

# On the Normativity of Interpersonal Reality

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## Abstract

When they interact in everyday situations, people constantly create new fragments of social reality: they do so when they make promises or agreements, but also when they submit requests or answer questions, when they greet each other or express gratitude. This type of social reality ‘in the small,’ that we call interpersonal reality, is normative in nature as all other kinds of social reality; what makes it somewhat special is that its normativity applies to the very same persons who create it in their interactions. We first show that interpersonal reality can be accounted for in terms of a suitable concept of interpersonal responsibility, which can be understood as a form of second-personal responsibility (in Darwall’s sense), intentionally co-constructed by two or more agents for themselves. We then introduce certain configurations of interpersonal responsibilities (namely, mutual and joint responsibilities), which are relevant to analyse different types of human interactions.

## Keywords

Social reality; interpersonal reality; interpersonal responsibility; mutual responsibility; joint responsibility.

## 1. Introduction

When they interact in everyday situations, people constantly create new fragments of social reality. They do so when they make promises or agreements, but also when they submit requests or answer questions, when they greet each other or express gratitude. As we have argued elsewhere (Carassa & Colombetti 2013), this type of social reality ‘in the small,’ which we call interpersonal reality, is normative in nature and thus, in this respect, does not differ from other kinds of social reality. What makes interpersonal reality somewhat special is that its normativity is, so to speak, contractual, in that it applies to the very same persons who create it in their interactions. This is not the case with other types of social reality, like for example the world of etiquette, whose norms are understood, by those who endorse them, as being binding also for those who do not actively participate in its creation.

We submit that the normativity of interpersonal reality is created on the background of pre-existing normative competence, which can be understood in the frame of Stephen Darwall’s second-person standpoint (Darwall 2006). The concept we introduce to capture the collective normativity of interpersonal reality we call *interpersonal responsibility*; in the rest of this paper we shall contend that interpersonal reality is constituted by relationships of interpersonal responsibility, which in turn can be understood as those relationships of second-personal responsibility (in Darwall’s sense) that are intentionally co-constructed by two or more agents for themselves.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2 we define interpersonal reality in terms of relationships of interpersonal responsibility. In Section 3 we analyse certain significant subspecies of interpersonal responsibility, namely mutual and joint responsibility. Finally, in Section 4 we draw some conclusions.

## 2. Interpersonal reality

By definition, we consider *interpersonal reality* as the fragment of social reality that two or more agents co-construct for themselves. We follow John Searle (2010) in understanding social reality, in general, as a matter of collectively accepting or recognising positive and negative “deontic powers,” that is, normative relationships of bipolar obligation, right, entitlement, and the like. Searle suggests that the type of acceptance required for the construction of the social world is a form of collective intentionality, which is not reducible to personal intentionality even in conditions of common belief. He has defended this position in many writings, at least since his paper on collective intentions and actions (Searle 1990); in *Making the Social World*, however, he clearly distinguishes between a stronger form of collective intentionality, that he calls *cooperation*, and a weaker form, that he calls *collective recognition* (Searle 2010). The point is that creating a new piece of social reality involves more than what is required to recognise social reality which has been created elsewhere. It is the former type of social reality, which is cooperatively co-constructed by two or more agents, that we call “interpersonal reality.” In other words, interpersonal reality is constituted by those normative relationships that are created by the very same agents who are bound by them; typical examples are the normative relationships resulting from promises, agreements, and the like.

Normative relationships may take different forms, which can be analysed drawing inspiration from Hohfeld’s treatment of legal relationships (Hohfeld 1923). In particular we find it useful to distinguish between two levels of normativity. The first level, that we call *deontic* (from the Greek *déon*, duty), concerns what is obligatory, permissible, impermissible, etc., for an agent to do, in view of the normative relationships that currently bind him or her to another agent.<sup>1</sup> The second level, that we call *kratic* (from the Greek *krátos*, power), concerns an agent’s capacity to create new normative relationships, which in turn may pertain to the deontic or to the kratic level.

Both deontic and kratic relationships are *bipolar* or *directed*,<sup>2</sup> in the sense that they relate two agents holding complementary positions, which we respectively call the *debtor* and the *creditor* of the relationship. An *obligation*, for example, is a deontic relationship of some agent *A* (the debtor of the obligation) to another agent *B* (the creditor of the obligation), which is satisfied if, and only if, *A* performs an action of a given type. The same deontic relationship, viewed from the creditor’s position, can be described as *B*’s *right* against *A*, that *A* performs the action. In Hohfeld’s terms, *A*’s obligation and *B*’s right are *correlative*: as such they should not be regarded as two different normative relationships, but rather as the descriptions of the same relationship from two different viewpoints (the debtor’s and the creditor’s, respectively). Kratic relationships have an analogous structure. For example, *A* may have the stand to order *B* to do *X*, thus creating an obligation of *B* to *A* to do *X*; in such a case we say that *A* has the *power* over *B* to order that *B* does *X*, or that *B* is *liable* to *A* concerning orders to do *X*. Again, the two descriptions are correlative, in the sense that they describe the same relationship from the debtor’s and the creditor’s point of view.

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<sup>1</sup> For simplicity’s sake we limit our treatment to situations involving two agents, but nothing seems to prevent a generalisation to larger groups.

<sup>2</sup> We do not deny that it may make sense to deal with ‘unipolar’ or ‘undirected’ obligations, etc. If at all possible, however, these would not count as normative *relationships*.

Human beings can be bound by different types of normative relationships (moral, social, legal, political, and so on), which differ in many respects and in particular in the processes through which they are brought about. By definition, *interpersonal* normative relationships (like the obligations arising from promises and agreements) are created by the same agents that are bound by them. For example, if Ann and Bob agree to go dancing together next Saturday night, the two of them are both the agents who intentionally create the agreement, and those who are bound by it. On the contrary, normative relationships that are not interpersonal are usually purported, by those who collectively create them, to bind a wider set of agents, whether or not these intend to be so bound; this appears to be typical of social, legal, and moral norms,<sup>3</sup> to which people are considered to be liable even if they do not participate in making them.

All normative relationships, whether deontic or kratic, concern the fact that the debtor is *accountable* or *responsible* to the creditor in a way or another. For example, saying that *A* is obligated to *B* to do *X* is equivalent to saying that *A* is responsible to *B* for doing *X*; and saying that *A* has the power to order to *B* to do *X* is equivalent to saying that *B* will be responsible to *A* for doing *X* if *A* so orders. This suggests that we can take a suitable concept of *being responsible to* as a primitive, in terms of which all normative concepts can be defined.

The concept of responsibility has been extensively analysed in the literature (see for example Fischer 1986; Scanlon 1998, Ch. 6; Frank Paul et al. 1999; Cane 2002). In our view the concept of responsibility that can best serve as the starting point for the analysis of interpersonal reality is Stephen Darwall's notion of responsibility as a second-personal concept (Darwall 2006). According to Darwall, *responsibility to* (i.e., the relationship between an agent and another agent, to whom the former is answerable for something) is one of four irreducible, logically related concepts which, besides responsibility, include *practical authority*, *valid claim or demand*, and *second-personal reason for acting*. In short, the logical connections between the four concepts can be summarised as follows: an agent, *A*, is responsible to another agent, *B*, for doing *X*, if and only if *B* has the practical authority to address to *A* a valid claim or demand that *A* does *X*; in turn, *B*'s valid claim or demand constitutes a second-personal reason for *A* to do *X* (see for example Darwall 2009); in particular, practical authority can be regarded as the correlative of responsibility.

Darwall's concept of practical authority concerns both the deontic and the kratic level. One of Darwall's favourite examples, namely, the practical authority we all have to demand of anybody that they remove their foot from on top of ours (Darwall 2006: 5ff.) is an instance of a second-personal right concerning the integrity of our body, and therefore pertains to the deontic level. On the contrary our practical authority to partake in transactions like promises or agreements (Darwall 2011) is an instance of second-personal power (i.e., the capacity to create new second-personal relationships) and thus pertains to the kratic level.

Beyond the distinction between the deontic and the kratic level, another important difference can be introduced by borrowing two terms from the legal tradition. Both the rights concerning body integrity and the powers to participate in transactions are *erga omnes*, in the sense that they are rights against and powers over everybody. On the contrary, the normative relationships brought about by a successful transaction are *inter partes*, in the sense that they bind only those agents involved in the transaction. It

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<sup>3</sup> We understand that the extent to which a certain type of normative relationship can be qualified as "moral" or "non-moral" may be controversial. Our use of the term is coherent with Strawson's remark that qualifying something as "moral" typically involves an impersonal point of view: «What we have here is, as it were, resentment on behalf of another, where one's own interest and dignity are not involved; and it is this impersonal or vicarious character of the attitude, added to its others, which entitle it to the qualification 'moral'» (Strawson 1962/1993: 84).

follows from what we have said so far that we regard interpersonal reality as constituted by relationships of responsibility, and in particular by those relationships of responsibility that are *inter partes* as clarified above. A normative relationship of this kind we call an *interpersonal responsibility*; in other words, an interpersonal responsibility is a relationship of responsibility that is collectively constructed by those agents who are bound by it. Moreover, by the term *interpersonal authority* we denote the correlative of interpersonal responsibility.

The fact that interpersonal responsibility is a collective construction of its parties has at least two important consequences. The first is that an agent can incur an interpersonal responsibility only intentionally; more precisely, the creation of an interpersonal responsibility (and of its correlative interpersonal authority) requires the intentional contributions of both parties<sup>4</sup>. The second consequence is that a relationship of interpersonal responsibility can be successfully created only if this is common knowledge of its parties. Indeed, *A* can assume the position of debtor in a relationship of interpersonal responsibility to *B* if, and only if, *B* assumes the correlative position of creditor in the same relationship, and this is common knowledge of *A* and *B*. This is not the case with all types of responsibility: for example, Bob may consider himself as responsible of the well-being of his old father irrespective of the fact that the latter does or does not hold Bob to be so responsible; but responsibilities of this type do not involve a ‘contractual’ or ‘transactional’ relationship between a debtor and a creditor—in a word, they are not instances of interpersonal responsibility.

### 3. Interpersonal, mutual, and joint responsibility

In the previous section we have seen that relationships of interpersonal responsibility are intrinsically collective, in the sense that an agent can regard herself as the debtor of an interpersonal responsibility to another agent if, and only if, the latter regards himself as the creditor of the same relationship.<sup>5</sup> From this, however, one should not conclude that the *content* of an interpersonal responsibility (i.e., the activity or state of affairs for which the debtor is accountable to the creditor) is itself collective; in fact, this may or may not be the case, depending on the situation. In this section we turn to this issue; in particular we shall analyse certain significant configurations of interpersonal responsibilities, that we call mutual and joint responsibilities, which differ from the point of view of the ‘allocation of agency’ to the parties.

Let us consider three different examples to be used as paradigmatic scenarios in the following discussion:

1. After dinner, Bob has the habit of smoking a Cuban cigar sitting on the sofa. One day, while he is puffing a gigantic *maduro*, he says to Ann, “I promise that from tomorrow I’ll go smoke in the garden.” To which Ann answers, “Very good idea, Bob!”
2. Ann says to Bob, “If you do the laundry, I’ll make dinner,” and Bob accepts (see Gilbert 2000: 50).
3. Ann and Bob are spending a few days in Buenos Aires. They enter a dancing hall: “Shall we tango?” asks Bob; “Oh, I’d love to,” answers Ann.

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<sup>4</sup> Clearly an agent may accrue a responsibility unintentionally: for example, accidentally causing a damage makes one responsible for compensation; but this would not be a case of *interpersonal* responsibility as we have defined it.

<sup>5</sup> There is a further sense in which interpersonal responsibilities are collective, namely, that creating them requires that the parties carry out a suitable collective activity which, as we have argued elsewhere (Carassa & Colombetti 2013), basically consists in performing communicative acts.

These examples have something in common: in all cases Ann and Bob agree on a course of action (at least in some sense of “agreeing”). But there are also differences: in case 1, there is nothing that Ann is required to do or to refrain from doing; in case 2, Ann and Bob are required to carry out two independent courses of action in parallel; and in case 3, there is one collective activity for Ann and Bob to perform, each of them doing their own part. How are we going to make sense of these differences?

In case 1, Bob promises to Ann that from the following day he will go in the garden to smoke his after-dinner cigar, and Ann accepts the promise. We regard an act of promising to do  $X$  as an offer, made by the promisor to the promisee, to the effect that the promisor takes responsibility to do  $X$ , on condition that the promisee accepts the correlative authority (i.e., the role of the creditor of the responsibility).<sup>6</sup> In case 1 a relationship of interpersonal responsibility of Bob to Ann is successfully created; while this responsibility is irreducibly collective (as we have argued in Section 2), its content involves no collective activity. It is often remarked that even with unilateral promises, like the one of our example, the promisee is not completely ‘passive,’ but is required to do certain things, or at least to abstain from doing certain things; for example, the promisee is supposed not to sabotage the promisor’s attempts to fulfil his promise. But while this is arguably true, it is not sufficient to turn the promisor’s unilateral action into an instance of doing something together with the promisee.

Example 2 can be analysed in similar terms. In this case, however, the interaction between Ann and Bob creates two relationships of interpersonal responsibility that are in a sense ‘interlocked’:

- (i) the responsibility of Ann to Bob, to the effect that Ann will make dinner, on condition that Bob lives up to (ii); and
- (ii) the responsibility of Bob to Ann, to the effect that Bob will do the laundry, on condition that Ann lives up to (i).

We call *mutual responsibilities* two relationships of interpersonal responsibility which are interlocked by conditions of the form (i) and (ii) above. As the example shows, there can be a situation of mutual responsibility even when there is no collective activity that Ann and Bob are required to do together; in other words there may be no activity  $X$  such that Ann and Bob could reasonably describe what they are doing by saying, “We are doing  $X$ .”

Finally, concerning example 3 we say that Ann and Bob are *jointly responsible* for doing something. More precisely,

- (i) Ann is responsible to Bob, to the effect that Ann and Bob dance tango together, with Ann giving an appropriate contribution, on condition that Bob lives up to (ii); and
- (ii) Bob is responsible to Ann, to the effect that Ann and Bob dance tango together, with Ann giving an appropriate contribution, on condition that Ann lives up to (i).

It should be noted that there is a substantial difference between joint responsibilities and non-joint mutual responsibilities, which wholly resides in the structure of their contents (i.e., in the structure of the activities that the agents are required to carry out). In example 2 (a case of non-joint mutual responsibilities), Ann is responsible to Bob for achieving success in making dinner, and Bob is responsible to Ann for separately achieving success in doing the laundry. This means that the failure of one of the two agents to carry out their part would not entail a failure of *both* agents. On the contrary in case 3 each agent is responsible to the other one for their joint success in dancing tango, and this means that the failure of either agent to carry out their part will *eo ipso* constitute a failure of the collective enterprise. We can therefore expect that in the two situations the agents will cope with possible

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<sup>6</sup> This implies that a promise succeeds only if the promisee accepts it (see for example Darwall 2011).

difficulties in different ways. In case 2, for example, if it turns out that there is no laundry powder left, only Bob (and not Ann) is responsible for getting some; of course Ann may have a personal reason to help Bob to do so, but this is not entailed by their agreement. In case 3, on the contrary, if Bob faces a difficulty in doing his part, their joint responsibility is a reason for Ann to help him, because she is responsible (as is Bob) for securing success of the whole joint activity.

Our concept of interpersonal responsibility, and the subordinate concepts of mutual and joint responsibility, appear to be closely related to Margaret Gilbert's notion of joint commitment (Gilbert 1989, 1996, 2000, 2006): both interpersonal responsibilities and joint commitments involve normative relationships, are intrinsically collective, and are intentionally created by groups of agents. However, there are a number of significant differences between our position and Gilbert's:

- we believe that interpersonal normativity presupposes some form of pre-existing second-personal authority (see Section 2);
- while joint commitment always involves doing something as a body, the concept of interpersonal responsibility separates the collectiveness of a responsibility relationship from the collectiveness of its content (this section);
- even when its content is a collective activity, interpersonal responsibility does not presuppose Gilbert's notion of “doing something as a body,” which is constitutive of the definition of joint commitment but seems to us somewhat problematic (this point has been discussed elsewhere, Carassa & Colombetti in press).

#### 4. Conclusions

In this paper we have argued that interpersonal reality (i.e., the part of social reality collectively created by certain agents for themselves) consists of relationships of interpersonal responsibility, understood as a species of second-personal responsibility (in Darwall's sense), with the further condition that relationships of interpersonal responsibility are collectively constructed by the same agents who come to be bound by them. We have then analysed certain significant configurations of interpersonal responsibilities (namely, mutual and joint responsibilities).

The main contribution of this paper concerns the introduction of the concept of interpersonal responsibility as the key normative relationship underlying interpersonal reality. Relationships of interpersonal responsibility share crucial properties with joint commitments, but do not presuppose that the agents who are so related do something together in any strong sense. This allows us to reconcile the fact that interpersonal responsibility is inherently collective from the fact that the content of such responsibility need not be a collective activity.

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