
In *The Second-Person Standpoint*, Stephen Darwall develops a broadly Kantian conception of morality and practical reasoning based in the special character of ‘second-personal address’. For Darwall, to address someone in the second person is to make a claim or demand on her, where such claims are meant to constitute ‘second-personal reasons’ to act in some way. A reason is second-personal if it comes into being only through the exercise of a normative power that the claimant has with respect to the person addressed. To properly respond to a second-personal reason, the addressee must recognize this authority and be able to act immediately from this recognition, in independence of her concern for any desirable outcome.

Not every way in which we might give others practical reasons is second-personal in this sense. When we give advice or make suggestions, we offer considerations in favor of some course of action that hold independently of our pointing them out. I may call upon someone to defer to my authority as an expert on some subject, but the significance of such expertise is wholly derivative of more basic reasons that make no reference to anyone’s special epistemic status. A truly second-personal reason depends not on the reliability of someone’s intellect to make a correct assessment of some independent fact, but only on an authoritative exercise of some person’s will. For Darwall, it is in this difference that the fundamental distinction between theoretical and practical reasoning is grounded.

Of course, a person can create practical reasons for others by making threats or offering rewards, but these reasons are not truly second-personal. What is essential for second-personality is the reason’s connection to accountability and the sorts of reactive attitudes that are our most basic ways of holding someone accountable. If someone fails to comply with my threats, I may indeed act so as to make him regret his choice. However, I would not resent or blame him, however imprudent I think his refusal. I would not think that feelings of remorse or guilt would be appropriate on his part, let alone any thought of apology, excuse, or forgiveness.

Darwall’s central contention is that any coherent form of second-personal address presupposes that we must all have ‘dignity’: i.e., a fundamentally equal authority to make claims on each other as free, rational beings. Darwall argues that to give or receive second-person claims, a person must appreciate that a refusal to comply would be truly blameworthy. Disobedience would be properly blamed by anyone who is able to take up the second-person stance toward others, including both the maker and the recipient of the claim. But insofar as this awareness can directly motivate the recipient, he has already recognized the second-personal authority of any accountable, rational agent simply as such. And insofar as the claimant is calling for just this response, she implicitly recognizes such dignity as well.

Darwall does not deny that there can be legitimate forms of unequal authority. His claim is only that any such unequal forms of authority must be justified from the perspective of rational persons taken as free, equal, and mutually accountable: as members of something very much like Kant’s ‘Kingdom of Ends’. For Darwall, the lord can make coherent second-personal demands on his vassal only if the vassal can make such demands on himself. These self-addressed demands would manifest themselves as guilt or remorse.
should the vassal disobey. It is the appropriateness of such responses that distinguishes a real exercise of authority from mere coercion or manipulation. Darwall concludes that even in such hierarchical relations of authority, both the lord and the vassal must be able to address the vassal from a common normative perspective; that is, with a kind of fundamental authority they both possess, in abstraction from their particular roles. Supposedly, the lord’s authority over the vassal rests on the vassal’s basic authority over himself, as a person who just happens to be a vassal confronting a person who just happens to be his lord.

However, it is not clear why the lord’s special authority would then have to be subordinate to or derivative of this basic authority that any person has simply in virtue of being a person. Consider a general of an army who cannot interact with privates directly but only through his subordinate officers. In order for the general to give some private an order, it must be the case that some officer can give that private an order that the private can recognize as legitimate. If the general is to be able to hold the private accountable for disobedience, it must be the case that the officer can as well. What this shows is that the general’s authority depends on that of the officer only in the sense that were the officer to have no authority, neither would the general. There must be a way in which the officer can speak with something like the general’s voice. Yet the general’s authority need not depend on that of his officers in the sense that the former must be derived from the latter, or that the general should deliberate from the perspective of a community of officers simply as such.

Darwall is certainly right that in addressing his vassal second-personally, the lord implicitly assumes that the vassal would be properly blamed (absent some excuse) for failing to comply, and that the vassal is able to act from an awareness that this fact that might take the form of guilt or remorse. The vassal must also allow that his blameworthiness might be recognized and pointed out to him by any person capable of taking up a second-person standpoint at all, including himself.

However, none of this requires that the vassal think that these third parties would be entitled to blame him in the truly second-personal sense. Although reactive attitudes such as resentment are often available to third parties (here, as indignation) this is not a necessary feature of reactive attitudes as such. While Ashley might be properly grateful that I saved her life rather than Mary-Kate’s, it would be bizarre for complete strangers to take up anything like this attitude toward me as well. While the vassal admits that third parties may properly find him blameworthy, he need not think that he owes them any sort of apology or even an explanation, or that he should seek forgiveness from them.

Darwall is right that the lord’s exercise of his authority presupposes that both lord and vassal can speak from a common normative perspective. However, this does not show that they must occupy this perspective simply as people, rather than in terms of their special practical identities. When the vassal reproaches himself for noncompliance, he may not do so in his own voice. Instead, the vassal may blame himself only in what he takes to be the borrowed voice and authority of his lord, whom he is representing with respect to himself. As a mere representative, he does not pretend to any power to forgive himself, which may remain the lord’s exclusive prerogative in his eyes. While the lord and the vassal must have some normative perspective that they can share, this does not mean that they must share it as mere persons in abstraction from the particular unequal relationship that they inhabit.

Of course, the vassal would still care whether other people in general correctly judge him to be blameworthy. However, his relation to these judgments may be thoroughly ‘third-personal’. The vassal may care about someone else’s belief that he is blameworthy just