

Ressentiment and The “Hard” Problem of Moral Normativity

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I. Introduction

At the Ian Ramsey Centre Conference 2013, moral philosopher Stephen Darwall explains that his aim in writing the paper “Making the ‘Hard’ Problem of Moral Normativity Easier” was to answer the age old question “why be moral?”¹ In the paper, he argues that it is a matter of conceptual necessity that there exist normative reasons to comply with moral obligations, and that this existence is easier to show than the existence of prudential or instrumental reasons. To argue the former, Darwall introduces the distinct Strawsonian reactive attitude of blame, which he claims conceptually links moral obligation to accountability in the following manner: “when we blame someone, we presuppose that the person we are blaming [if without excuse] cannot sufficiently answer for what he has done.”² Hence, he concludes, there must exist normative reasons *period* for complying with moral obligation, whereas prudential and instrumental reasons can only provide reasons *from a point of view*.

At a glance, it may appear that this distinct characterization of blame, which is nontrivial and arguably unintuitive, is doing most of the work in Darwall’s argument. In fact, this suspicion of Darwall’s blame is precisely what may tempt us to attack his argument on Nietzschean grounds, and perhaps why Darwall himself differentiates his account of blame (and resentment) from Nietzschean resentment in his work “Resentment and Second-Personal Resentment.” This is because, for Nietzsche, the sources of moral accountability are such clandestine, self-deceptive psychological mechanisms as resentment, where the man of herd morality hostilely identifies the source of his frustrations to be the man of higher rank, thus, assigning to him blame

¹ Darwall, Stephen. “Making the ‘Hard’ Problem of Moral Normativity Easier,” Oxford University Press video, 2013, <https://www.ianramseycentre.info/darwall-making-the-hard-problem-of-moral-normativity-easier>.

² Darwall, Stephen. “Making the “Hard” Problem of Moral Normativity Easier.” Weighing Reasons.: Oxford University Press, March 24, 2016. Oxford Scholarship Online, 14.

and culpability.³ For Nietzsche, the means of ascribing blame and culpability are dishonest and harmful; they render man insipid and mendacious, blaming others for his own shortcomings. Hence, from this view, it becomes doubtful whether blame tracks moral obligation as closely as Darwall posits.

But this is not a problem for Darwall. Indeed, he can easily refute this. As I identify, this refutation is only possible because Darwall is not arguing that “there exist normative reasons to comply with moral obligations.” Instead, as he clarifies in Section 3, he is arguing that “*if such a thing as moral obligation exists*, then there exist normative reasons to comply with moral obligations.”⁴ Thus, Darwall’s argument only follows if we are realists about moral obligation—that is, we take them to exist.⁵ So attacking such an implication on anti-realist Nietzschean grounds, which speak to how we might empirically engage with concepts of blame and culpability, is not effective. And it is not effective for reasons beyond the simple logical fact that if the antecedent of an implication is false, then the entire implication is true. It is not effective because from the Nietzschean standpoint, we do not at all possess certain distinctions which are central to Darwall’s argument, so we cannot coherently invalidate them.

This already points us in the direction of what I argue is the true issue with Darwall’s paper: his claims of which variety of reasons are “easier” or “harder” to show. I argue that it is only easier to show that normative reasons to comply with moral obligations exist once you have already committed to the existence of moral obligations. From an anti-realist standpoint, Darwall’s argument does not even begin since you cannot distinguish between moral obligations

³ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. M. Clark & A. Swensen, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998, 20-23.

⁴ Darwall, “The ‘Hard’ Problem,” 15.

⁵ The form of realism I am invoking here is procedural, rather than substantive realism: values are constructed by a procedure, the procedure of making laws for ourselves (Korsgaard 1996, p. 112).

and moral recommendations. Hence, his declarations of easier and harder do not apply outside his framework, and it is not clear that they necessarily can. In this way, Darwall's argument can be misleading; he claims to not take a stand on whether moral obligations exist in his positive argument⁶ (hence, presenting us with the aforementioned hypothetical), yet his argument concerning which types of reasons are easier or harder to show argues from a standpoint which has already taken such moral obligations to exist.

To begin, I identify two distinctions Darwall makes which are essential to his characterization of what is "easier" and "harder" to show. Then, I show that these are wholly reliant on the assumption that moral obligations exist. The first is the distinction between moral recommendations and moral obligations. The second is the distinction between blaming and coherently blaming. Without these distinctions, Darwall's argument cannot get off the ground.

II. Two Kinds of Oughts

To begin his positive argument, Darwall distinguishes between the two kinds of normativity that tend to be assessed as easier or harder to explain, respectively: prudential and moral normativity. Imagine that it advances X's self-defined "good" of becoming a professor of philosophy to place all her earnings towards the pursuit of philosophy graduate school, instead of giving foreign aid. However, as she hears about a tsunami that affects the lives and livelihood of thousands, she acts contrary to her decision and donates some of her savings to foreign aid. Now, even if X took saving for graduate school to be the only way she can achieve her good, we do not blame her for choosing to give to foreign aid instead. According to Darwall, this is because prudential considerations are only considerations *from a point of view* (particularly the view that

⁶ Darwall's positive argument refers to precisely the following: "if moral obligations exist, then there exist normative reasons to comply with them."

one should take necessary steps towards one's self-defined good).⁷ He contrasts this with the case of moral obligation, where the violation of one's insight into what one should be doing indeed warrants blame. Suppose X had decided to not steal in order to support herself in graduate school. If she were to violate this plan, we would blame her, presumably because we take stealing to be morally wrong and as a violation of a moral obligation—namely, the moral obligation to not steal.

This is because, as Darwall argues, moral obligations “occupy a different conceptual space than do those that concern what reasons favor, support, or justify.”⁸ Moral obligations are deontic notions which pertain to concepts of “require,” “right,” “wrong,” and “obligatory.” Where A is a moral obligation, it is entailed that X's omitting of A is an action of a kind that would be blameworthy had X omitted A without excuse. In addition to the basic distinction between moral and prudential oughts, Darwall examines an ambiguity in ought-statements that are broadly speaking moral. He claims that when we say, in some moral sense, that X ought to do A, we can mean two different things: either “X is morally obliged to do A” or “morality recommends that X do A.” The difference, as Darwall indicates, is that “Moral obligations are what morality requires or demands, not what it ‘counsels.’”⁹ In analyzing the conceptual connection between moral oughts and blame, Darwall is concerned with morality in the narrower sense of obligation. That is, while he concedes that there can also be moral reasons that merely counsel something, those are not the moral reasons he focuses on. Return again to our graduate

⁷ Philippa Foot argues in “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives” that an agent's ends and interests are what provide her with “automatic-reason giving force.” In this way, one's good arguably automatically provides one with reasons to pursue it. It is precisely Foot's construction which Darwall argues against, arguing that these are only reasons *from a point of view* and are not reasons *period* like reasons to comply with moral obligation.

⁸ Darwall, “The ‘Hard’ Problem,” 12.

⁹ Darwall, “The ‘Hard’ Problem,” 4.

school example. Suppose we modify it again, to the effect that the student decides that if she gets a stipend, she will donate half of it to foreign aid. Alas, once she receives the stipend she realizes she needs almost all of it for her living expenses; she ends up donating less than half of it to foreign aid. In this case, we would say that there are moral reasons in favor of (or, that “recommend”) donating to foreign aid, but they are not of the obligating kind. No one blames the student for donating less.

Before we proceed in Darwall’s argument, let us note that this fundamental distinction between moral obligations and moral recommendations is not possible unless we take such a thing as moral obligation to exist. Otherwise, we cannot so specifically define something that does not exist. Darwall’s proposals stand, broadly speaking, in a Kantian and Fichtean tradition. In this tradition (and beyond it), philosophers work with a distinction between moral and prudential norms. It tends to be assumed that the distinctive normativity of morality is puzzling. Kant’s own project in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* was how it is possible that the categorical imperative is synthetic *a priori*, or in other words, how it is possible that a norm absolutely binds us while it does not draw on some motive we anyway have.¹⁰ A moral imperative “adds something” to our set of motivations, and it has the force of necessity. This is considered an ambitious claim, so much so that one might call it the “hard problem” of moral philosophy. Comparatively speaking, it is assumed that the motives we already have—motives related to what we take to be in our interest, and what we think will make us happy—are reason-giving in a less puzzling fashion. After all, we have a motive that relates to something we already want. There is no puzzle, it seems, in the fact that this gives rise to reasons for action. Darwall’s

¹⁰ Kant, Immanuel, and Mary J. Gregor. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

contention, then, is to turn the tables. He says that the presumably puzzling kind of normativity is not as puzzling after all—that, indeed, it is less hard to explain than prudential or instrumental normativity.

III. Blame and Moral Obligation

Darwall's key move is to argue for the conceptual linkage of moral obligations and accountability through blame. Before we proceed, I remark that whenever Darwall speaks of blaming, he seems to speak of coherently blaming. As we shall see, this becomes important when we attend to cases that, by Darwall's lights, do not qualify, because people are expressing some other attitude which does not entail the conceptual linkage of moral obligation and accountability that coherently blaming does.

Blame is what Darwall deems a Strawsonian reactive attitude¹¹, which are distinct in their ability to “hold their objects accountable in a way that implicitly relates to them.”¹² When we blame someone, we presuppose that they cannot sufficiently answer for what they have done, and this is because “It is impossible coherently to blame someone and simultaneously accept that he lacked (nonsubstricted, nonperspective-realitive) pro tanto normative reason to act as he was morally obligated.”¹³ Because moral obligations exist and are defined in such a way that when someone does not comply with them without excuse, their action is blameworthy, then it follows

¹¹ In Section 3, Darwall argues that there is no “special reason to be skeptical of normative reasons for reactive attitudes like blame.” Darwall offers a formidable defense here of how if we are skeptical of these normative reasons, then we must also be skeptical of other such attitudes as prudence and desirability. For the purposes of this argument, it is of no use to deny the integrity of Strawsonian reactive attitudes. Nietzschean attacks are nonetheless ineffective for an alternate reason: their failure to even make the distinction between moral obligations and moral recommendations.

¹² Darwall, “The ‘Hard’ Problem,” 13.

¹³ Ibid., 14.

that if they had possessed an excuse (hence, a justification), we do not blame them. Taking the contrapositive, we have that if we do blame someone, it presupposes that they did not possess an excuse (or justification). Therefore, when an action is blameworthy (i.e. it warrants blame), there was normative reason not to have done it. Hence, it is of conceptual necessity that there exist normative reasons to comply with moral obligations.

IV. Darwall on Resentment

In his essay “Resentment and the Second-Personal Resentment,” Darwall differentiates Strawsonian reactive attitudes such as blame, guilt and resentment from Nietzschean resentment. His aim is to defend the second-personal framework of Strawsonian reactive attitudes such as blame against a line of argument he ascribes to Nietzsche: “that morality is born of *ressentiment*.”¹⁴ His claim is that Nietzschean resentment cannot possibly be the source of moral accountability because it is third-personal, rather than second-personal.

Darwall takes after Strawson (as well as philosophers in the German tradition, such as Fichte) in his adoption of second-person ethics. In “The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability,” Darwall argues that the central conceptions of morality—moral obligation, moral right and wrong, and so on—can be understood and defended from within the second-person standpoint.¹⁵ In this tradition, reactive attitudes implicitly make or address demands to their objects, making claims upon them. It follows that we engage with these attitudes when we reciprocally relate to one another distinctively as persons. Furthermore,

¹⁴ Darwall, Stephen. “Resentment and Second-Personal Resentment” In (Ed.), *Honor, History, and Relationship: Essays in Second-Personal Ethics II*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, <http://www.oxfordscholarship.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199662609.001.0001/acprof-9780199662609-chapter-5>.

¹⁵ Darwall, Stephen, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability*, Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 2009.

Darwall explains “freedom of the will is a necessary presupposition of a perspective we implicitly adopt whenever we relate *to* one another in the way that is distinctive of persons.”¹⁶ In contrast, third-personal attitudes such as Nietzschean resentment take freedom of the will to be an illusion that the man of herd morality tells himself in order to cope with shame and inferiority. These attitudes are not reciprocal; they engage with concepts of hierarchy, rather than morality which Darwall takes to be engaged with reciprocally. Thus, to Darwall, third-personal attitudes cannot competently be employed to hold others accountable.

In Nietzsche’s parable of the lambs and the “birds of prey,” the lambs blame the birds of prey when they claim the “right to make [them] *responsible* for being birds of prey.”¹⁷ But Darwall dismisses any conception of Nietzschean resentment tracking moral accountability because “Resentment causes distorted evaluations of merit and demerit, of traits and conduct as meriting esteem or contempt...[yet] any such change in third-personal evaluations of this kind cannot give rise to the distinct second-personal judgments that are implicated when we hold people morally accountable, and, therefore, that are involved in judgments that are distinctive of morality, including moral evil.”¹⁸

Hence, he argues that Nietzschean resentment does not arise from a second-personal “demand for respect”¹⁹ which is necessary to make claims on others and hold them accountable. It seems that this distinction Darwall argues for comes from his taking up of second-personal ethics and the distinct characterization of blame as a Strawsonian reactive attitude. But as I shall argue next, it is not merely that Nietzsche is speaking of a wholly distinct attitude from Darwall’s blame which conceptually links moral obligation and accountability, nor that

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Nietzsche maintains a different conception of freedom of the will. It is that Nietzsche's view that morality is born of resentment is from an anti-realist framework that does not take moral obligations to exist. On the other hand, Darwall's second-personal framework must take such entities to exist in order to begin.

V. Realism about Moral Obligation

Arguably, it is only after taking moral obligations to exist, separating them from the moral recommendations, and defining the distinct Strawsonian reactive attitude of blame in its terms that Darwall can argue that reasons exist to comply with moral obligation. Hence, his entire framework rests on our being realists about moral obligations.²⁰ Thus, any anti-realist Nietzschean arguments²¹ against Darwall's construction can be easily deflected. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche writes that "Whatever has *value* in our world now does not have value in itself, according to its nature—nature is always value-less, but has been given value at some time."²² For Nietzsche, moral judgments and evaluations are "images" and "fantasies" which are mind-dependent, and there exist no objective moral facts, let alone ones about moral obligation.²³

²⁰ In making this diagnosis, I use "realism" in a broad sense. Namely, all I mean to convey is that we need to be convinced that moral obligations exist in some fashion that is not up to us or our attitudes. On this broad construal, realism can include positions that are otherwise called constructivism, positions that have been developed in the Kantian tradition. According to these views, moral norms are constructed by practical reasoning, or in some other way by our rational agency. I set aside the complexities of this discussion. What matters for current purposes is that, on these kinds of views, moral norms are not up to the attitudes of some particular person or set of persons. Their existence is explained by reference to the very nature of practical reasoning.

²¹ I follow Brian Leiter's essay in his and John Richardson's volume "Nietzsche" (Oxford University Press, 2001) in taking Nietzsche to be an anti-realist.

²² Nietzsche, "The Gay Science," 301.

²³ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, ed. M. Clark & B. Leiter, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 119.

Hence, we cannot at all make the distinction between moral obligations and moral recommendations necessary for Darwall.

When we do attempt to argue from the Nietzschean perspective that blame arises from psychological mechanisms such as resentment, which do not conceptually link moral obligation and accountability, Darwall easily responds that then we are not coherently blaming. We are actually experiencing a different sort of attitude than blame since “Blaming someone for what he did differs from any form of looking down on him or thinking less of him,”²⁴ and the man of herd morality and resentment is revenge-seeking, attempting to lower his envied superior to his level. And because we do not even possess the conception of coherently blaming (since it is defined in terms of moral obligation), we cannot counter. We see Darwall is not concerned with incoherent practices of blame. He is only concerned with actions which are blame-worthy with respect to the definition of moral obligation he outlines earlier. But such practices of blame evade the anti-realist Nietzschean standpoint altogether. Hence, the man of resentment is not coherently blaming and poses no threat to blame’s ability to track moral obligation and link it to culpability.

If we return to the beginning of Darwall’s paper “Making the ‘Hard’ Problem of Moral Normativity Easier,” he argues that reasons for complying with moral obligations are easier to show than prudential or instrumental reasons because the former’s existence is conceptually necessary, while the latter’s is conceptually open. As I have shown, this is insofar as we take moral obligations to exist. But once we commit to the idea of moral obligations existing, does it not already become easier to show that reasons to comply with them exist? Once we commit to the existence of moral obligations, aren’t we committed to distinguishing and defining them?

²⁴ Darwall, “The ‘Hard’ Problem,” 12.

Then, given that moral obligations may not even be “instantiated,”²⁵ how can we adequately deny that they are linked to blame? And so notions of blame and coherent blame can seemingly be distinguished as one likes. It is only after taking the antecedent of the “if-then” argument to be true—that moral obligations to truly exist—that Darwall concludes the existence of normative reasons to comply with moral obligations is easier to show than the existence of prudential or instrumental ones.

Thus, Darwall only shows that it is easier to show that normative reasons to comply with moral obligations exist *from a certain framework*. It is only easier to show from the framework that already presumes the existence of moral obligations, which arguably is not a commonly-held belief. Even Darwall admits that showing that moral obligations exist is a much more difficult task than the one he set out.²⁶ Hence, it seems that Darwall buck-passes the difficulty of showing one type of reasons is easier to show over another to the difficulty of showing that moral obligations exist, while claiming that he has proven “easier” all around. From an anti-realist Nietzschean standpoint, it suddenly becomes difficult to show that there exist normative reasons period to comply with moral obligations. How can we prove that there exist normative reasons to comply with non-existent entities? In this framework, where value is placed on the world in a mind-dependent manner and moral systems emerge as illusionary constructions, it indeed seems easier to argue that we have prudential reasons, that we have reasons to comply with prudential norms from the framework that places value on self-defined goods and life-projects. Even from a non-procedural realist perspective, where we may be realist about morality but not necessarily about moral obligations, the task remains difficult. In such alternate frameworks, the problem of moral normativity remains hard.

²⁵ Darwall, “The ‘Hard’ Problem,” 15.

²⁶ Darwall, “The ‘Hard’ Problem,” Video.

VI. Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that Nietzschean attacks to Darwall's positive argument are ineffective because they are incapable of even grasping the distinctness of moral obligation when they do not take them to exist. Ironically, it is precisely the conceptual characterization of (coherently) blaming that shields Darwall's blame from Nietzschean characterizations of blame while, at the same time, limiting his declarations of ease and difficulty to the specific conceptual framework where moral obligations do exist. Hence, it is only of conceptual necessity that normative reasons to comply with moral obligations exist *in given frameworks*, and so ease follows. Just as Darwall qualifies his positive argument with the antecedent "*if we take moral obligations to exist*," the claim that it is easier to show the existence of reasons to comply with moral obligations should be qualified as well.

As a concluding remark, Darwall's argument may run into problems upon transfer into the empirical world. By only showing conceptual necessity, Darwall's argument began and remains in the conceptual sphere. In the empirical world, we have not yet shown whether moral obligations exist. Hence, we cannot clearly apply Darwall's argument to contemporary problems. Thus, when Darwall proclaims "I argue that morality is better off,"²⁷ his diagnosis can ultimately only speak to the conceptual sphere.

²⁷ Darwall, "The 'Hard' Problem," 9.

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