MISSING THE “WE” FOR ALL THOSE “YOU’S”
DEBUNKING MILGRAM’S OBEEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY

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Summary
This paper discusses Darwall’s interpretation of Milgramian “obedience to authority”, in which second-personal norms, second-person authority, and the power of (second-personal) address play key explanatory roles. A series of arguments against this reading is presented, and a different view is suggested, according to which second-personal authority and address have very little explanatory power. Important parts of Milgramian obedience have to be understood in the light of the human ability to look at cooperative ventures from a shared point of view. Some consequences for a more adequate understanding of the relation between the second-person and the first-person plural standpoints are explored.

Stanley Milgram’s obedience experiment—in which test subjects proved to be willing to comply with an authority figure and to administer potentially deadly electroshocks to another person—is probably one of the most famous experiments in all of the history of science, and it has become part of general knowledge. It hardly needs to be summarized here (Milgram’s own book-length account—after the original publication of his results in 1963—is in Milgram 1974; a detailed description of the background history and the setting is in Blass 2004, chaps 5–7). Explaining the surprising and indeed shocking degree of obedience to authority has always been recognized as an important task of moral psychology. Stephen Darwall takes up this task in a passage of the second part of his Second Person (Darwall 2006, 160–170). This passage seems to constitute an application of—or perhaps even a kind of “reality check” for—the account of practical reasoning Darwall has developed in the first part. The Darwallian concep-

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tual tools—concepts such as “second-personal reasons”, “second-person authority”, “second-personal norms”, and, above all, “address”—are used for the purpose of a description and explanation of the shockingly obedient behavior of Milgram’s test people. The core critical claim of this paper is that the results of Darwall’s “reality check” (if it is thus adequately described) are not nearly as favorable to his account as he seems to think. There is serious reason for doubt that Darwall’s second personal approach is indeed helpful in providing an adequate description—let alone an explanation—of Milgramian obedience. Darwall’s account is largely inadequate, or so it will be argued. This discussion leads to a conjecture about what might be wrong with Darwall’s general account: While large parts of Darwall’s analysis in the Second-Person Standpoint are devoted to an analysis of cooperation and cooperative-mindedness, he does not take seriously enough the fact that cooperative-mindedness involves a shared (or first person plural) standpoint from which cooperating individuals reason and act.

The paper is divided in three parts. In the first section, I shall present Darwall’s interpretation of Milgramian “obedience to authority”, in which second-personal norms, second-person authority, and the power of (second-personal) address play key explanatory roles. The second section will present a series of arguments against this reading, and a different view will be suggested, according to which second-personal authority and address have very little explanatory power as such, and according to which important parts of Milgramian obedience have to be understood in the light of the human ability to look at cooperative ventures from a shared point of view. The concluding section of this paper will briefly explore some consequences for a more adequate understanding of the relation between the second-person and the first-person plural standpoints.

I.

Darwall’s account and interpretation of Milgram’s experiments and their results emphasizes a feature of the behavior of Milgram’s test people that has attracted many interpreters’ attention at least since the time of Erich Fromm’s Anatomy of Human Destructiveness (Fromm 1973, 47–52). Over the course of the experiment, the typical Milgramian test person went through intense internal and external conflicts. Of the ten test people whose cases Milgram describes in some more detail in his book, it is only one person (whom Milgram calls Bruno Batta) who complies in cold