

## RELATIONAL ROOTS

This paper explores the best way to develop the increasingly fashionable view I will call *relational morality*. This view concerns the structure of morality and its requirements. It is neither a metaethical view about what explains the normativity of moral requirements nor a normative ethical view about the content of these requirements. Instead, it claims that moral requirements should be understood in fundamentally relational terms.

For the sake of this exploration, I assume the soundness of relational moralists' complaints about competing views on the structure of morality. In brief, these complaints are that appeals to *evaluative* notions and *merely deontic* notions (e.g., *reasons*, *duties*, or *oughts*) are inadequate to make sense of *relational deontic* facts—such the fact that I would *wrong you* by performing a particular action, or that I *owe it to you* to perform a particular action. Articulating relational judgments like these requires specifying both agential “poles” of the bipolar relation in question. The trouble with competing views is a familiar one: just as we cannot derive *deontic* judgments directly from *evaluative* ones, we cannot derive *relational* judgments from *merely deontic* ones or *evaluative* ones.

These complaints yield the conclusion that morality must in some sense be *relational all the way down* if we are to do justice to the idea that we owe things to others and are capable of wronging them. This way of understanding the dialectic pushes the relational moralist to pick her primitive. She must identify a relational notion to install at morality's foundation—one that plausibly forms the basis for the edifice of morality as we know it.

Darwall selects the *authority relation*.<sup>1</sup> The notion of authority is fundamentally relational: we cannot articulate it without specifying both agential poles of the relation: one cannot have authority simpliciter; she has it *over* someone else. Darwall's view, however, renders moral requirements implausibly arbitrary. It's true that the exercise of legitimate authority generates directed duties; but many moral requirements seem to require no such exercise. They *precede* the making of a demand rather than depending on it.

Ariel Zylberman picks *claims* as his primitive. A claim is a corollary of a directed duty: I have a directed duty to  $\phi$  owed to you iff you have a claim to my  $\phi$ -ing. According to the view he calls *Relational Primitivism*, our moral obligations are explained by others' *original claims*. This label is a bit tendentious, since there are other relational notions one might take as primitive. So I will call his view *Claim Primitivism*:

**CP.** In the primary case, the moral ought represents actions required as the objects of original claims, that is, those claims necessary for the status of personhood.<sup>2</sup>

As a solution to the problem that animates relational moralists, CP appears unsatisfying. We wanted to know what explains the fact that our moral obligations are directed duties. The answer

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<sup>1</sup> Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint*.

<sup>2</sup> Zylberman, “Relational Primitivism,” 408. This is Zylberman's own statement of the view.

on offer is that others have claims to the actions these obligations require. But a claim, one might think, is simply a directed duty viewed from a different angle.

Furthermore, stopping the explanatory chain at claims appears premature, since it seems perfectly sensible to assume that there are *grounds* for our claims. These grounds show their face in moral reasoning, which often seems to proceed on the assumption that certain considerations—such as the way an action will affect an individual’s interests—might *make it true* that the person in question has a moral claim to some action.

We can illuminate these difficulties with Zylberman’s view by considering his criticism of Wallace’s relational view.<sup>3</sup> Wallace suggests that a person’s claims are ultimately “anchored” in her interests as filtered through contractualist reasoning. Zylberman complains that this view illicitly attempts to derive relational facts about claims from nonrelational facts about the importance of interests or the value of wellbeing. Be this as it may, the appeal to interests helps show what’s missing from CP. It seems right that whether I have a claim to some action depends on some further facts. And it seems right that when we try to ascertain whether someone possesses a claim, we reason by appeal to these further facts and are correct to do so. A view that says otherwise seems to render this moral practice utterly mysterious, and casts moral claims as utterly arbitrary.

If the relational moralist cannot appeal to nonrelational facts as the grounds of claims, but should not leave claims unexplained, what notion should she instead treat as primitive? My answer is we can articulate a relational ideal of interpersonal recognition constituted by proper attention to and consideration of certain features of moral persons. Just as we think that there is an ideal of practical reason that involves attentiveness to the reasons one has even when these reasons do not give rise to practical requirements, I submit there is an ideal of interpersonal relations that involves attentiveness to certain features of the other person, even where these reasons do not suffice to ground claims. If I fail to take your interests into account, for example, I fail to fully recognize you.

Notice that your interests here do not gain significance because they are valuable, but because proper attention to them is partially constitutive of a relational ideal. Such features, I will say, offer us *relational reasons*. They are the sort of things that can ground claims. But they also help us better understand other moral phenomena.

Gratitude, for example, seems to be a fitting response when someone responds to relational reasons though we had no claim to their doing so. And the resentment licensed by suberogation appears to be a fitting reaction to the failure to respond to a relational reason, even where this feature did not suffice to ground a claim. These other important applications of the notion of a relational reason show that it’s not an ad hoc solution to the problem for the relational moralist, but rather an independently plausible concept that plays a number of important roles in our moral landscape.

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<sup>3</sup> Wallace, *The Moral Nexus*.