

A Defense of First-Personal Phenomenological Experience: Responses to Sticker and Saunders

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Abstract:

In this paper, I respond to questions Sticker and Saunders raise about integrating third-personal interactions within my phenomenological first-personal account of moral obligatedness. Sticker argues that third-personal interactions are more central for grounding moral obligatedness than I admit. Saunders turns things around and suggests we might not even be able to access third-personal interactions with others at the level one would need to in order to secure proper moral interactions with them. I argue in response that both these challenges misunderstand something about my phenomenological first-personal account of the grounding of moral obligation. Sticker assumes that I make absolutely no room for third-personal interactions as important for morality, but that is not the case. And Saunders assumes that first-, second- and third-personal interactions demand phenomenological access to oneself and others as transcendently free, but I deny that claim. I will consider each of these challenges in turn.

Keywords

Kant, Phenomenology, First-Personal

I welcome the interesting questions that both Sticker and Saunders raise about how properly to integrate third-personal interactions within one's most basic and necessary first-personal consideration of one's moral demands. Essentially, Sticker (2016) argues that third-personal interactions are more central for grounding moral obligatedness than I

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admit. Saunders (2016) turns things around and, on the basis of epistemic and/or metaphysical worries, suggests that we might not even be able to access third-personal interactions with others at the level one would need to in order to secure proper moral interactions with them.

I find that both these challenges, in their own ways, misunderstand some basic claims of my first-personal account of the grounding of moral obligation. Sticker assumes that I make absolutely no room for third-personal interactions as important for morality, but that is not the case. And Saunders assumes that first-, second- and third-personal interactions demand phenomenological access to oneself and others as transcendently free, but I deny that claim. I will consider each of these challenges in turn.

STICKER:

Firstly, although I will not go into detailed rebuttal of them here, I do not agree with Sticker that every moment in Kant's texts he identifies as third-personal actually are (or are solely) third-personal in the relevant sense. In short, just because Kant mentions a person other than himself or the reader in his discussions of moral philosophy does not necessarily mean that Kant is intending for the reader to reflect on that person as if encountering him or her observationally or third-personally in the world.

One might assume (as I think Sticker does) that in order to have examples of the first-personal grounding of morality, we would need to have Kant speaking in his own voice (viz., Kant saying that "I" thus think or feel this way or that). In fact, Kant rarely (if ever?) does this. But sometimes (indeed, frequently), he uses examples of persons other than himself or the reader to display an example of, and to motivate the reader's own, *first*-personal reflection. That is, he presents the example as an opportunity to enter that person's mind-set, as if first-personally (viz., to imagine oneself as the person in the example). Use of persons other than Kant and the reader are thus not necessarily references to Kant asking us to think of our engagement with other persons third-personally as the ground of moral judgment making. They might instead be, and often are, ways to trigger first-personal reflection in the reader.

There are however some examples which Sticker rightly notes of persons to which Kant refers which are indeed intended as being utilized as a third-personal engagement. That is, Kant does sometimes suggest that we can "access the material that ethicists should work with" (Sticker 2016: 355) through third-personal observation of another person. I agree with Sticker that these encounters of other persons can be useful and that one should "work with" such examples; I do not deny that they are important for moral reflection generally. My only claim is that such engagements, on their own, are neither necessary nor sufficient for one specific moral task: the grounding of one's sense of moral obligatedness. Even when one relies upon the engagements Sticker rightly describes as third-personal, whatever

moral value they end up having for us, they are not successful in themselves in grounding one's own moral obligatedness. To do that, one needs to take up what one has seen in another and reflect upon it attentively and first-personally within oneself, applying it to one's own moral condition.

Sticker seems, however, to assume I make the claim that the grounding of morality is only first-personal and, indeed, that most every task involved in being a moral agent (and not just this central moral task of grounding one's obligatedness) is only first-personal. But both these assumptions are too strong. The claim to which I *am* committed is more modest than this: while both second- and third-personal engagements can be *important* in coming to a proper realization of the moral law depending upon the contingencies of one's particular moral psychological state (in Sticker's (2016: 355) language, that these third-personal engagements provide "resources in addition to first personal experience for accessing the material that ethicists should work with"), neither second- nor third-personal engagement is either *necessary* or *sufficient* for the singular and precise moral task of grounding one's recognition of the bindingness of the moral law upon oneself. You can find this argument in Chapter 9 (2013: 207ff) of my recent book where I respond to Stephen Darwall's suggestion that one's obligatedness to morality is grounded second-personally, not first-personally.

As such, it should be clear that, although first-personal engagement is necessary for this precise and central moral task, it is also possible to supplement this first-personal engagement with relevant third- (or second-) personal encounters that trigger the proper first-personal encounter. Further, it should also be clear that there are other things a moral agent needs to do besides affirming her obligatedness (e.g., assessing her success in being moral, or deciding how to enact her moral obligations in a particular situation), and that these tasks might very well involve or even require both second- and third-personal engagement. In the end, then, a first-personal recognition of the moral law is always necessary, though not always sufficient, for affirming one's moral obligations. Really to understand the nature of the bindingness of the moral law (and especially its power to constrain *my* inclinations), I need to be attentive to my own internal appreciation of the force of moral demands over my desires for happiness. But this leaves lots of room for third- and indeed second-personal interactions informing and enhancing our lives as moral agents.

I thus am happy to grant that there are times when first-personal reflection is not, in itself, sufficient to affirm an awareness of my obligations in a particular case. Sometimes it is necessary to get knocked out of my unthinking or stubborn way of proceeding by some significant unexpected encounter with someone directly (Darwall's Aretha Franklin example: "Think! What ya' trying to do to me?") or observationally (Kant's own example that the humble person strikes me down whether I choose it or not). But in either

of these cases, one's second- or third-personal encounter will not culminate in affirmation of my moral obligatedness unless I take up that experience first-personally. We need, in other words, to take up that example in accordance with Kant's own directive for moral education:

“[a] good example (exemplary conduct) should *not* serve as a model but only as a proof that it is really possible to act in conformity with duty. So it is not comparison with any other human being whatsoever (as he is), but with the idea (of humanity), as he ought to be, and so comparison with the law, that must serve as the constant standard of a teacher's instruction. (6:480/223, emphasis added)

True moral judgment involves me comparing my would-be maxim *not* with any person second- or third-personally, but with the law in myself which affirms the idea of humanity (as dignified, worthy of respect). The appeal to the 'idea of humanity' and 'comparison with the law', *not* with other persons is what emphasizes the movement back *from* whatever second- or third-personal encounters might trigger some new and more proper reflection *to* the first-personal internal reflections that will ultimately make proper use of that second- or third-personal contact. An autonomous being must *always* eventually access her own tools which assure not only that she makes *choices*, but that she makes *autonomous* and *virtuous* choices. Those tools are 'the idea of humanity' and its 'law', both of which are to be found *within her*.

So, when Sticker (2016: 348) asserts that “the method Kant recommends to the ethicist and that we find employed in crucial passages of his practical philosophy is not solely first-personal,” we are in agreement. And when he asserts that “For [Grenberg], a third-person perspective is not apt for practical philosophy,” (Sticker 2016: 349) he makes a claim that is both too broad and too vague, and one that ultimately ends up not being an accurate statement of my position. I never said that the third-personal approach never provides us with any important 'material practical philosophers should work with.' Rather, I claim that thoroughly third-personal approaches or information can never ground an affirmation of my being obligated.

For more on this question, I refer the reader to “Free, First-Personal Moral Education,” (forthcoming) in *Educational Philosophy and Theory*. In this paper, I consider how both second-personal encounters (with a teacher) and third-personal encounters (through the study of casuistical questions which moral education demands) can be very important in the proper moral education of a person. It is not impossible to integrate such important interactions with persons into one's moral education, but Kant's commitment to autonomy demands that we do this very carefully. In this paper, I consider in more detail how to do just exactly that.

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Whereas Sticker wrongly assumes that I claim the grounding of morality is exclusively first-personal, Saunders (2016: 165) wrongly assumes that the grounding of our knowledge of freedom is “exclusively” first-personal. As such, much of what I’ve said in response to Sticker is relevant also in responding to Saunders. But Saunders goes on to point out a deeper epistemic and/or metaphysical problem that raises issues about relying upon second- or third-personal engagement in one’s moral life, one which pushes some interesting questions about the very nature of moral experience, and I will thus focus my response to him on this more central epistemic and/or metaphysical challenge. In short, Saunders wonders whether transcendental idealism ever allows for even the bare *possibility* of second- or third-personal engagement in the relevant moral sense. I do not address this epistemological question (of whether and how one gains access to other minds) in my book. Saunders is arguing, though, that for first-, second- or third-personal moral reflection to work, one needs access both to oneself and to those others *as* transcendently free via some metaphysical cognition of one’s own as well as their own transcendental freedom. But, so his argument goes, such phenomenological access to oneself or others as transcendently free—or, indeed, any cognitive access to one’s own or another’s transcendental freedom—is not forthcoming.

But I do not accept this argument. One can look to thinkers like Sartre or Levinas who have these worries about the very possibility of some deep metaphysical encounter of the other: if we cannot encounter others as transcendently free, the worry is that we cannot encounter them as persons in their own right but only as objects for our use. But Kant, out of what I would call a certain epistemic humility, does not share those worries. He believes that we can accept other persons as persons while admitting the impossibility of knowing with metaphysical certainty (that is, without having strict phenomenological access to) their status as transcendently free beings.

To see this, one should first recall that, in my book, I do not even argue that we have *first-personal phenomenological* access to *ourselves* as transcendently free (much less that we have or should hope to have access to others *as* transcendently free). Rather, we have phenomenological access to ourselves as *obligated*, then *infer* from that phenomenological experience (via “ought implies can”) to *confidence* in (but, importantly, *not* an experience of and certainly not an absolute certainty in) us having just that freedom necessary to fulfill our obligations.

Saunders’ ideas do, however, raise some interesting further questions for me, questions that I did not address directly in my book, about whether and how to make sense of our moral encounter with other persons. Early in my book, I did reflect upon Kant’s suggestion in the first *Critique* (as part of his discussion of the Third Antinomy) that I can look at other persons third-personally and recognize them as obligated. I argued, though,

that Kant abandons this early idea of grounding one's understanding of one's *own* obligatedness in a third-personal way. He turns instead, in both the *Groundwork* and especially in the second *Critique*, to the first-personal grounding of morality that I go on to defend in my book.

But Saunders' ideas raise further interesting questions for me. Third-personal interactions cannot ground my most basic understanding of *myself* as obligated. But once that affirmation of my obligation is indeed in place through first-personal reflections, might I be able to approach my third-personal interactions with a new depth? That is, just as I can now recognize myself as *obligated*, might I now also be in a better position to recognize *others* as obligated? Might I be capable of a phenomenological encounter of "the other" not as free but as obligated? That is, once I have my first-personal appreciation of the validity of the moral law in place for myself via my phenomenological experience of the conflict between happiness and morality, it might just be that I could now encounter the other phenomenologically when I recognize the very *same* conflict and obligation in him or her. If this were possible, then, once again, I needn't be able to recognize the other as transcendently free in order really to encounter her as a moral agent. I can, rather, with her, as I did for myself, ground a confidence in her freedom based on the phenomenological recognition of her obligatedness.

There is something tempting about this picture. But before accepting it, I would need to work out some potential problems with it. Most centrally, I fear that claiming a felt phenomenological experience of another puts pressure on what exactly felt phenomenological experience is. Essentially, my worry is that I cannot feel what you are feeling, so I cannot have an experience of your conflict between happiness and morality in quite the way that I am able to have that experience of my own conflict. As such, I cannot know for sure whether you are experiencing just the same internal conflict with which I have come to terms in myself. But again, humility might be able to enter the scene here to help relieve existential angst about the other: perhaps there is a way of structuring phenomenological experience such that my inability to feel another's conflict is not as important as my ability somehow to encounter them as conflicted. I'll need to think more about that.

Meanwhile, although my account does assume the need for specifically phenomenological access to my own experience of being obligated (and, importantly, not to my own experience of being transcendently free), I continue to entertain the alternative possibility that we needn't assume that second- or third-personal encounters with *other* persons need to occur (or even *could* occur) *phenomenologically*. To the contrary, they most often (perhaps always?) occur empirically. And yet, this empirical access to others might just be sufficient for utilizing the information I gain from my interactions with them to inform my own phenomenological reflections on my internal conception of duty (including my ability to *recognize* them as and my duty to *treat* them as persons). When I use this empirical

information to inform my internal phenomenological reflection on myself, the result is a deeper first-personal appreciation of what the law within demands of me *here*, with *this* person. The result, that is, is that I accept other persons *as* morally obligated persons.

I will admit that such an account demands that I tell a larger story of how empirical experience could intersect with phenomenological experience. And that story demands that we think about how the empirical time of inner sense intersects with the phenomenological time that is determined via moral epistemic categories or concepts. For more reflection on such matters, I point the reader to: ‘The Practical, Cognitive Import of Feeling: A Phenomenological Account’. In this paper, I begin the reflections on time that I take to be necessary for thinking about the intersection of phenomenological and empirical time.

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