's strict association (just mentioned) between second-personal reasons, and claims and demands, there are other deonticist moments in the writings of proponents of Relational Deontic views. Deonticist predispositions are suggested in the approach – shared by Darwall, Wallace (2019, chpt. 2) and Zylberman (2019: 2) – that begins the analysis of relational morality with an account of the form of interpersonal obligations. A further point at which Relational Deontic views have seemed to promote deonticism is a specific argument that occupies Chapter 3 of Wallace's *The Moral Nexus*. There, Wallace argues that what he calls 'the relational interpretation of morality' is uniquely well-placed to make sense of the relational features of morality – which reflect the features I have described above as practical relationality. Deonticism represents one intuitive way to understand how Wallace might intend that vindicatory explanation to go.

obligations. But if there is a domain of practical reasoning that all shares a distinctive relational structure then a good explanation of that phenomenon would explain that distinctive relational structure everywhere it is found: a unified explanation of the whole domain. Relational Deontic views are restricted to consideration of deontic relations. Thus, if deonticism is false and there are non-obligatory relational reasons, then this poses a question for Relational Deontic views, namely, whether they are compatible with the best explanation of practical relationality in general.

4. Non-Obligatory Relationality

By way of an argument against deonticism, consider the following example of a relational reason that is not an obligation. Suppose you and I are friends. I ask you to come camping with me at the weekend – which, please suppose, is something we both typically enjoy. Without needing to say so explicitly, we both understand that the reason I have presented in my request that you join me is not an obligation. It's up to you, and I would only want you to say yes if you would actually like to. Naturally, I hope that you agree to come, and as it happens, so does my housemate, Nadia, who would like the house to herself for those days.

But you decline, citing the fact that though you don't have any other plans for the weekend, you don't really want to come camping with me. Let's suppose that in the context of our friendship, such an apparently blunt reply is not rude as you know that I appreciate your honesty.

The question is whether the reason created by my request is relational. I submit that it is. It is relational because it exemplifies the four phenomena detailed above: standing, relational reason, normative injury, and attitudes of accountability. For ease of explanation, it will be clearest to start with the normative injury that is brought about by your declining my invitation. Since both parties to the invitation understood it to present a non-obligatory reason, it is clear that your saying no cannot have wronged me. Rather, we might think of this sub-obligatory normative injury as a *snubbing*. To see that this is a normative injury of a kin with a wronging, note the contrast between the way your answer affects me, and the way it affects my housemate Nadia who had also privately hoped that you would say yes. Nadia and I are both disappointed that you do not appreciate my company as much as I had hoped. But I alone, whose request you declined, as the one who put my neck out by inviting you,

and whose status in our relationship was at stake in the request, am snubbed; Nadia is not. Being snubbed may be embarrassing for me, and in that way harmful above and beyond the harm of having been disappointed. But just as in the case of wronging, the normative dimension (being snubbed) is not reducible to the harm (being embarrassed). If I am for some extraneous reason glad to be snubbed, and not at all embarrassed, this will not alter the fact that you have snubbed me.

The relationship between you and I is altered by our unfortunate transaction in ways that are structurally analogous to the normative aftermath of a wrong in attitudes of accountability. In the first instance, though I lack the standing to resent you, I feel hurt, let down, and disappointed in you, *for* snubbing me.⁵ These sentiments seem to be akin to resentment in having as their object an agent (you) qua the one responsible for bringing them about. They are not merely attitudes of regretting an event, they are attitudes of regretting an action – your action. They do not just express a wish that it had not happened, but that you had not done it. What’s more, my disappointment in you is not just a private matter of mine but represents a change in the normative dynamics of our friendship. For instance, my inclination to grant requests of yours may be diminished, among other things.

Again, since no wrong has been committed, you do not owe me an apology. But suppose that you came to regret having snubbed me, and the hurt it may have caused. (Unlike wrongs, snubs are not necessarily regrettable.) If you did feel regret, then saying so to me would take responsibility for the regrettable action in just the same way as would an apology. Likewise, though I do not have the standing to forgive you exactly, in the right circumstances I could let my feelings of hurt and embarrassment be forgotten. If I told you so, then this would release you from my judgement and repair our normative standing with respect to one another in just the same way as forgiveness.

The appropriateness of these dyadic reactive attitudes entails that among the bundle of original reasons that I presented to you in my request was a relational reason. Similarly to a directed duty, this was a reason not to bring about an interpersonal normative injury. Again, this is an aspect of the situation that distinguishes my position from Nadia’s. Whilst you might have wanted to please her

⁵ My point here is similar to one developed by Ulrika Carlsson (2017) who argues that cases of unreciprocated interpersonal valuing-attitudes can be apt grounds for an attitude that she calls *tragic resentment*. However, it is left slightly unclear from Carlsson’s discussion whether she thinks of tragic resentment as exemplary of all the features of practical relationality, and so whether that sentiment poses a problem to deonticism. Thus, though my thought here is similar in spirit to hers, she and I focus on different ramifications.

by coming on the trip, your reason to do so is quite different from your reason to please me as the one making the request and exposing themselves to being snubbed.

Finally, it seems clear that if there was a relational reason for you not to snub me, then there was a mirrored standing of mine not to be snubbed. In other words, there was a structural difference between mine and Nadia's hope that you would come. Whereas hers pertained only to the possibility of your joining us on the trip, mine pertained also to your acceding to my request and thereby honouring my standing that you would not disappoint my exposed hope for our relationship.

5. Conclusion

The camping invitation presents a reason that appears to have exactly the same relational structure as an interpersonal obligation despite not being obligatory. That reason is relational in that it mirrors a standing on behalf of another person with whose life the reason-facing agent's own predicament is entwined. That standing is keyed to the possibility of a distinctly normative injury that would be brought about should the reason be neglected. And such an injury would make appropriate a sequence of attitudes of accountability that are structurally similar to resentment, apology, and forgiveness. This example – and the possibility of others like it – constitute a problem for the thesis that I have called deonticism: that deontic interpersonal relations (that is, obligations) explain practical relationality. The problem, in short, is that it seems that the domain of practical relationality is broader than the domain of deontic interpersonal relations.

A range of options are open to the proponent of deonticism in response to this problem. One would be to concede that interpersonal obligations explain only the obligatory dynamics that are manifested in some cases of practical relationality. Some further explanation would then be required for the general appearance that our practical reasoning can sometimes have a relational form: an explanation which provides a unified account of obligatory and non-obligatory relational reasons. One alternative option would be to hold fast to the deonticist thesis and deny that the reasons presented in

requests like the camping invitation are relational in senses (i)-(iv). I hope to have shown that this option is at least counter-intuitive.⁶

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