

Moral Friends? The Bipolar Standpoint

Suppose we're both taking a train to London and are in the process of storing our luggage. As it happens, I have a hard time reaching the overhead locker and consider stepping on your foot in order to place my luggage in the locker. Now, suppose I do in fact step on your foot to reach the overhead locker. What has happened here? The straightforward answer seems to be that I did something wrong. To leave it at that, however, would miss an important element. For, what I have done did not simply amount to a wrong action period, a failure to comply with an obligation period. Instead, I have *wronged* you, as a result of which you'd be justified as the victim of my doing to blame me and at the very least ask for an apology. How are we to explain all of this?

The answer turns on the thought that I have not just violated a moral obligation period, but instead a directed obligation owed *to you*, one incurred because of your valid claim against me. Directed obligations, or bipolar obligations as they are also called, are characterized by their three-part structure and the resulting bipolar normative nexus: a person who is under the relevant obligation (obligor), the action required, and a claim-holder to whom the obligation is owed (obligee). In contrast, with a non-directed obligation period, there need only be an obligor. This explains how in stepping on your foot I have not only done something wrong period, but *wronged* you in particular by disregarding your valid claim against me.

In the dissertation, I argue for and defend the claim that each and every obligation ranging over the interpersonal sphere is, like the obligation not to step on your foot, directed and owed *to someone in particular*. In doing so, I argue against the prevalent view according to which our interpersonal moral obligations are at its basis non-directed and owed to no one in particular. I discuss two versions of this view. On one version of the prevalent view, defended by T.M. Scanlon, directed obligations ultimately reduce to non-directed moral obligations. On another version of the prevalent view, defended by Stephen Darwall, directed obligations normatively depend on moral obligations period. I turn these views on its head, arguing that directed obligations are normatively basic. On the resulting view, even those obligations that at first appear to be non-directed and owed to no one in particular, like the obligation not to litter in the streets, turn out to be directed and thus always owed to someone in particular who stands to be wronged by another's action.

I begin my argument for the directed nature of interpersonal morality by addressing the following question: why should it matter whether we conceive of our interpersonal moral obligations as inherently directed (**Chapter 1**)? I argue that the answer turns on the idea that directed obligations are intimately connected to and enable a particular form of recognition respect that we owe to each other simply as fellow persons: in doing what one owes to another, one recognizes the other as a source of valid claims who stands to be potentially wronged by one's action and not merely as the occasion or target of a non-directed moral obligation period that one has with regards to another. In doing so, I seek to vindicate Joel Feinberg's thesis that 'to respect another, and to see him or her as possessive of dignity, is to recognize the other as a potential maker of claims'. Underlying Feinberg's thesis, I argue, is the thought that in respecting another person, it does not suffice to simply register the other as the occasion or target of a non-directed obligation that one has with regard to her, but to recognize and acknowledge her at the same time as the normative source of a directed obligation that one is under to the other. In turn, this helps to explain how any unexcused failure to comply with a directed obligation does not merely amount to having done something wrong period, but to the wronging of another person by disregarding the other person's valid claims. This sheds light on the often-underdeveloped attitudinal aspect of interpersonal morality and highlights the way in which the wronging of another does primarily

consist in a failure to relate and be attuned to the other as an equally authoritative source of valid claims.

Having established that any plausible theory of interpersonal morality or ‘what we owe to each other’ must be able to adequately accommodate the directed nature of interpersonal morality, I turn to the two most prominent contenders for offering us such a theory: T.M. Scanlon’s moral contractualism and Stephen Darwall’s second-personal view of morality. As I go on to show, however, neither of these theories is in the end able to adequately accommodate the directed nature of interpersonal morality and the thought that in stepping on your foot, I *wrong* you.

I argue that on Scanlon’s contractualist account this is due to the fact that he does not ascribe any fundamental normative importance to individual claims and their corresponding directed obligations (**Chapter 2**). When deliberating about what we owe to each other, Scanlon argues, we must simply deliberate about which moral principles others could or could not reasonably reject. Understood in this way, the wrongness of certain actions is explained in terms of the wrongness of breaking certain general moral principles, with the resulting obligations being non-directed moral obligations. On Scanlon’s account, each of us possesses the *normative standing* as the target of an obligation that others have with regard to us and in virtue of which can do something wrong *simpliciter*. At the same time, Scanlon argues that his moral contractualism has the resources to accommodate the directed nature of certain moral obligations, like the obligation to keep one’s promise to another. As a result of this ‘principle worship’, however, Scanlon’s moral contractualism renders it entirely mysterious how I can have any directed obligation *to you* in virtue of which I can not only do something wrong in failing to do what I owe to you, but to *wrong* you in particular. For, on Scanlon’s account, directed obligations are ultimately reducible to non-directed obligations.

Next, I turn to Darwall’s proposal to understand morality and its associated obligations as a second-personal phenomenon, with each of us possessing the individual authority to claim moral rights and demand certain treatment of others (**Chapter 3**). While all of this seems to make Darwall’s theory an ideal candidate to accommodate the directed nature of interpersonal morality, Darwall ultimately argues that the individual authority each of us possesses to claim certain moral rights is normatively dependent on the representative authority that we all share as members of the moral community. This, however, has a striking consequence: I can *wrong you* only insofar as I *wrong* each and every representative member of the moral community. All you possess on Darwall’s account is the *second-person standing* of a representative authority, in virtue of which you are owed a moral obligation period that is made on behalf of and owed to the entire moral community. As a result, I can sometimes fail to recognize *you* as a source of valid claims who has the special standing to demand certain treatment of me and be owed an apology as the victim of my action. Eventually, Darwall’s second-personal theory is, like Scanlon’s moral contractualism, unable to adequately accommodate the directed nature of interpersonal morality. For, like Scanlon’s view, Darwall ultimately takes the notion of a non-directed moral obligation period to be normatively basic.

In light of these shortcomings I propose a novel theory of interpersonal morality according to which each and every interpersonal obligation is directed *to someone in particular* by arguing that each interpersonal obligation is constitutively linked with the valid claim of some particular person (**Chapter 4**). On the resulting view, one’s individual authority to claim or demand certain conduct is, contrary to Darwall’s view, normatively basic. The relevant moral standpoint is *bipolar*, insofar as it always only normatively implicates two individuals relating as opposing poles to each other – a person owing an obligation X and a person being owed the obligation X – and the resulting recognition respect involves acknowledgment of the other as a self-originating source of valid

claims who stands to be wronged by one's actions. Understood in this way, each of us possesses the *bipolar standing* of an independent source of valid claims who is owed certain treatment by others. The bipolar view can thus naturally explain how my stepping on your foot amounts to a *wronging* of you, and not simply a wrong action period: in failing to do what I owe to you, I disregard your individual authority to demand certain conduct of me, thereby failing to recognize and respect you as a source of valid claims.

In the last chapter, I seek to vindicate the proposed bipolar account and defend it against various challenges (**Chapter 5**). In particular, I show how the bipolar proposal can account for even those interpersonal moral obligations that appear to be owed to no one in particular, like the obligation not to litter in the streets or the obligation to pay one's taxes. I argue that each of these seemingly non-directed obligations is ultimately reducible to a set of directed obligations, placing individuals in vast web of bipolar normative nexuses with each other. On the resulting view, one can be under an indeterminate number of directed obligations not to litter in the streets or to pay one's taxes. Moreover, I argue that the bipolar standpoint account is uniquely equipped to illuminate some central phenomena of the interpersonal moral sphere, like blame, apology and forgiveness, by showing how these phenomena are themselves best understood as inherently directed.