Please cite the final version appearing in Robb, Catherine M.; Mills, Georgie & Irwin, William (eds.) (2024). Taylor Swift and Philosophy: Essays from the Tortured Philosophers Department. The Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series.

"It's Me, Hi! I'm the Problem It's Me": Taylor Swift and Self-blame

Agnès Baehni

The most popular song on Taylor Swift's 2022 album *Midnights* is the track "Anti-Hero." Speaking about the song, Taylor says: "This song really is a real guided tour throughout all the things I tend to hate about myself. We all hate things about ourselves."[1] What Taylor expresses in this song captures a recurring theme in both music and everyday life: the tendency to blame oneself without thinking twice about it. When referring to the importance of self-blame in Taylor's work, I am not implying that she always blames *herself* in her songs like she does in "Anti-Hero." Rather, my point is that her music reflects something that many of us do on a daily basis. In addition, not only does self-blame play an important role in Taylor Swift's musical repertoire, but as the documentary *Miss Americana* (2020) reveals, blame and self-blame have also been a central aspect of her life since her rise to fame in 2008. Insisting that her "entire moral code as a kid and now is a need to be thought as good," Taylor confessed that she often struggled with the need to maintain the image of a "good girl."[2]

In light of this, we face the following question: should we blame ourselves more than others, like Taylor seems to suggest in songs such as "High Infidelity," "Would've, Could've Should've," "Afterglow," and "Anti-Hero"? Taylor is often presented as a model for younger generations and as a feminist icon. But could it be that she is also exemplifying and fueling a

tendency to over blame oneself? If so, this could be particularly problematic for her audience, which is largely constituted of girls and young women, a demographic that often experiences disproportionate levels of blame both self- and from others.[3]

To settle this question, we'll consider an asymmetry in our intuitions about the ethics of self-blame and other-blame. The asymmetry is this: for a given wrongdoing, let's say arriving late to a concert, it often seems morally appropriate for someone to blame *herself* more than it would be morally appropriate for others to blame her.[4] This is "The Blame Asymmetry Claim." Is this true? And if so, why is it true?

Don't Blame Me (But Let Me Blame Myself?)

Contemporary philosopher Dana Nelkin provides an interesting explanation of the above-mentioned asymmetry. In her view, it can be explained in light of the following philosophical principle: "All other things equal, it is harder to justify risking harm to others than to ourselves."[5] We find echoes of this principle in many of our everyday actions. As an illustration, consider Taylor's actions during her "Eras Tour" in 2023. During this tour, she sometimes performed in extreme conditions, for instance in Rio de Janeiro where temperatures exceeded 40 degrees Celsius (104°F) and where videos showing her gasping for air caused concern among her fans.[6] Contrast this with her decision to postpone a show in Buenos Aires because of bad weather conditions saying, "I love a rain show but I'm never going to endanger my fans or my fellow performers and crew."[7] What Taylor expresses in this quote is that certain risks she is willing to accept for herself cannot be tolerated when it comes to other people's health.

Let's come back to self-blame. Both self-blame and other-blame are painful when we are subjected to them, and so, when blaming ourselves or others we risk inflicting undue harm if we blame more than is warranted. Since one is justified in risking more harm to oneself than to others, and since blame involves a risk of harm, one is justified in blaming oneself more than others for a

similar offense. So, on Nelkin's view, there is nothing wrong with self-blame being a recurring theme in Taylor's music, because it reflects a general fact about the ethics of our blaming practices. That is, we are justified in blaming ourselves more than others because we are justified in taking more risk when it comes to ourselves than to others.

I Knew You Were (in) Trouble

Nelkin's proposal is appealing but it raises some questions. A first question is whether *risk* is the right concept when thinking about the ethics of self-blame. Indeed, the intuition underlying the claim that Taylor is justified in risking her health more than her fans' health, or that one is justified in blaming oneself more than others, is not merely that we are justified in *risking* more suffering to ourselves. It is rather that we are justified in inflicting more suffering on ourselves than on others. For instance, Taylor would be more justified in ruining her own career than someone else's. This is because what is at stake in these cases is not merely the potential risk but suffering itself.[8] Blame usually involves a form of suffering—it is never pleasant to be blamed or to blame oneself, even when it is deserved. Thus, the more pressing question with regards to the ethics of self-blame is whether we are justified in inflicting more suffering on ourselves than on others for the same wrongdoing.

My suggestion is that the relevant concept when thinking about the ethics of self-blame should not be *risk*, but rather suffering or harm. If we accept an asymmetric principle about self-blame, it needs to be: "All other things being equal, it is harder to justify inflicting suffering on others than on oneself." For now, I have not given a definitive answer to the question of whether we should blame ourselves more than others. I have simply argued that if we are seeking to explain this asymmetry in light of a general moral principle, we need to abandon the notion of risk and concentrate instead on the idea of suffering. For now, it remains unclear whether Taylor's work

might be fueling an unjustified tendency to over blame oneself, or whether it reflects a justified moral asymmetry.

A second point of concern is that Nelkin's analysis of what matters in blame might be misguided. She suggests that what matters is that we blame *enough*, but I think that what matters is that we don't blame *too much*.[9] Nelkin's proposal overlooks a fundamental insight into what morality is about: morality is more about avoiding suffering and increasing well-being than it is about ensuring that wrongdoers get their due. Although there are many dissimilarities between the legal and moral realms, it is worth noting that this is what the presumption of innocence is based on: it is often more of a problem to punish or blame someone too much than to blame or punish someone insufficiently.

The two problems mentioned so far are related. Since Nelkin assumes that what matters is that we blame enough, it makes sense that she focuses on risk. If we care about blaming enough, we will probably often blame too much to ensure that wrongdoers get what they deserve, and then we risk wronging them if we over-blame. Instead of risk, I suggest that we focus on suffering, and that we keep in mind that what matters in blame is that we don't blame someone too much. However, just focusing on suffering is not enough. We also need to point to the precise feature of the relationship we have with ourselves that explains the asymmetry between the justification of inflicting suffering on ourselves and others. In the next section, I suggest we can blame ourselves more than others because we *know* ourselves better. This is in line with one of the major lessons Taylor draws in her documentary *Miss Americana* (2020)—the need to be self-aware and to know oneself.

Self-blame and Self-knowledge

One promising way to make sense of the asymmetry between the ethics of self-blame and other-blame is to consider the role of knowledge and self-knowledge in the justification of our blaming

practices: perhaps it is appropriate for Taylor to blame herself more than it would be for others to blame her because she has *self-knowledge.*[10] She knows why she did a particular action and she knows the kind of person she is, as she sings in "ME!" for example, "I know that I'm a handful, baby, uh / I know I never think before I jump." The idea is that by knowing herself, she might have access to aggravating conditions that would justify her in blaming herself more than others.

Nevertheless, according to Nelkin, this explanation might not work for three reasons.[11] First, it is possible that the asymmetry having to do with knowledge doesn't always hold, whereas our intuitions about the moral asymmetry remain. This means that even when we don't know our minds better than the minds of other people, the intuition according to which it is morally appropriate to blame oneself more than others remains. I disagree. Let's imagine that Taylor has complete amnesia for what she did yesterday because a crazy scientist erased her memory. In this case, she cannot access her past thoughts just like she cannot access other people's thoughts. Since she has no idea about her motives or intentions, it is reasonable that she should be as cautious in blaming herself as she would be in blaming another, even though she remains, in some sense of the term, *herself.* Now imagine a reverse situation: Taylor has access to a machine that allows her to read other peoples' minds and to know their intentions and motives in the same way as she knows her own. In this case, she would be justified in blaming them as much as she would blame herself for the same wrongdoing. So, it looks like our ethical intuitions vary according to variations in the "knowledge" parameter.

Second, Nelkin insists that we might not be able to know ourselves better than others.[12] It is indeed hard to generalize the claim that we are more accurate about ourselves than about others. I want to defend a much more modest claim: we are not *always* more accurate, but we *often* are. If I see Taylor on the stage, I have no way of knowing what her thoughts are. Maybe she is enjoying the show, or maybe she is anxiously waiting for it to end. Contrary to this, I have some sort of access to my mental states (what goes on in my head). For instance, I know why I am now getting

closer to the stage, because I am enjoying the concert very much and I want to snap a good picture before it ends.

Finally, even if we are radical self-knowledge skeptics, that is, if we think we can never know ourselves better than others, we can still point to a relevant difference having to do with knowledge. Let's imagine again that Taylor arrives late to a meeting—maybe she is justified in blaming herself more than others would be, because she knows there was no traffic jam, that she woke up late, and so on. She has access to relevant facts about herself that don't have anything to do with her mental life.

As Nelkin remarks, if we have special access to our own mental states, this might not explain that we should blame ourselves more, but rather that on certain occasions we should blame ourselves less, since "we might also sometimes have better access to excusing conditions."[13] In line with this reasoning, consider the following lyrics from Taylor's song "Don't Blame Me": "don't blame me, love made me crazy." Here she seems to point to an excusing condition for her actions. The fact that self-knowledge provides excusing conditions is not a problem. On the contrary, it captures something central about the degree to which we should blame ourselves—sometimes we should blame ourselves more, and sometimes less than others, depending on whether we have access to aggravating or excusing conditions. This reflects the general treatment of self-blame in Taylor's work. Although there is much self-blame in her lyrics, there is also compassion for herself (and in particular for her younger self being blamed by others), for example, "When you can't blame it on my youth and roll your eyes with affection" ("Nothing New").

And so, we don't have any *systematic* reason to blame ourselves more than others. We can blame ourselves more than others only because we often know ourselves better than we can know others and in knowing ourselves better we can be aware of aggravating conditions.[14] If we could know others as well as we know ourselves, then it would be permissible to blame them to the same degree as we blame ourselves.

Private Blame and Overt Blame

In *Miss Americana,* Taylor claims that "When you are living from the approval of strangers, one bad thing can cause everything to crumble."[15] This makes it clear that Taylor, like many of us, is concerned with the approval of others. We care about what people think of us, but, luckily, we are often ignorant of whether they are blaming us. Indeed, there are roughly two ways of blaming people: we can do it privately or we can express it overtly.[16]

In overt blame the person who is blamed is aware of being blamed. This is what happens when someone tells you, "Hey, you really should not have done this!" Taylor does this in some of the songs directed at her ex-boyfriends, such as "Picture to Burn" and "All Too Well." Usually, when we blame ourselves, we are directly aware that we blame ourselves, whereas we can blame others privately.[17] The fact that we are aware of our self-blame makes it overt. Taylor refers to this conscious aspect of self-blame in "I Knew You Were Trouble" when she sings, "He's long gone / when he's next to me / and I realize / the blame is on me."

These two different forms of blame, private and overt, come with different moral implications: while some situations may not warrant overt blame, it is possible that they would still make private blame appropriate. If your spouse breaks your favorite piece of Taylor Swift merchandise after a very difficult day at work, it might be appropriate to blame them privately, but inappropriate to express your blame to them overtly.

In assessing whether blame is morally appropriate we can use the norm of "proportionality," which tells us that in order for blame to be morally appropriate, the harm it does to the wrongdoer must be proportionate to the gravity of the offense. This norm explains why we would blame someone who stole our ticket to a Taylor Swift concert more than someone who forgot our birthday—because stealing a ticket is worse than forgetting a birthday. Since private blame involves less harm to the individual being blamed than overt blame, it can be appropriate in cases when overt blame is not. Think of cases in which it is unclear how bad the offense is, or cases

such as those mentioned above in which the person is justified in blaming the culprit silently, but where the culprit, for some reason, deserves to be cut some slack.

"… Ready for it?"

Recall the following points: We saw that the proportionate harm norm can warrant private blame while forbidding overt blame. We also saw that all self-blame is overt because we are directly aware of it. If we combine these two points, we see that the proportionate harm norm sometimes warrants other-blame (given that it can be private) while forbidding self-blame (since it is always overt). This is because overt blame inflicts greater harm than private blame on the recipient. Thus, it appears that we should sometimes blame ourselves *less* than others should blame us.[18] The explanation for this is very simple: it is possible to ignore that one is subjected to other-blame, while it is impossible to ignore that one blames oneself. And so, in the end, is it true that we should blame ourselves more than others, like Taylor's work suggests? My answer is that it depends on two parameters. On the one hand, whether we can know ourselves better than others, and, on the other hand, whether we are focused only on overt blame:

1. We should blame ourselves *less* than we blame others for the same wrongdoing if by blame we mean "all kinds of blame considered" (private and overt), and if there is no difference between how we know ourselves and how we know others.
2. We should blame ourselves and others *the same* if we know ourselves and others the same, and if by blame we only mean overt blame.
3. We should blame ourselves *more* than others if we only focus on overt blame (both self- and other-) and if we accept that there is a difference in how we know ourselves and others.

Since it is likely that there *is* a difference between how we know ourselves and how we know others, and since we often care about how much people blame us to our face, not merely how much they

blame us privately, the third solution is the one that is the most promising. Such an instance of self-blame, featuring self-knowledge, is exemplified in the song "Dear John" when Taylor sings, "Well maybe it's me and my blind optimism to blame." Here she seems to be aware of her tendency to be overly optimistic, and this justifies her blaming herself. Nevertheless, if we are justified in blaming ourselves more than others, this is not because of a fundamental asymmetry between the self and others but because of a contingent feature of the self-relationship: the fact that we usually know ourselves better than others.

We can conclude that there's nothing wrong with the recurring theme of self-blame in Taylor's work. Her lyrics are in alignment with justified intuitions about our moral practices: we are often justified in blaming ourselves more than others. Swift's work should be seen as an invitation for self-reflection. It's necessary to be aware of one's own faults in order to improve, and self-blame can be a useful tool to achieve moral progress.

Despite this positive aspect of Taylor's work, one might still wonder about the extent to which the self-blame that she describes in "Anti-Hero," for instance, stems from external sources ("…at teatime, everybody agrees"). Does her self-blame come from the blame others put upon her in a problematic way? Hopefully, the answer is no. It's important to consider self-blame in Taylor's lyrics in the more general context of her work and public presence, which generally advocates self-esteem and autonomy from the opinions of others. So, the good news is that we can continue listening to Taylor's songs without blaming ourselves.

---

[1] Taylor Swift, [@taylorswift]. (2022, October 3). Instagram.
[2] *Miss Americana*, Lana Wilson, Director, (2020).
[3] See for instance Itziar Etxebarria, M. José Ortiz, Susana Conejero, and Aitziber Pascual, "Intensity of Habitual Guilt in Men and Women: Differences in Interpersonal Sensitivity and the Tendency towards Anxious-Aggressive Guilt," *The Spanish Journal of Psychology 12* (2009), 540-554.
[4] Dana K. Nelkin, "How Much to Blame? An Asymmetry between the Norms of Self-Blame and Other-Blame1," in Andreas Brekke Carlsson, ed., *Self-Blame and Moral Responsibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 98.
[5] *Ibid.,* 111.

[6] Let us nevertheless remember that one of Taylor's fan, Ana Clara Benevides Machado, died of heat exhaustion at one of her shows in Brazil.
[7] Maanya Sachdeva, "Taylor Swift cancels Buenos Aires Show Due to 'Unsafe' Conditions," *Independent*, November 2023, at https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/news/taylor-swift-buenos-aires-argentina-eras-tour-b2445507.html.
[8] One might resist the idea that there could be a form of justified harm, since injustice or unfairness might be built in the concept of harm. In order to avoid this worry, I suggest using instead the notion of "suffering" which is more neutral. For a discussion on whether the notion of harm should be moralized see Nils Holtug, "The Harm Principle," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 5 (2002), 357–89.
[9] Nelkin (2022), 112.
[10] Nelkin (2022), 106.
[11] Ibid., 107.
[12] Ibid.
[13] *Ibid., 108.*
[14] Another way of explaining the asymmetry in our intuitions about blaming ourselves and others, is to say that we hold ourselves to different standards from others. It seems to me that this explanation can be traced back to the fact that we generally know ourselves better than others. We hold ourselves to higher standards often because we know that we have the capacity to do better.
[15] *Miss Americana*
[16] See for instance Mona Simion, "Blame as Performance," *Synthese* 199 (2021), 7595–7614.
[17] I won't be assuming the stronger claim that we always know it when we blame ourselves, since it is possible that we are sometimes blaming ourselves unconsciously by entertaining recurring thoughts, or having certain self-regarding emotions without identifying them as self-blame.
[18] When discussing her account, Nelkin herself observes that "A different hypothesis might seem to jump out at this point: self-blame is essentially harmful or painful where other-blame isn't, or, at least, self-blame is more directly connected to something essentially painful than is other-blame" Nelkin (2022), 110. For a discussion of the fact that self-blame is essentially painful see Andreas Carlsson, "Blameworthiness as Deserved Guilt," *The Journal of Ethics* 21 (2017), 89–115.