

## Relationality without obligation

### Intro

General thesis: Proponents of Relational Deontic views (such as Darwall 2006; Wallace 2019; Zylberman 2019) sometimes promote a misleadingly narrow image of the ways that individual practical reasoning must make reference to relations between people.

Relational Deontic views, core claim: moral obligations are grounded in duties that people owe to one another.

*Deonticism*: that deontic interpersonal relations explain practical relationality.

Specific claim of talk: that Deonticism is false.

### Practical Relationality

- i) Some particular agents have special entitlements to expect certain actions from particular other agents. E.g. Claims
- ii) Correspondingly, some particular agents have reasons to act grounded in the legitimate expectations of particular others. E.g. Directed duties
- iii) Failure to act on the legitimate expectation of another person can constitute a normative injury to that person. E.g. Wrongs
- iv) Such normative injuries can initiate sequences of appropriate accountability relations. E.g. Blame, apology, moral repair, forgiveness

### The Deonticist picture

The fact that we owe duties to others explains the ways that practical reasoning so often makes essential reference to our relations with others (practical relationality). How does this explanation go? Well, our practical reasoning is *made relational* by the obligations that we owe to each other.

Other moral theories are less well-placed to explain practical relationality. Consider: utilitarianism, perfectionist virtue ethics, divine command theories. (See Wallace 2019, chpt. 3)

### Objection: non-obligatory relationality

First, note that the normative underpinnings of other-regarding reasons are the same in cases of obligation and supererogation.

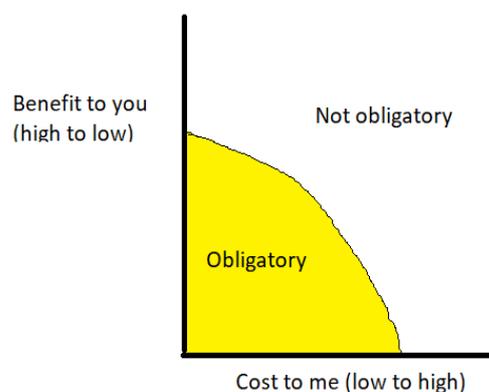


Fig. 1: Crude graph of other-regarding reasons for action illustrating the non/obligatory distinction in terms of cost-benefit trade-off.

Second, consider an example of relational supererogation. We are friends. I ask you to come to my party. We both acknowledge that the reason I have provided for you to say yes is not an obligation: it's up to you, and I would only want you to say yes if you would actually like to. You say no. Despite this reason being non-obligatory, it has something of the structure of (i)-(iv) above.

- ia) I do not have a claim against you, but I do have a unique standing to hope that you would say yes (distinct from my interest in you coming).
- iiia) This standing is reflected in the fact that the reason presented in my request is a reason for you to do something for me, in light of my hope that you will.
- iiia) Your saying no does not wrong me, but in snubbing me it affects my normative status irrespective of whether it harms me.
- iva) Whilst no deontic reactive attitudes would be apt, they have sub-deontic analogues: I can aptly feel hurt or let down *by you*, and you needn't apologise but might nonetheless acknowledge the coldness of the snub, and could seek to make it up to me; forgiveness may not be apt, but something similar may be, where I allow my feelings of being hurt and let down to be forgotten.

Third, another possible example is Macalester Bell's (2013, p.82) case of Claude's contempt for Stephen selling-out and betraying his artistic integrity:

Claude's Contempt: Claude is Steven's old friend from art school. As students, Steven and Claude formed a collective devoted to abstract expressionism, and their friendship has always been based on their shared commitment to artistic excellence. When Claude visits Steven's studio he is momentarily confused by Steven's watercolors of golden retrievers. When Claude asks, Steven explains that he has stopped making abstract oil paintings altogether and spends all his time producing watercolors because he's discovered that they sell very well and win him the esteem of the members of the local arts community. When Claude learns that Steven has betrayed his artistic integrity, he can't help responding to Steven with contempt. Claude reminds himself of Steven's many admirable characteristics but cannot shake his scorn.

Claude's contempt may be apt even if Stephen does not morally owe it to anyone to maintain his artistic integrity. His Claude-relative reason for staying true to his principles is sub-obligatory. But it has a relational structure that renders Claude's reactive attitudes apt.

## Conclusions

Conclusion 1: The deontic relations between people are too narrow to explain practical relationality.

Conclusion 2: In light of above considerations, this is a reasonable further hypothesis: whatever it is that explains the relationality of non-obligatory practical reasons should probably also explain the relationality of obligatory practical reasons.