

Second-Personal Reasons and Special Obligations

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Abstract: The paper discusses the second-personal account of moral obligation as put forward by Stephen Darwall. It argues that on such an account, an important part of our moral practice cannot be explained, namely special obligations that are grounded in special relationships between persons. After highlighting the problem, the paper discusses several strategies to accommodate such special obligations that are implicit in some of Darwall's texts, most importantly a disentanglement strategy and a reductionist strategy. It argues that neither one of these strategies is entirely convincing. The last part of the papers sketches a novel account of how to accommodate special obligations in a second-personal framework: According to this suggestion, special obligations might be due to the fact that relationships change the normative authority that persons have over each other.

Keywords: Darwall; Second-personal reasons; agent-relative reasons; special obligations.

1. Introduction

Imagine that a friend of yours needs help moving house and asks you to come over next Saturday in order to carry some boxes. You might not feel inclined to do so – in fact, you might already have made plans to spend a nice day in the park – but you acknowledge a duty of friendship to cancel those plans and help him. You might even acknowledge what Stephen Darwall calls a *second-personal reason* to help your friend: A reason that is “grounded in (de jure) authority relations that an addresser takes to hold between him and his addressee” (Darwall 2006: 4) and that depends “on the possibility of the reason's being addressed person-to-person.” (Darwall 2006: 8). After all, your friend has special authority over you insofar as he can demand actions that not every person can demand – if a stranger asks you to help him move house, you might be justified to reject that request. But you acknowledge that, should you refuse to help your friend by telling him that you already made plans to spend a nice day

in the park, he would be justified in showing reactive attitudes like anger or resentment. At the same time, you might feel shame for failing to live up to your obligation. Thus, you acknowledge a moral obligation to help your friend, but no such obligation to help a stranger.

This example suggests that we owe more to persons with whom we maintain close relationships. Some of these relationships are chosen, like friendships. Some are not chosen, like family relationships. In any case, close relationships give rise to special moral obligations.

Stephen Darwall argues that moral reasons as such are second-personal reasons (Darwall 2006: 91). They are agent-relative reasons (Darwall 2006: 8) and ground claims that a moral agent has against another moral agent. Special obligations and the corresponding reasons seem to fit this description. They clearly seem to be second-personal in nature, as friends or family members have claims against each other that are expressed in second-personal address – after all, personal relationships seem to be paradigm cases of relationships in which persons have the authority to make demands on each other, and in which these demands take the form of direct personal address. However, on closer analysis, it is not clear if Darwall’s influential theory of second-personal reasons can account for the fact that we have special obligations which imply that we owe more to some persons than to others. And this is a problem with the account, as special obligations are an important part of our moral practice – a part that is so important that the fact that a moral theory cannot accommodate such special obligations is a reason to reject the theory.

I will proceed as follows. First, I make some general remarks about Darwall’s account of second-personal reasons. Second, I highlight its problems to explain special obligations. Third, I discuss possible strategies that can be found in Darwall’s writings to deal with this problem; the upshot is that none of these strategies is entirely convincing. Fourth, I sketch a strategy how to account for special obligations in a second-personal framework. However, whether Darwall can accept this strategy remains an open question.

2. Second-Personal Reasons and Agent-Relative Reasons: Preliminary Remarks

Second-personal reasons are reasons that are “grounded in (de jure) authority relations that an addresser takes to hold between him and his addressee. Unlike practical reasons of other sorts, therefore, second-personal reasons must be able to be addressed within these relations” (Darwall 2006: 4.). Second-personal reasons are characterized by their address to other (particular) persons and by presupposing a relationship of normative significance that grounds or authorizes these reasons resp. the address. Darwall emphasizes a circle of four interrelated second-personal notions that entail each other: “The authority to make a claim or demand, a valid (authoritative) claim or demand, responsibility *to* someone (with the relevant authority), and a second-personal reason for acting (that is, for complying with an authoritative claim or demand and so discharging the responsibility)” (Darwall 2009: 134). Darwall stresses that “[e]ach one of these notions entails the other three, and no proposition that does not already involve one of these four concepts can entail any that does” (Darwall 2009: 134).

According to Darwall, the fact that second-personal reasons presuppose “authority relations” makes them agent-relative reasons (Darwall 2006: 8). This is a conceptual matter: Agent-relative reasons are characterized by an “ineliminable reference to the agent for whom they are reasons” (Darwall 2006: 6), and the fact that second-personal reasons arise within relations in which the agent stands to other agents provides such an essential reference.

Agent-relative reasons come in different kinds. It is common to distinguish three types of agent-relative reasons (Nagel 1986). First, there are *constraints* or, as Darwall called them in an earlier essay, “agent-centered restrictions” (Darwall 1986): These are reasons to refrain from performing some act even if performing it would minimize the overall amount of such acts. For example, an agent has an agent-relative reason not to tell a lie himself even if his telling a lie would cause three agents speaking the truth who would be telling lies otherwise. The essential reference to the agent consists in the fact that the agent *himself* ought to refrain from some act. Second, there are *special obligations*. These are the obligations that arise with-

in relationships which were mentioned above. For example, a mother has an agent-relative reason to take care of her children because they are *her* children. Here, the essential reference to the agent consist in the fact that the agent's relationship with some other person is part of the full specification of the reason. Third, there is the class of *options*. These are agent-relative reasons to perform an act because this act is embedded in a personal project that I pursue. The fact that it is *my* project gives me an agent-relative reason to act accordingly, even if I could help more persons pursuing their projects by neglecting my own.

Agent-relative reasons contrast with agent-neutral reasons: Agent-neutral reasons do not contain an essential "back-reference" to the agent for whom they are reasons (Pettit 1987: 75). Such reasons are, as Darwall points out, "state-of-the-world-regarding" (Darwall 2006: 6). They are reasons to realize a certain (valuable) state of the world, and they are reasons for actions insofar as those actions tend to realize that state of the world. But in identifying the state of the world that is to be realized, no reference to the agent is given. For example, the normative goal might be a world with as little lies told as possible. This leaves open the possibility that an agent ought to tell a lie if that lie prevents three other agents from lying. From the point of view of the agent, the state of the world in which she tells a lie is bad, but only because a lie is told, not because it is *her* who tells the lie. Since on an agent-relative account, the reference to the agent has underived normative significance, whereas on an agent-neutral account, agent-relative reasons cannot be reduced to agent-neutral reasons. They are distinct classes of reasons.

But there is another sense in which agent-relative reasons are irreducible: It is not possible to reduce all kinds of agent-relative reasons to one of the types mentioned above. There is a difference between constraints and special obligations, and it is important. Even though some authors understand special obligations as constraints (Stewart 1993: 67; Schroeder 2007: 272-73), there are important differences between these types of agent-relative reasons: Special obligations might be spelled out in terms of reasons to prefer (Enet 2010) – a mother has a

reason to prefer the flourishing of her own child over the flourishing of other children, since part of her special obligations is to be especially concerned with her child's well-being. However, constraints cannot be spelled out this way: "Does the special reason I have to avoid wrongdoing really have anything to do with the outcomes I have reason to prefer? It seems not. Deontological restrictions do not require me to be especially concerned with the wellbeing of my potential victim. They just say that I cannot do certain things to people" (Emet 2010: 10). Furthermore, special obligations depend on special relationships, while constraints do not (McNaughton/Rawling 1998: 43). Thus, even if they share an important formal feature – the reference to the agent – there are important differences between different kinds of agent-relative reasons, and this means that one cannot simply apply insights about one kind of agent-relative reasons to another kind.

This is an important point, because it shows that even if the second-personal account can justify and explain constraints, it does not follow that it can also justify and explain special obligations as well. In order to show that the second-personal framework can accommodate special obligations, it is not enough to show that certain agent-relative reasons are built into the fabric of the account. That being said, I turn to the question whether Darwall's account of second-personal reasons can include not only constraints, but also special obligations.

3. Second-Personal Reasons and Agent-Relative Reasons: The Problem

Darwall understands second-personal reasons as reasons that arise within relationships between persons. One might assume that this covers special obligations, given that such obligations conceptually arise within relationships between persons. However, this assumption is problematic.

Consider first the example that Darwall chooses to explain second-personal moral obligations: An agent causes another agent pain by stepping on his foot. Darwall argues that the victim has a legitimate claim against the offender to remove his foot, and the offender has a directed duty

against his victim to do so, a duty that is owed to the victim, not to some state of the world. Furthermore, it is a duty which is owed to the victim simply in virtue of the victim being a person.

It is important to see that in such a case, we are talking about the violation of a constraint: The victim has the standing to demand the foot being removed because the other person violates the negative duty not to cause avoidable pain. Of course, such a negative duty is grounded in a right, namely the right not to have avoidable pain inflicted to oneself, and given that she has such a right, the victim also has a valid claim. It is true that in this case, the second-personal reason in question is an agent-relative reason, but the agent-relative character of this reason must be understood in terms of constraints. Thus, if Darwall's second-personal analysis of the situation is convincing, he has established the claim that agent-relative *constraints* can be accounted for in his second-personal framework. But as was mentioned above, this does not show that special obligations can also be understood and justified along second-personal lines. They are also agent-relative reasons, but of a different type.

On the contrary, there is some evidence that special obligations *cannot* be understood along second-personal lines. The agent-relative reasons of special obligations seem to be second-personal in nature, but Darwall's framework offers no rationale for them. Here is why: In order to make a valid claim, an agent must have normative authority – the victim of the violation of a constraint has the authority to make a valid demand on the offender to remove his foot, and this demand is valid because the victim has the necessary normative authority, and she has this authority in virtue of being a person. According to Darwall, the normative authority of persons consists in their “equal accountability” (Darwall 2006: 101). This equal accountability means that persons are accountable against all other persons for violating a moral obligation. This implies that an agent who fails to fulfill his obligation is not only answerable to the person to whom the obligation is owed, but also to the moral community of all persons as moral agents (Darwall 2009: 141). Second-personal reasons “always derive from agents’

relations to one another” (Darwall 2006: 8); but these relations are not to be understood as particular personal relationships between persons, such as friendships or family ties, but as relations within the moral community. And the fact that second-personal reasons derive from “the agent’s place in a network of relations of authoritative claim and demand” (Darwall 2006: 78) does not mean that the agent-relativity of second-personal reasons exceeds the class of constraints, for it is constraints that regulate relations within the moral community. Special obligations, on the other hand, are agent-relative reasons that regulate personal relationships. But these personal relationships are not merely relations between agents as members of the moral community. Thus, special obligations are not part of the circle of second-personal notions. Within this circle, agents appear only as persons, not as participants in particular relationships.

The difference between general moral obligations and special obligations does not amount to the distinction between what Darwall calls “moral obligations period” (Darwall 2013c: 20) on the one hand and “bipolar obligation” (Darwall 2013c: 20) on the other. Bipolar obligations involve the relationship between an obligor and an obligee, whereas moral obligations period arise within relations of persons as members of the moral community. One might think that this distinction mirrors the distinction of special and general moral obligations: Whereas bipolar obligations imply an “individual authority” of an obligee to make a claim against the obligor that nobody else has, moral obligations period imply a “representative authority” that each person has as a representative of the moral community. But this assumption is wrong. The individual authority that is implied by a bipolar obligation is not the kind of special authority that is implied by special obligations, as victims of violated restrictions also have individual authority to make certain claims: I have the individual authority to demand that you take your foot from mine because it is *my* foot, and *I* am the victim. But, again, restrictions are not special obligations. They are general obligations against every member of the moral community.

Thus, special obligations are not the same as bipolar obligations. And the problem remains: If moral reasons are second-personal reasons, and if second-personal reasons are reasons that arise within the moral community, special obligations cannot be accounted for in second-personal terms, as they arise not within the moral community, but within discrete personal relationships. Of course, at this point, there is an easy way out for Darwall: He could simply deny that special obligations are moral obligations and characterize them as quasi-moral obligations.¹ He could then hold that special obligations arise within personal relationships and that all moral reasons are second-personal reasons that arise within the moral community. But why should special obligations not be *moral* obligations? They share important characteristics with other forms of moral obligations: They are other-regarding rather than self-regarding; they have a “second-personal feel”, arising within relations between persons, grounding valid claims and implying answerability; they are, when violated, accompanied by the reactive attitudes analyzed by Strawson which Darwall refers to (Strawson 1962; Darwall 2006: 17). In fact, Darwall seems to accept the moral character of special obligations, as he explicitly accepts a moral “parental obligation” to provide for one’s children (Darwall 2013d: 120).

We can conclude that Darwall’s account of second-personal reasons has problems incorporating special obligations. However, several of his texts implicitly offer strategies to deal with this problem, even though Darwall never explicitly addresses the question of special obligations. In what follows, I will discuss some of these possibilities, showing that none of them is entirely convincing.

4. Possible Strategies

¹This is the strategy that Thomas Scanlon seems to follow. According to Scanlon, there are “obvious similarities between the case of the friendship [...] and that of the morality of right and wrong” (Scanlon 1998: 162), since friendships implies certain demands on behavior, which can be accompanied by feelings of guilt if the agent fails to meet those demands. However, these demands can “conflict with morality” (1998: 166), which of course implies that they are not moral demands themselves.

There are two lines of argument that Darwall could endorse in order to accommodate special obligations in his framework of second-personal reasons: A “disentanglement strategy” and a “reductionist strategy”. I will discuss these two strategies in turn.

4.1 The disentanglement strategy

The disentanglement strategy consists in drawing a distinction between two normative aspects of special relationships: Care and respect (Darwall 2010). Respect is to be understood in general and second-personal terms, care is not. Accordingly, claims of respect are grounded in general features of agents: Being a person is sufficient to have the authority to make a valid claim for respect. Respect is part of the moral requirements that arise within personal relationships: We are morally required to respect our friends and loved ones, and this is not due to the fact that they are our friends or loved ones, but to the fact that they are persons. But there is more to relationships than the kind of respect we owe to persons as such: We *care* for our friends and loved ones. But care is an agent-neutral concept, not an agent-relative one. Thus, it is not second-personal either. The obligations that arise within special relationships, one might claim, are to be described in second-personal terms, but relationships also imply a caring attitude which is not second-personal and thus not obligatory.

In order to see why this strategy is not convincing, one must look closer at Darwall’s understanding of care. An agent who care for another person has reasons for action, reasons to promote the welfare of the person one cares for. But such “considerations of welfare present themselves as agent-neutral, rather than agent-relative. From the perspective of sympathetic concern, what benefits the cared for seems not only good for him; it seems a good thing absolutely (agent-neutrally) that he benefited in this way” (Darwall 2002: 15). The idea seems to be the following: In caring, one recognizes the value of the cared for. However, this value is not generated by caring; rather, caring is an appropriate response to the intrinsic value of the object of one’s care. For example, the mother who cares for her children recognizes her chil-

dren's value as persons. The children have this value, independent of their mother caring for them, and this means that the children's value is not relative to their mother. It is not agent-relative, but agent-neutral value. Since reasons of care are generated by agent-neutral value, they are also agent-neutral in character (Darwall 2002: 15). As agent-neutral reasons, they are "state-of-the-world-regarding": They express concern "first and foremost [...] for the state of the world in which the cared-for flourishes" (Darwall 2010: 164).

Given that second-personal reasons are agent-relative reasons, and given that reasons of care are agent-neutral reasons, reasons of care are not second-personal reasons. The second-personal reasons that arise within special relationships are therefore limited to reasons of respect that arise between persons as members of the moral community, and therefore also between persons as participants in special relationships. There might be "special responsibilities" within relationships, but these are not special obligations in the sense of owing more to specific persons. Rather, a special responsibility is a general moral obligation that arises only in special circumstances: "We make ourselves vulnerable to and reveal ourselves to friends and lovers in ways that we typically do not to strangers. They come to know us in ways that others do not, including some of our most unrespectable moments, not just when we are less than presentable, but also when we have subjected them to injuries and betrayals, petty and grave. I think this is partly what makes respect from them so important to us and contempt so significant" (Darwall 2010: 168). In this line of thought, special responsibilities do not imply that personal relationships carry any normative weight. They merely create situations in which reasons apply that exist independently of the relationship.

This disentanglement strategy is unsatisfactory in two respects. First, the distinction between agent-neutral reasons of care and agent-relative reasons of respect relies on an ambiguous understanding of the terms "agent-neutral" and "agent-relative". When Darwall writes about reasons of care, he understands agent-neutral reasons as objective reasons and contrasts these reasons with subjective reasons, which are "reasons for acting for the agent himself, but no

one else” (Darwall 2002: 20). On this understanding, agent-relative reasons resemble what is sometimes called “reasons of one’s own” (Sie et al. 2004). But this, of course, is not the only way to understand agent-relative reasons, and, more importantly, it is not the understanding that Darwall has in mind when he characterizes second-personal reasons as agent-relative reasons: Second-personal reasons ground agent-centered restrictions, but agent-centered restrictions, although agent-relative, are certainly not reasons only for specific agents. They are reasons for every member of the moral community.

To put this point differently: Darwall suggests that reasons of care are agent-neutral reasons because they are generated by agent-neutral value – the value of the person one cares for. But if that is the case, it is unclear why reasons of care are agent-neutral, whereas reasons of respect are agent-relative. After all, reasons of (recognition) respect are generated by the intrinsic worth of persons, and thus from agent-neutral value (Darwall 2002: 78). If reasons of respect are generated by agent-neutral value, and if reasons that are generated by agent-neutral value are agent-neutral reasons, why are reasons of respect agent-relative, rather than agent-neutral?

The disentanglement strategy relies on the claim that reasons of care are agent-neutral reasons because they are generated by agent-neutral value, and insofar as this claim is implausible, so is the disentanglement strategy. But even if this problem could be solved, another problem with the disentanglement strategy arises.

It is plausible to ground reasons of care in the value of the cared for. There must be some normative grounding of practical reasons, and the fact that I am caring for someone or the fact that I have a relationship with someone does not provide an agent with the final ground of such reasons (Keller 2013). But even if the value of the cared for generates reasons of care, some further story must be told that explains why I have stronger reasons to care for a specific person rather than another – if the value of my children provides me with reasons of care that are generated by the value of my children, why do I have special reason to care for them ra-

ther than for some other children? Other persons have some reason to promote my children's wellbeing, and I have some reason to promote other children's wellbeing, but I have *stronger* reason to promote the wellbeing of my own children rather than the wellbeing of strangers. But Darwall offers no rationale for my having stronger reason to care for my loved ones.

To see that the strength of reasons of care is stronger within, compare two worlds: One in which B flourishes and A, who very much cares for B, is responsible for B's flourishing, and one in which B flourishes, but A had nothing to do with B's flourishing. It seems obvious that A can reasonably prefer the first world over the second, and this suggests that A's reasons of care are not merely agent-neutral reasons. The fact that it might be important for A that *she* is responsible for B's flourishing introduces an essential reference to A into her reason of care, making it agent-relative. But there is also another dimension of agent-relativity at work here: Not only might A prefer to be responsible for B's flourishing; B might have a valid claim against A to be responsible for B's flourishing. Consider the example of a neglected child with good foster parents who took care of her and realized the state of the world in which the child flourished. It seems that the fact that the child flourishes does not change the fact that she has a valid complaint against her parents for neglecting her. And this complaint is valid because *they* did not take any measures to be responsible for this child's flourishing. But this again introduces an agent-relative element. Whether we look at the caring person or the cared for person, reasons of care cannot be characterized merely in agent-neutral terms. And this suggests that the special relationship between parent and child implies second-personal reasons that are not simply based on the "recognition respect" (Darwall 1977) that is grounded by mere personhood. Rather, there are second-personal and agent-relative reasons of care.

If that is the case, special obligations cannot be accounted for by drawing a distinction between agent-relative and second-personal reasons of respect on the one hand and agent-neutral reasons of care on the other. Reasons of care are (in part) agent-relative and second-personal as well. But these second-personal reasons of care are not part of the circle of sec-

ond-personal notions, as they are not generated by mere personhood, but partly by personal relationships. We might thus look for another strategy to accommodate special obligations in a second-personal framework: The reductionist strategy.

4.2 The reductionist strategy

The reductionist strategy consists in reducing special obligations to some other phenomenon for which an account can be given in second-personal terms. Different ways of reduction are possible.

First, one might try to reduce special obligations to obligations that arise from promises. The obligations that arise from promises can be accounted for in second-personal terms (Darwall 2013e), and if it is possible to reduce special obligations to obligations from promises, this amounts to a convincing account of special obligations in second-personal terms.

The idea that there are structural similarities between promises and duties that arise from close relationships is defended by several authors. Ross famously objects against utilitarianism that it “seems to simplify unduly our relations to our fellows. It says, in effect, that the only morally significant relation in which my neighbours stand to me is that of being possible beneficiaries by my action. [...] They do stand in this relation to me, and this relation is morally significant. But they may also stand to me in the relation of promisee to promiser, of creditor to debtor, of wife to husband, of child to parent, of friend to friend, of fellow countryman to fellow countryman, and the like; and each of these relation is the foundation of a *prima facie* duty [...]” (Ross 2002 [1930]: 19). Ross seems to understand both promises and relationship-dependent obligations as cases of special obligations, and contemporary philosophers follow him in this regard (Hoff Sommers 1986: 445; McNaughton/Rawling 1998: 42). *Prima facie*, this might seem plausible, since there are obvious similarities between promises and relationship-dependent duties. When I promise to pay you five dollars, I have an obligation to pay *you* five dollars, but I have no obligation to pay five dollars to everybody. Similarly, I

have an obligation to help my friend move house, but I do not have an obligation to help everybody move house. Promises and obligations from relationships are similar in that they are owed to specific persons, rather than to person in general.

There are other similarities between promises and relationship-dependent duties. Darwall rightly emphasizes that not everybody has the right to make promises: In accepting a promise, one recognizes the competence of the promiser to keep it. “Accepting a promise involves entrusting an action to someone and giving him the responsibility for doing it. If we accept someone’s promise and subsequently try to usurp control by offering extra incentives or even doing the promised thing ourselves, the promiser may be entitled to object though our conduct might otherwise have been permissible” (Darwall 2013e: 148). At least on the surface, relationship-dependent duties are similar: Friends might see it as insulting to be offered extra incentives – say, money – for fulfilling a duty of friendship. Promises and relationship-dependent duties thus not only imply a duty, but also a right of the duty-bearer, namely the right to fulfill their duty, without being offered extra incentives (of course, this right can be waived).

Furthermore, both promises and at least some relationship-dependent duties imply what Darwall calls “second-personal transactions” (Darwall 2013e: 149). They involve invitation and uptake in order to be binding. In the case of promises, the invitation consists in one party making the promise, whereas the uptake consists in the other party accepting it. A similar structure of invitation and uptake is often involved in relationships, especially in friendships: One party offers an invitation to start a relationship (which, of course, is not explicitly such an invitation), and the other must accept this offer. Without this kind of invitation and uptake, a relationship does not develop, and without a relationship, there is no relationship-dependent duty. Of course, close relationships usually develop over time, and this implies a series of invitations and uptakes – invitations and uptakes to start a relationship, but also to prolong or deepen it. But even if it is not possible to pinpoint the existence of a friendship to a specific

event, friendships follow the structure of second-personal transactions that involve invitation and uptake.

However, in spite of these similarities between promises and relationship-dependent duties, there are also important differences. First, even if promises and special obligations are analogous, this analogy holds only in the case of relationships between consenting adults, since only in these cases one can speak of second-personal transactions that establish the relationship. But there are important cases of special obligations that do not fit this description – family relationships being an important example. A parent-child-relationship does not rest on second-personal transactions, but it is an important source of relationship-dependent duties – duties that are not established by invitation and uptake and that are therefore in an important respect different from promises.

Another important difference between promises and relationship-dependent duties concerns the way in which a relationship relates to a duty. In the case of relationship-dependent duties, the duties arise *because of the relationship*. It is because Al is my friend that I have an obligation to help him move house, whereas I do not have such an obligation to Brian, who is a complete stranger to me. Thus, there is a conceptual and logical priority of the relationship over the obligation. In the case of promises, however, the priority is with the obligation: If there is a special relationship between promiser and promisee, this relationship holds *because of the obligation*. It is because I promised Chris to do something that I now stand in a special relationship to him, while I do not stand in such a special relationship to Donald, whom I have promised nothing. In these cases, the obligation has conceptual and logical priority over the relationship. In this regard, duties that arise from promises are more like restrictions: If I step on your foot, I have established a special relationship between you and me. However, this special relationship is grounded in the fact that I have a specific obligation towards you, namely: to remove my foot from yours. The obligation does not follow the relationship. Rather, the relationship follows the obligation.

If this is correct, it follows that the second-personal account of promises is not sufficient to accommodate relationship-dependent duties in the second-personal framework. Rather, it can give us further insight about the second-personal character of restrictions. We must therefore look somewhere else for a second-personal account of relationship-dependent duties.

The most promising strategy consists in reducing special obligations to obligations that arise within a “Gilbertian joint activity” (Darwall 2010: 158). Joint activities in Gilbert’s sense are performed by “plural subjects” (Gilbert 1996b: 184) which are constituted by joint commitments of two or more persons. Such joint commitments can include shared goals, shared beliefs or shared principles. This wide understanding of plural subjects makes it possible to understand not only relationships between consenting adults, but, for example, also families as plural subjects in the relevant sense (Gilbert 1996b: 188f.). Plural subjects imply special obligations between their individual members, and these special obligations are duties of assistance: “[...] there is a sense in which the parties [...] are obligated to come to one another’s aid. By definition, each one is committed to promoting their ‘cause’” (Gilbert 1996c: 221).

Like promises, Gilbertian joint activities can be accommodated in second-personal terms. In fact, their very existence seems to depend on a presupposed second-personal authority of the participants. Unlike promises, however, the special relationship between members of such a plural subject is not generated by an obligation. The obligation depends on the relationship: Once the members have constituted a plural subject, they have special obligations against each other. The relationship has conceptual priority over the obligation, and special obligations implied by plural subjects are agent-relative reasons of a distinct kind, rather than a subclass of constraints.

Can special obligations be accommodated within a second-personal framework by characterizing personal relationships as Gilbertian plural subjects? Two considerations cast doubt on this. First, Gilbert explicitly claims that the special duties of assistance between members of plural subjects consist in helping the other parties promoting the common cause. This seems

to be unproblematic in cases in which the plural subject is formed by a common goal of the parties. If two persons form a plural subject by having the common goal of taking a walk together (Gilbert's famous example), they have duties of assistance like: Helping each other up in case one stumbles and falls, offering a rest if one falls behind, etc. These duties of assistance do not extend the context of walking together. For example, the participants of the walk have no duty to help each other out in financial problems.

However, in the case of personal relationships, it is less clear what the content of the duties of assistance to realize a common cause is. Is a friendship adequately characterized by two persons having the common goal to form and uphold a friendship? Formulated this way, it sounds fetishistic, as if friends do not care about each other as specific persons, but rather about the relationship that they share.

One might object that caring for a person and caring for a relationship are closely related – we care about our friendships and want to uphold them because we care about our friends. This might be so, but a second question remains: Are duties of assistance within relationships necessarily related to the common cause of the relationship, regardless of the exact specification of the common cause? Take the example of your friend moving house again. Clearly, the relationship between you and your friend is not characterized by the common cause of your friend moving house. Let's say the common cause consists in fact in upholding the friendship. But then the question arises: In which way is your helping your friend moving house an act in which you help *him* to uphold your relationship? The duties of assistance consist in helping the other party to contribute to the realization of the common cause. But it is not as if the friendship would cease to exist if you do not help your friend; also, it is not as if your friend would lose his desire to uphold a friendship with you in case you do not help him. You help him move house – you do not help him upholding a friendly attitude towards you. Of course, he *might* lose his interest in your friendship because he is too disappointed by your failure to live up to the demands of friendship. But even in this case, it seems odd to say that your duty

of assistance concerns his friendly attitude towards you. Again, your duty of assistance concerns his need of help to move house. Therefore, it is unclear in which way duties of assistance that arise within personal relationships can be specified as reciprocal help to realize the common cause of the relationship.²

These considerations suggest that it is not possible to reduce personal relationships to plural subjects. Accordingly, special obligations cannot be reduced to obligations based on joint activities in a Gilbertian sense. Thus, the reductionist strategy fails: Relationship-dependent duties cannot be accounted for in a second-personal framework by reducing them to some other phenomenon for which a second-personal account can be given. In what follows, I try to sketch a possible way of incorporating relationship-dependent duties within a second-personal framework.

5. Concluding Remarks: Special Obligations and Reason's Strength

It is important to see – and Darwall seems to embrace this thought – that relationship-dependent duties are not to be understood as duties that arise from reasons which are generated by the relationships in question. Darwall rightly points out that the reason to care for a person is generated by the value of that person, which is independent from the relationship in which one stands to that person. This can be seen in the example of my friend moving house: My ultimate reason to help my friend moving house is the fact that he needs help, and his need for help exists independent of our friendship.³ However, other people might need help to move house as well; in these cases, I also have a reason for action, but it does not amount to some kind of obligation. Strangers cannot demand my help in the same way my friend can demand that I assist him.

²For further problems with reducing personal relationships to shared intentions or joint commitments, see Betzler (2008).

³This consideration also speaks against seeing relationships as Gilbertian plural subjects, since Gilbert makes it clear that it is the relationship that actually generates reasons. Cf. Gilbert (1996d: 288).

The difference between these cases – the stranger on the one hand and my friend on the other hand – can be understood as a difference in the strength of the reasons in question. My reason to help my friend is stronger than my reason to help a stranger, as I have an obligation to help my friend, whereas I merely have a reason to help the stranger. But the reason is the same in both cases – the person needs help. This suggests that the friendship can be seen as what Jonathan Dancy calls an “intensifier” (Dancy 2004: 41f.): It alters the strength of my reason, which in turn leads to an obligation. This amounts to a difference in the authority relations between me and my friend on the one hand and me and a stranger on the other hand: My friend has greater authority, as he has the authority to demand things from me that mere strangers do not have.

On such an account, a relevant difference between constraints and relationship-dependent duties could be this: Constraints are based on relations that all persons have as members of the moral community; they imply equal accountability and equal authority relations. This means that the authority that persons have as members of the moral community is sufficient to make a valid demand to any other person to respect such restrictions. In the case of certain duties of assistance, the mere fact of personhood does not ground an authority that is sufficient to make a valid demand. Rather, the relationship increases the authority of the participants to demand things from each other, which is why friends can demand things from each other that strangers can merely request.

These are only suggestions; I am not sure whether Darwall can accept different authority relations that ground different moral obligations. The problem seems to be that such a strategy breaks the circle of second-personal notions that is at the heart of Darwall’s theory of moral obligation, since it opts for a class of moral obligation that is not intrinsically connected to the equal accountability of persons as members of the moral community. If the second-personal account of moral reasons and moral obligation can accommodate special obligations thus remains to be seen.

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