One of the many rich and interesting themes in Gary Watson’s very impressive body of philosophical work is the idea that moral responsibility involves a distinctive kind of interpersonal address. There is a characteristic practice of addressing moral standards to other agents that is associated with at least one prominent form of responsibility, and this practice can help us to understand both the nature of moral requirements and the conditions of responsible moral agency.

I am broadly sympathetic to this suggestion, though I also have some questions about the ways it is developed in at least some of Watson’s many writings on the topic. In what follows I shall offer an interpretation of the practice of addressing moral demands interpersonally, and then consider its significance in relation to two different clusters of issues: responsibility and its conditions, and the nature and source of moral requirements. Throughout I will take Watson’s remarks about moral address as a starting point, drawing out of them some questions for philosophical reflection and some possible paths that could be taken in answering those questions. But ultimately my aim will not be to offer an interpretation of Watson’s own position, so much as to sketch some independent thoughts about moral address that are broadly inspired by his own reflections on this important topic.
1. What It Is.

The idea of moral address makes its first prominent appearance in Watson’s paper on “Responsibility and the Limits of Evil”, but it figures in one form or another in many of his writings on responsibility and its limits. There are several distinct themes that recur in these texts. First, moral address, on Watson’s understanding of it, is familiarly associated with moral demands; thus it is paradigmatically demands that are addressed by us when we participate in this distinctive practice (RLE, 228-9; TFR, 262; TWP, 314).1 To address a demand in this way, furthermore, is not merely to register a fault or defect on the part of another person in their conduct, relative to some moral standard, but somehow goes beyond the attribution of fault or defect. We hold the person to the standard relative to which they are deficient when we address the standard to them as a demand, in a way that is continuous with practices that are familiar outside of moral contexts (such as “being on the hook” for something in a personal or professional relationship [TFR, 274-5]). To address a demand to someone is to take up a stance that is suited for communication to the addressee, though the demand that is addressed does not necessarily need to be expressed discursively (RLE, 230). An important question for the theory of moral address will be to explicate what exactly this stance of holding another to a demand might consist in, so that we can understand how it goes beyond the acknowledgement of moral defect or fault, and how a demand can be addressed to another even if it is not communicated to the addressee directly.

Watson often characterizes moral address as an interpersonal practice, whereby demands are addressed by one person to another. He associates this interpersonal practice with one of the two different “faces” of responsibility that he distinguishes in his paper of the same
name: with responsibility as accountability rather than as attributability. The idea, I take it, is that to be responsible in the accountability sense is to be fit for participation in the interpersonal practice whereby moral demands are addressed by people to each other. Watson characterizes this practice as involving a form of interpersonal relation whereby we are accountable to each other for what we do (TFR, 274-5; PSRS, 17). It is a practice within which we have and undertake responsibilities to other individuals, standing in interpersonal relationships with them that involve subjection to their claims (TWP, 312), so that we are “beholden to” each other for our behavior (TWP, 315-16). A further task for a theory of moral address will be to explain these relational locutions, specifying the way in which we are responsible to each other when we participate in the practice of addressing moral demands to each other.

A third noteworthy theme in Watson’s discussions of moral address concerns its limits. If responsibility as accountability is a matter of one’s fitness to participate in an interpersonal practice of moral address, then the limits of this kind of responsibility will be limits on one’s suitability to be the addressee of moral demands (RLE, 228-9, 233). It is in these terms that Watson proposes to make sense of some of the conditions that are familiarly taken to exempt agents from moral accountability. Thus it is widely (if not universally) assumed that a certain kind of moral competence is a condition for responsible moral agency, and that people who lack such competence (as the psychopath arguably does) are not in the normal sense morally responsible for their actions. In his several illuminating treatments of psychopathy Watson argues that this condition involves a deficiency of moral understanding that renders one unsuited for participation in interpersonal relationships of accountability to other people, whereby moral demands are mutually addressed as a scaffolding for a common social life (RLE,
This is a helpful and suggestive idea, albeit one that is also in need of further unpacking. Deficiencies of moral understanding do not prevent psychopaths and other agents from acting with contempt for us and flagrant disregard of our interests, and this is sufficient to give us good reason to modify our relations with them, going forward. Why isn’t this enough to make psychopaths accountable to us for what they do? In what ways, more specifically, does a lack of moral understanding properly inhibit the practice of interpersonal moral address?

I hope eventually to get around to discussing all of these questions. But I’d like to start with the interpretation of the practice of moral address. What is it to stand in the relationship of accountability to others that Watson takes to be characteristic of this practice? An initial, rough stab at an answer, to which I am (unsurprisingly) sympathetic, would invoke the reactive attitudes. In some earlier work, I have suggested that we might understand these attitudes in terms of a distinctive practical stance, one through which we hold people to demands or expectations. To adopt this stance is to be disposed to respond to violations of the demands or expectations in question with such attitudes as resentment or indignation, or to judge, at a minimum, that it would be appropriate to hold such attitudes and to treat them as significant for one’s relation with the person who is their target. Watson’s guiding thought seems to be that relationships of accountability to other people are not merely relationships in which we register each other’s failings, relative to some shared set of moral or social norms, but relations in which we demand that others should comply with such norms. But what exactly is involved in this practice of addressing demands to other agents, and in what ways does it go beyond the mere registering of moral or other failings? The reactive account provides ready answers. To address a demand to someone is to hold the person to the demand, in the way that is constitutively
linked to such reactive attitudes as resentment and indignation. Thus you can register that a person has fallen short, relative to moral or social norms, but in a spirit of mere bemusement or anthropological or therapeutic curiosity. In regarding people in this way, you are precisely not regarding them as a participant in a common practice of mutual accountability, insofar as you are not holding them to the norms that they have fallen short of. Those norms do not function as demands that you place on them, of the kind that trigger the reactive attitudes.

On the broadly Strawsonian approach that I favor, the reactive attitudes are invoked to make sense of a certain kind of moral blame. To blame someone for something they have done is, on this approach, to react to it with such emotions as resentment or indignation, and to be blameworthy is to act in ways that would warrant or justify these reactive attitudes. The interpersonal practice of accountability might thus be understood as a practice in which we are prone not merely to register peoples’ moral lapses, but to blame them for them. Note further that we can address demands to other people, in the way connected to this reactive form of blame, even if we do not articulate those demands conversationally in our interactions with them. This captures a further dimension of moral address, which as Watson understands it is something that is somehow suited for interpersonal exchange, but that does not necessarily need to be communicated.

In “Two Faces of Responsibility”, Watson himself emphasizes that relations of accountability to other people might be understood to be relations that involve liability to sanction for moral infractions, where the sanctions in question are in turn understood in terms of peoples’ attitudes toward each other (TFR, sec. 7). This points to a dimension of accountability practices that we can make good sense of in terms of the reactive emotions. A
practice in which people hold each other to moral demands, in the ways connected to the
reactive emotions, is one in which people do not merely keep track of each other’s moral
shortcomings, but are prone to blame each other for them, where blame in turn is a matter of
something like angry disapprobation. To participate in such a practice is to take part in an
economy of esteem and disesteem, which functions in part as a social mechanism that helps to
keep us morally on track.

Watson supports the reference to sanctions by noting that it is typically disagreeable to
be on the receiving end of attitudes of angry disapprobation (TFR, sec. 7). This strikes me as an
important observation, though talk of sanctions in this context is perhaps best avoided (for
reasons that I discuss briefly in section 2 below). But as Watson himself goes on to note, the
connection of moral address to a system of social pressures can seem attenuated in cases in
which disapprobation isn’t expressed outwardly, or in which its target is no longer alive. Some
light may be shed on such cases, however, by developing a line of thought from Watson’s recent
discussion of Strawson’s “Freedom and Resentment” (PSRS). Watson emphasizes there the
fundamental role that is played in Strawson’s theory by the “basic concern” we have for the
attitudes that other people take toward us. We are, as Rousseau was acutely aware, deeply
social creatures, and it matters to us profoundly how we are thought of by our fellows. In
Strawson’s own theory, this basic concern is invoked primarily to explain the circumstances that
provoking the reactive emotions; these are responses not so much to the harms that are done to us
by the actions of other people, but to the qualities of will that those actions display toward us.
But the same concern might help us to understand the significance of the reactive attitudes
themselves for our ongoing social relations. It matters to us, in itself, whether people react to
our behavior with attitudes of angry disapprobation. That is, we care about such attitudes not merely because it is disagreeable to experience them, but because we do not wish to inhabit a social world in which such attitudes are harbored toward us, regardless of whether they are expressed or experienced by us. It is bad for us, in its own right, to be the target of such attitudes, and this helps us to understand why it makes sense to think of them in relation to an informal but effective system of social pressures.

The reactive approach thus seems well-suited to make sense of core features of interpersonal accountability relations, as Watson understands them. Despite these advantages, Watson himself is reluctant to understand interpersonal accountability in these reactive terms, voicing several distinct reservations about the reactive account. One objection is that it is possible for people to participate in relations of interpersonal accountability even if they are not subject to reactive sentiments, or if they forswear such sentiments as they might be disposed to experience. In “Responsibility and the Limits of Evil”, he cites Gandhi and King as examples of people who are able to address demands to other agents without vindictiveness or malice, standing up for themselves and confronting those who would oppress them or treat them unjustly (RLE, 257-58). Examples such as these, Watson suggests, tell against Strawson’s “troubling” idea that “[t]he making of the [moral] demand is the proneness to such attitudes” as indignation and resentment (RLE, 257).

But it seems to me there is a natural way to make sense of these examples within the general framework of the reactive approach. Gandhi and King might well have succeeded in freeing themselves from vindictiveness and malice toward those whose immorality they are concerned to oppose. But they nevertheless viewed those they opposed as people whose actions
warranted resentment and indignation, and their oppositional stance gained authority from their willingness to abstain from the reactions that were clearly called for by the things they were setting themselves against. They were in this way operating from within the economy of esteem and disesteem, and the reactive attitudes help us to understand how they are participating in a practice of interpersonal accountability. The oppression that they condemn is not merely a social force that is to be resisted and reformed, but one that one would be a fit target of reactive blame.

A different basis for resisting the reactive approach is that it is potentially overly moralized. As noted earlier, Watson himself is at pains to emphasize that interpersonal accountability admits of non-moral expressions. We can be “on the hook” for something that does not involve a specifically moral failing on our part, as we are in our personal relationships with our friends and intimates. To the extent this is right, we cannot understand interpersonal accountability exclusively in terms of the stance of holding people to specifically moral demands. But the reactive approach can accommodate this point, as well. In the intimate context of personal relationships, it is plausible to suppose that we hold each other to expectations that are constitutive of the relationships in question, where this in turn involves a susceptibility to attitudes that belong in the general reactive category. There are things that we owe to each other as friends and siblings and romantic partners, and we take it personally when those who stand in these relationships to us disregard these requirements, responding to such offenses with non-moralized resentment, anger, and feelings of hurt. As in the narrowly moral cases, one can stand in relations of interpersonal accountability with friends and intimates even if one does not actually experience specific reactions of this kind, so long as one judges their
behavior to potentially warrant such reactions. Insofar as this is the case, it can be said that one holds one’s friends and relatives to the sui generis standards that are constitutive of the special relationships, and that one holds it against them when they are flouted. But it is the connection to blaming disapprobation that gives these relational locutions their distinctive sense.

In his recent paper on Strawson, Watson takes me mildly to task for offering an overly narrow interpretation of the reactive sentiments, and for a correspondingly uncharitable take on Strawson’s claim that participation in personal relations naturally goes together with the stance of reactivity. As I have just conceded, I think he is right that there are non-moral variants of the reactive attitudes, connected to the sui generis expectations that we hold one another to when we stand in special relationships to them, and I agree that reactivity of this kind is ordinarily bound up with such special relationships. I also agree with him that we should be tolerant of a range of modalities of reactivity in understanding specifically moral accountability. In my book *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments* I focus narrowly on resentment, indignation, and guilt as the paradigmatic reactive attitudes that are associated specifically with moral obligations. I continue to think that these attitudes have special features that make them peculiarly well-suited to an interpersonal practice of accountability that is structured around specifically moral obligations, and this is an issue to which I shall return below. But I agree with Watson that moral accountability relations could be built up on different forms of angry disapprobation—on the attitudes characteristic of shame cultures, for instance, if indeed they are distinct from resentment, indignation, and guilt.

But I’m not sure these concessions go far enough for Watson. There are passages in his work where he seems to suggest that reactive attitudes, however capacious they might be
interpreted, are at best peripheral to relations of interpersonal accountability. Returning to the examples of Gandhi and King mentioned above, Watson characterizes these figures as “intensively involved in the ‘fray’ of interpersonal relations”, insofar as they interact with those whose behavior they reject, remonstrating with them, addressing moral criticism to them, and defending their own rights and standing against them (RLE, 258; see also RR, p. 316). The suggestion seems to be that there is a performative aspect to the addressing of demands to other agents, which can be enacted socially in the absence of the reactive attitudes or even the belief in their appropriateness.

In another essay, Watson concedes that the addressing of demands must consist in some reactive dispositions or other, but denies that these essentially involve “any particular range of emotional responses” (PSRS, 18). Thus, a readiness to alter one’s intentions in regard to a person, in response to the effects of their actions on one’s relationship to them, might suffice to make it the case that one is holding the person to moral demands. This suggestion might be taken to be broadly consistent with the blame-centered approach to moral address that I have been sketching, insofar as there is an important theory of blame, due to T. M. Scanlon, that interprets it precisely in terms of modifications of this kind in the intentions of the blamer toward the person whose behavior has impaired the relationship between them. For my part, I find Scanlon’s approach to blame too bloodless and dispassionate to capture the distinctive character of this way of reacting to wrongdoing; as I put it elsewhere, it leaves the blame out of blame. Adapting the point to the present context, it seems to me that an interpretation of moral address that dispenses with attitudes in the register of angry disapprobation does not have sufficient structure to model the fundamental idea that there are genuine demands to which one
is holding other people. The connection is severed to the attitudinal pressures constitutive of what I earlier referred to as the economy of disesteem. I therefore favor the approach to moral address sketched above, which is cashed out in terms of angrier attitudes of disapprobation such as resentment.

2. Why it Matters I.

One important context in which Watson’s account of moral address appears to make a difference is in understanding the conditions of responsibility. Thus it is a consistent theme in his writings on psychopathy that there is a requirement of moral competence that needs to be satisfied in cases of responsibility as accountability, one that does not carry over to responsibility in the sense of attributability. We can make sense of this requirement, Watson suggests, when we attend to the distinctive features of moral address, which is constitutive of relationships of mutual accountability.

There are in fact two different ways in which this point about the conditions of accountability gets developed in Watson’s work. They may ultimately be complementary lines of argument, though they tend to figure separately in different phases of his thinking. The most prominent of these two strands of argument is couched in terms of intelligibility. The suggestion here is that there are conditions for the intelligibility of moral address, and that these conditions are ones that the psychopath fails to satisfy (RLE, 228-30; TWP, 314, 318). In part this seems to be a matter of understanding. Psychopaths, as Watson plausibly suggests, appear unable to appreciate that the interests of other people make valid claims on them, which amounts to a fundamental lack of competence with moral reasons and moral reasoning. But it
also appears, in part, to be a matter of reciprocity. In virtue of their deficient moral understanding, psychopaths are not equipped to participate as reciprocating members in a practice of mutual accountability to other agents. They in this way stand outside our moral community.

For purposes of discussion I shall follow Watson in taking it as given that psychopaths lack the competence to grasp and respond to moral reasons. The question is, why exactly does this undermine the intelligibility of moral address? As several philosophers have noted, and as Watson himself would agree, there is a range of morally-inflected attitudes and responses that it would seem to make sense to direct toward people, even if they lack the kind of moral competence that is here at issue. Such people form propositional attitudes for which reasons can in principle be adduced, attitudes that may be taken to settle theoretical and practical questions of various kinds. They may take your interests to make no claims on them, for instance, and intend to harm or to subordinate you in order to advance their own purposes. States of this kind are of their nature susceptible to justification and criticism, and the bearers of these states may therefore be regarded as answerable for them, regardless of their level of moral competence. It might in practice not always be a good idea to confront psychopaths with a specific request that they justify the attitudes they have adopted toward you. But those attitudes call out for justification and critical interrogation, and it therefore makes perfect sense for us to question their rational credentials (at least amongst ourselves, if not in active dialogue with them).

Furthermore, psychopaths certainly seem capable of displaying hostility, and it is practically definitional of them that they do not show appropriate concern for the interests of
other people. There is perhaps a question of whether they are capable of such familiar vices as cruelty, in virtue of their lack of moral understanding; their attitudes may lack the structure and content that is presupposed by such stances as disrespect and contempt. Insofar as they are capable of rudimentary responsiveness to reasons for action and belief, however, psychopaths definitely seem capable of treating others with a lack of regard and with the intention to inflict harm. “They are often against us”, as Watson at one point observes (TWP, 317). But someone who directs attitudes of these kinds toward you will thereby have altered their relationship to you, giving you reasons, which you otherwise would not have had, to modify your attitudes and behavior regarding them. These alterations in attitude and behavior, which are characteristic of Scanlon-style cool blame (as we might call it), make perfect sense as responses to the depredations of agents who lack capacities for basic moral understanding.

If the argument from intelligibility is to be plausible, then, it seems that moral address must somehow go beyond cool blame or critical interrogation of the psychopath’s judgment-sensitive attitudes. One way we might understand moral address to do this would be to emphasize the element of interpersonal exchange. Watson has himself memorably characterized the reactive attitudes as “incipiently forms of communication” (RLE, p. 230), and this is an aspect of them that could perhaps ground a concern about whether it makes sense to address moral demands to the psychopath. If psychopaths lack a moral sense, as we have been assuming them to do, then the moral demands that we might attempt to communicate to them are ones that they will not fully understand. And it is tempting to conclude that it does not really make sense to communicate demands to someone who is in this way unable to understand them.
This is a suggestive line of argument, but also one that is somewhat elusive. Note, for one thing, that intelligibility figures at two different points in the argument, which apparently moves from the fact that moral demands are unintelligible to the psychopath to the conclusion that it is unintelligible to communicate the demands to the psychopath. One might well wonder, however, whether this inference really goes through. There are cases in which it seems intelligible for a person to engage in an essentially communicative act despite the fact that the target of the act is unable to understand the message being communicated. Think in this connection of the little speeches that we sometimes make (typically in a sing-songy, high-pitched voice) when interacting with our pets or feeding baby food to an infant. In circumstances such as these, we can understand a person to be undertaking a communicative performance, even if what they are attempting to communicate cannot fully be understood by its target audience.

In response, it might be said that the question of the intelligibility of the communicative performance is a question not of whether we can understand someone to be engaged in such an activity under circumstances in which the message communicated cannot be grasped. It is whether there is any point to undertaking a communicative performance under such circumstances. But the suggestion remains elusive on this interpretation of it. For one thing, as the examples involving infants and pets illustrate, there can be some point to engaging in a communicative undertaking even in cases in which the literal message being communicated cannot fully be understood. After all, there is something that we succeed in getting across to the infants and animals, even if they do not grasp the literal meaning of our words. Furthermore, the point of the performance might lie in part in its effects not on its facial audience, but on
ourselves. For instance, it can be amusing or consoling, for us and for other adults in our vicinity, to interact with infants and pets as if they were capable to grasping the meaning of the words that we are directing to them. But it seems that communication to the psychopath could have a point in ways that are analogous to these. Even if they do not fully grasp the moral demands that we are addressing to them, psychopaths are surely able to grasp that we are communicating some kind of generalized disapproval of their behavior. And the communication of such disapproval through specifically moral criticism may find its further point in its effects on us and on the other adult agents who understand it, insofar as such criticism serves to remind us of the basic moral standards that have been flouted by the psychopath’s behavior, or to express solidarity with those who have been victimized by such behavior.

But perhaps this would not imbue the communication of moral criticism with the right kind of point. Thus we might think of moral address as a communicative intervention that is suited to figure in a certain kind of idealized exchange between a moral offender and others. Its point comes into clear focus only when it is situated in relation to a kind of conversational interaction, whereby reactive attitudes are expressed to the person who has acted to wrong another party, eliciting in turn characteristic responses on the part of the wrongdoer (such as acknowledgement of wrongdoing, apology, and remorse). 10 In these terms, we might say that psychopaths, in virtue of their lack of moral understanding, are not able to participate in this kind of conversational interaction, and that this undermines the intelligibility of communicative criticism that is directed to them. Though moral address might make sense in relation to some
human purposes under these conditions, it does not make sense as a potential move in an unfolding conversational exchange.\textsuperscript{11}

This may well be the best way to develop Watson’s point about moral understanding as a condition for the intelligibility of moral address. But I continue to have some concerns about the resulting account. For one thing, though there is something importantly right about the suggestion that moral address may be situated within an unfolding interpersonal exchange, it seems to me too restrictive to locate its point or purpose solely within this kind of context. There are other human purposes that are served by the expression of moral criticism, and such expression can “make sense” or be “conceptually apt” in relation to those purposes, even if the agent who is its target is unable to respond to it as a normal member of the moral community might do. Second, I worry that the argument from intelligibility, if sound, proves too much. Consider the incorrigibly evil agent who, though capable of understanding moral criticism, is so deeply invested in bad ends as to be resolutely unwilling to acknowledge wrongdoing, to apologize to those offended or harmed, to make amends, and so on. A person with these incorrigible dispositions will not in fact respond to the expression of moral criticism in the ways characteristic of ordinary conversational exchange. If such critical expression is pointless in relation to these forms of exchange when directed at the psychopath, it threatens to be equally pointless when directed at the incorrigibly vicious. But they would seem to be morally accountable for their evil actions.\textsuperscript{12}

Finally, it strikes me that the argument from intelligibility, as outlined above, goes too far in the direction of assimilating moral address with the communication of moral criticism. If we understand moral address along the lines of the reactive approach sketched in section 1 of
this paper, then we can blame people for what they have done, even if we don’t communicate
the blame to the wrongdoer (or to anyone at all). We can also hold people to moral demands
without communicating that we have adopted this basic accountability-conferring stance. If this
is right, however, then the question of the intelligibility of moral address should focus on
whether it makes sense to adopt this stance or to hold the attitudes to which it renders one
prone, not whether it makes sense to express these stances and attitudes to the persons who
might be their targets.13

There is a different basis for the conclusion that psychopaths are not fit targets of such
address that is suggested by at least one of Watson’s seminal writings on this general topic (see
TFR, e.g. p. 276, sec. 8). Thus, returning to the reactive account of moral address sketched earlier
in this paper, I suggested that it situates moral address in relation to the informal system of
social responses whereby we exert attitudinal pressure on one another to comply with the
moral standards that govern our interactions. But subjecting people to such attitudinal
pressures is something we do to them, and actions of this kind are themselves susceptible to
assessment by moral standards of fairness. In these terms, it could be argued that there is
something fundamentally unfair or unreasonable about exposing to social pressures agents,
such as the psychopath, who lack the capacity to understand the basic requirements that we
would stigmatize them for flouting. According to this way of thinking about things, moral
address is not so much unintelligible or conceptually inapt when directed at the psychopath as
morally objectionable, incompatible with plausible requirements of fairness in our interpersonal
relations.
I have developed this general approach to questions about the limits of moral accountability in my book *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments*, and I continue to find it attractive in several respects. Most importantly in the present context, it draws on salient features of what Watson would call moral address to locate a distinctive objection to such address when it is directed at an agent of limited moral understanding, an objection that does not carry over to other ways we might respond to the things that people do. Thus, as we have seen, people can be answerable for their attitudes, and fit targets of Scanlon-style cool blame, even if they lack basic competence with moral reasons and forms of argument; we have good reason to interact with people on these terms regardless of their level of moral understanding. But if moral address involves participation in an informal economy of disesteem, it is potentially subject to different norms of assessment, ones that tell against it when it takes people like the psychopath as its target.

Though Watson was at one point sympathetic with an account of the limits of moral address in terms of moral standards of fairness, he seems to have distanced himself from such an account in more recent work, proposing instead to understand those limits in terms of intelligibility. One reasonable concern that may lie behind this move is that to think of moral address in terms of social sanctions is to assimilate the practice of moral accountability too closely to legal schemes of punishment (see TWP, pp. 315-16). It is certainly true that we are not in the business of punishing other adult agents when we address moral demands to them in those ways, whatever they may be, that are characteristic of blame. To think of ourselves in this role is to conceive our relation to the object of our opprobrium in objectionable terms; who are we, it might be asked, to arrogate to ourselves the right to punish another autonomous adult?
But it seems to me that we can acknowledge the connection of moral address to social pressures even if we reject the idea that reactive blame involves the application of anything reasonably understood as a sanction. It is enough to reflect on the attitudinal tendencies at work in our own case, and to see them as part of an informal system that functions to articulate basic standards of interpersonal behavior and to facilitate compliance with them, mobilizing to this end the innate sociability of human nature.

A more specific objection to the argument from fairness focuses on the attitudes in terms of which the reactive approach understands moral address. As emphasized earlier, these are attitudes of angry disapprobation, such as resentment and indignation and more generalized reactions of this kind. But it has rightly been pointed out that attitudes of this sort are not themselves strictly assessable by appeal to norms of fairness. In asking whether a person should feel, say, resentment about something that was done to them, we are asking, in the first instance, whether resentment would be fitting under the circumstances. This in turn is determined by the content of the attitudes in question. Just as it is fitting to experience fear in the presence of the seriously dangerous, so too it makes sense to resent someone when they have treated your interests with indifference or contempt. Fairness, it is tempting to conclude, has nothing to do with it.

I agree with this line of argument in thinking that the reactive attitudes are primarily assessable by reference to internal standards of fittingness of this kind. But I don’t think it follows that fairness is irrelevant to the evaluation of our practices of mutual accountability. As noted just a moment ago, it is possible for us to step back from our individual attitudes of disapprobation, and to reflect on their connections to a broader system of informal social
pressures that helps individuals to understand and to comply with moral standards of conduct. When we adopt this view, it is open to us to ask questions that are framed in terms of fairness about our relation to this economy of disesteem. We can ask, for instance, whether it is fair that the system of informal pressures should be focused on a given agent, given their lack of basic competence with moral concepts and reasons, and whether it is fair for us to accede to the application of such pressures to such an agent, through our resentment or angry disapprobation about what they have done. The attitude itself may be potentially fitting or warranted, given the wrongful behavior of the person to whom it is directed; but we confront a practical question about whether the attitude that is in this way fitting is one that should be treated by us as significant for our ongoing relations to the person who is its target, or whether it instead should be disavowed and set aside. The latter is a question of attitude management, concerning actions that might be taken by us in relation to the fitting attitude of disapprobation, and such actions are the sorts of things that admit of proper assessment in terms of moral norms of fairness.¹⁵

There is, to be sure, a kind of double vision here, insofar as we are thinking of attitudes such as resentment both in relation to the offenses that might make them fitting, and in relation to the broader system of social pressures that expose their targets to undesirable outcomes. But it seems to me that reflective agents should be able to think of reactive attitudes in these two different ways, and that doing so provides a basis for assessment of the practice of moral address by reference to norms of fairness. Moreover, unless there is such a basis for the moral assessment of that practice, I don’t see how to recover an argument for the view that the psychopath’s lack of moral competence should function to limit moral address.
3. Why It Matters II.

There is a different context in which Watson’s account of moral address might have a bearing on broader philosophical issues. This is the context fixed by concerns about the nature and source of moral requirements.

I noted earlier that Watson’s descriptions of moral address are shot through with relational language. It is, he suggests, an interpersonal practice in which we are accountable to each other for what we do. To this point, I have interpreted these relational locutions as pointing to a distinctive stance we adopt toward the moral requirements that govern our actions, insofar as we hold people to those requirements in the ways constitutively connected to broadly reactive attitudes. What is relational, on this line of thought, is the standpoint that agents take up when entering the realm of interpersonal accountability, one that involves their attitudes toward other moral agents.

But at some points in his work, Watson’s reflections on moral accountability move in an apparently different direction. Consider the following characteristic passage, which takes as its starting point some remarks of Scanlon’s about the differences between moral norms and the rules of chess:

Unlike morality, the chess player is not in general beholden to us to live up to these standards. In contrast to doxastic norms, and the strategies of chess, the moral norms in question are standards with which it is reasonable to require one another to comply. The second-personal character of these standards—that they are addressed to others as norms that make a claim on them—is what explains the presumption of normative competence in this realm. Further, those who
violate these norms wrong others, which explains the distinctive significance for interpersonal relations these standards possess—and why, in particular, demands for justification and apology are in order. (TWP, pp. 315-16)

There are at least two distinct strands that can be teased apart in this rich and suggestive quotation. In one of these strands, Watson begins by emphasizing the attitudinal relations we stand in to each other within a practice of accountability to others, insofar as we address demands to each other. Building on this observation, he then remarks that moral standards have a “second-personal character”, a comment that evokes the general approach to morality that has influentially been defended and developed by Stephen Darwall. According to Darwall’s approach, moral standards come to represent binding obligations on agents in virtue of the fact that they are addressed to those agents in a kind of interpersonal attitudinal exchange; unlike the rules of chess, they trace their origins to the relations between agents that are characteristic of moral address.16

At other points in the same passage, however, Watson shifts subtly to characterizing the difference between moral and ludic norms in terms of their different contents. Moral norms are ones that we are “beholden to” others to live up to, which suggests that we owe it to them to comply with such norms. Furthermore, the violation of moral norms is not merely an infraction, but something that alters the terms of one’s normative relation to another party; such actions are not merely morally wrong, they also **wrong** someone else. This in turn suggests that the party who was wronged had an antecedent claim against the agent to compliance with the moral norm that has been violated, where the wrong consists in the fact that a claim of this kind was flouted. The picture that results from these ways of characterizing moral norms is one that I
have elsewhere called relational. It is a picture according to which moral requirements represent directed obligations, which are owed specifically to other individuals. The persons to whom moral duties are in this way owed have claims against the agent to performance, and they in particular will be wronged if the agent fails to live up to the duties. Morality, according to this relational understanding of it, is an inherently interpersonal domain, insofar as it consists of requirements that link agents with other parties through a sui generis normative nexus.

In the remainder of this paper I would like to consider the significance of moral address for these two different ways of thinking about moral requirements. Let’s start with the Darwall approach, according to which moral requirements have a second-personal character. This approach, as I understand it, traces the source of moral obligations to the kinds of interpersonal interactions that are characteristic of Watson-style moral address. That is, moral standards represent demands on the will of an agent because they are addressed to the agent by another party. Addressing a demand in this sense may be taken to involve a susceptibility to broadly reactive attitudes, in the ways characterized in section 1 of this paper. But it is important that in adopting this stance, one may be thought to be doing something distinctive in relation to the party who is the target of one’s reactive stance. Specifically, one is making demands on that party, in a process analogous to that through which recognized authorities issue commands to those who are subject to their rule, or lay down requirements on such subjects. According to this voluntarist approach, as we might call it, moral address has great significance for our understanding of moral obligations, since they are ultimately to be traced to the forms of interpersonal relation that it describes, relations through which demands are imposed by one party on another.
This general approach to obligation is one that has a long and illustrious philosophical history. It is reflected, for instance, in divine command theories of moral obligation, as well as in the secular analogues of them that connect obligation to the social or emotional consequences of violating moral norms (such as Mill’s suggestion that to call an action wrong is to say that people should be sanctioned, internally or externally, for performing it). Though it is a venerable way of thinking about moral obligation, however, it is also one that faces serious philosophical challenges.

An important difficulty for secular versions of the voluntarist approach is nicely articulated by Watson himself in his critical discussion of Darwall’s book *The Second-Person Standpoint*. It seems we have a clear paradigm for how an action can give rise to new requirements when we think of cases in which a recognized authority issues a specific command or determination. If the department chair tells the faculty in her department that course preferences for the coming academic year must be submitted by the end of the month, then they are under a requirement, as a result, so to act. But it is not at all clear that this model carries over felicitously to the case of interpersonal morality. After all, we have moral duties regarding the interests of other people that appear to be independent of whether any actual authority in fact demands that we comply with them. In Darwall’s development of the voluntarist approach, this is dealt with by a shift to saying that moral obligations derive not from the actual addressing of corresponding demands to us by other agents, but from the fact that representative members of the moral community have authority to address such demands to us. But as Watson astutely observes, this invocation of authority functions very differently from the way the notion operates in the paradigm cases with which we are familiar (MEA, pp.
Thus, the fact that the department chair has the authority to determine that course preferences must be submitted by the end of the month does not, in itself, entail that faculty are obligated so to act. Indeed, this does not follow even if we add that there is good reason for the chair to issue such a directive to her colleagues. The chair must actually exercise her authority, by addressing the corresponding demand to the faculty in her department.

For this and other reasons, I am skeptical that the voluntarist approach can be extended into a plausible secular account of the source of moral obligation. But is there a role for moral address to play in making sense of moral obligations if we reject the voluntarist account of it? Here is a possibility to which I am attracted. Even if moral address is not the source of moral obligation, it might be a condition on the adequacy of an account of moral obligations that they should be suited to figure in an interpersonal practice of mutual accountability. That is, it should make sense, in virtue of the content and nature of moral obligations, that people hold each other to them, in the way that is characteristically connected with reactive attitudes. Such obligations should in this way provide a reasonable basis for social relations that are structured in terms of moral address, as we have been interpreting it. Furthermore, and relatedly, it should follow from an account of moral obligations that people who act with disregard for them thereby give others at least pro tanto reasons for the reactive attitudes involved in blame.

These proposed constraints reflect a conception of morality as a phenomenon with an essentially social function. Moral obligations, if there are such, presumably have significance for individual agents, providing them with compelling reasons for action that shape their deliberations about what to do. But they are not merely considerations that have this kind of normative importance in the context of first-personal deliberation. They also have an essential
role to play in providing the basis for a shared social life, via their role in a practice of Watson-
style interpersonal address. According to this way of understanding morality, a satisfactory
account of it must make sense of the role of moral obligations not only within the first-person
context of deliberation, but also as considerations that provide a normative framework for
interpersonal relations of mutual accountability.\textsuperscript{19}

To see how this constraint might operate in practice, let’s consider briefly one prominent
version of voluntarism about moral obligations, namely the divine command theory. According
to this approach, there may be things that it would be morally good to do, independently of
whether we are commanded by God to do them. But we stand under obligations to act in these
ways only in virtue of the fact that God lays down a requirement on us so to act. An approach
along these lines might be well-suited to explain the significance of obligations in the first-
person perspective of deliberation, their standing as genuine requirements that make claims
on the agent’s will. But it is less clear that it offers an illuminating account of the social
dimension of moral obligations, where this is taken to involve their suitability to structure an
interpersonal practice of mutual accountability.

To stand in relations of accountability to another person, or to address moral demands
to the person, is, on the account sketched earlier, to hold the person to the demands, in the ways
constitutively connected to broadly reactive attitudes. So the question is whether demands that
are understood in this way, as commands of a benevolent and omnipotent deity, provide a
normative basis for such accountability relations. I think there is reason to doubt whether they
do. The worry, in a nutshell, is that it isn’t really our business whether other people live up to
the requirements that they owe, individually, to God. It is between them and the deity, as we
might put it, and hence not something that we have good reason to care about for its own sake.

Granted, many of the divine commandments may prescribe behaviors that affect other
persons in the subject’s local or less local community, insofar as they include demands to act
charitably or with justice. Those who are in the subject’s community are in this way apt to be
affected, one way or another, by the subject’s compliance or lack of compliance with the
requirements that God imposes on them. But this is completely incidental to the status of the
requirements as genuine obligations. God could in the very same sense lay down requirements
on subjects that have nothing to do with the subjects’ relations to other people, such as dietary
restrictions on the consumption of thistles on Wednesdays. The account of moral obligation on
offer thus leaves it mysterious why things that are morally required are for that very reason also
things that it makes sense to address to the agent whom the requirements regulate, in the way
characteristic of a practice of mutual accountability.

Obviously there is not the space here to canvass all possible approaches to moral
obligation with an eye to their capacity to illuminate its social dimension (as I referred to it
above). In conclusion, however, I would like to return to the relational account of obligation,
which as I noted earlier is at least adumbrated in some of Watson’s descriptions of interpersonal
accountability. According to the relational approach, moral obligations are essentially
requirements that are owed to other individuals, where those individuals have claims against
the agent to compliance with the requirements that are directed to them. But an account of this
kind is peculiarly well-suited to make sense of the social aspect of moral requirements, their
status as considerations that appropriately structure relations of mutual accountability.
Thus, suppose that you owe it to me to keep the promise you made to me, or to refrain from bodily trespass as you encounter me in the street. According to the relational account, these moral requirements essentially concern our relations to each other, and they are connected constitutively to claims that I have against you to compliance with them. Insofar as I have a claim against you to compliance, however, it would seem to make perfect sense for me to hold you to the requirement, in the way that we have seen to be characteristic of moral address. Indeed, moral requirements of this kind seem tailor made, in virtue of their relational structure, to be requirements that function as a normative basis for a practice of interpersonal accountability to other parties.

Note, for one thing, that it is a non-contingent feature of relational requirements of this kind that they have significance for another party. They are owed to other individuals, to whom the agent is, as Watson puts it, “beholden”. But if a requirement that you are under is in this way directed to me, then it is necessarily not a matter of indifference to me whether you make a conscientious effort to comply with it. Rather it is my business, in virtue of the relational structure that makes the requirement obligatory in the first place. As a claimholder, it thus fully reasonable that I should take an interest in whether the requirements that are owed to me are lived up to and taken seriously by those who stand under them. And holding someone to the requirement, in the spirit of moral address, is the natural way of doing this.

Consider, next, what happens if a directed moral requirement is flouted. The agent who failed to take it seriously will have shown a certain disregard for the values at the heart of morality. But moral obligations, on the relational account of them, are essentially connected to individual claims; so disregard for such requirements is eo ipso disregard for the person to
whom the requirement is owed. But your showing disregard for me is precisely the kind of stance that would seem to defeasibly warrant a reactive attitude on my part toward you. In failing to take the moral requirement seriously, you have not merely fallen short of some personal code of conduct that pertains to you alone (or to your relation to the divinity). You have displayed indifference to or contempt for my interests, as considerations that undergird claims I hold against you, and this is the primary normative basis of the reactive attitudes. Thus resentment, which we may take to be a paradigm of reactivity, is constitutively a response to the fact that not just that something bad has happened in my immediate environs, but that I have specifically been wronged by the actions of another party.

These considerations lead me to think that it is no accident that Watson sometimes describes the norms of interpersonal accountability in terms that suggest the directed model of relational obligation. Relational obligations of this kind seem peculiarly well-suited to a social practice of moral address, where their suitability to this purpose is a plausible constraint on a philosophical account of moral requirements. It is, to my mind, one of the most important contributions of Watson’s work on moral address that it in this way helps us to appreciate the relational character of the standards that we hold each other accountable to, their standing as norms that define what we owe to each other.

1 Parenthetical references in the text of this paper will refer to pages in the following papers by Gary Watson:


6 See “Dispassionate Opprobrium”.

7 See, for example, Angela Smith, “Control, Responsibility, and Moral Assessment,” *Philosophical Studies* 138 (2008), pp. 367–92, for the emphasis on judgment-sensitivity; and Pamela Hieronymi, “Reflection and Responsibility”, *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 42 (2014), pp. 3-41, for the suggestion that responsibility is connected to the settling of questions.

8 On responsibility as answerability, see e.g. David Shoemaker, “Attributability, Answerability, and Accountability: Toward a Wider Theory of Moral Responsibility,” *Ethics* 121 (2011), pp. 602–32. As Scanlon emphasizes, being answerable in this sense presupposes some generic capacity to respond to reasons, but it doesn’t seem to require a moral sense of the kind that is arguably missing in cases of psychopathy.


11 This might be one way to unpack Watson’s talk about the “conceptual inaptness” of moral address when directed to the psychopath, in TWP, 314. Though we could apply the concept of moral address to communications that are directed at the psychopath, nothing the psychopath might do would count as a genuine acknowledgement of wrongdoing or an apology, in virtue of their lack of their lack of moral understanding. But it is only in the context of responses of this kind that the communication of moral criticism would have its internal point.

12 Watson at one point distinguishes the charge that moral address is senseless from the charge that it is futile; see TWP, p. 314. He is also at pains to emphasize that the psychopath is unreachable by moral address in a way that is categorically different from the way in which an incorrigibly vicious agent might be (TWP, p. 318). On the interpretation I am considering, however, it is hard to hold these two conditions categorically apart from one another. Moral address is senseless in relation to psychopaths, precisely insofar as it is futile as a way of
eliciting the responses characteristic of an unfolding conversational exchange; but it seems futile in the same way in application to the incorrigible. Cf. TWP, p. 322: “The telos of this practice [sc. holding one another accountable] is the prospect of codeliberation and reconciliation. In the case of psychopathy, I have argued, this hope is forlorn. Psychopaths are, in this sense, irredeemably alien.”

13 Watson himself is sensitive to the distinction between the aptness of reactive attitudes and the aptness of their communication. But he continues to emphasize the connection to communication in his discussion of the felicity conditions of moral address, writing that reactive attitudes involve “a commitment to the appropriateness of an inherently communicative stance” (TWP, 328, note 35). I find this alleged commitment somewhat obscure, and believe that the fundamental question is whether the reactive stance itself (together with the attitudes to which it disposes us) is apt in response to the actions of the psychopath.


15 This account of blame, as involve both fitting attitudes and actions of acceding to them, seems to me to have a parallel in a plausible approach to forgiveness. When we forgive someone, we may continue to be subject to reactive attitudes that are rendered fitting by what the agent has done to us. But we nevertheless forswear these attitudes, setting them aside as a basis for our ongoing relations with the agent who has wronged us, where this is a matter of our actions in regard to our attitudes rather than whether we are subject to the attitudes themselves.


18 In “Reasons, Relations, and Commands”, I argued that Darwall’s conception of second-personal reasons seemed to equivocate between a voluntarist and a relational model of normativity. Darwall has since clarified that he takes the voluntarist interpretation to be fundamental; see his “Bipolar Obligation”, as reprinted in his Morality, Authority, and Law: Essays in Second-Personal Ethics, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 20-39.