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Blame as participant anger: extending moral claimant competence to young children and nonhuman animals

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ABSTRACT

Following the social conception of moral agency, this paper claims that many agents commonly exempted from moral responsibility, like young children, adults with late-stage dementia, and nonhuman animals, may nevertheless qualify as participants in moral responsibility practices. Blame and other moral responsibility responses are understood according to the *communicative emotion* account of the reactive attitudes. To blame someone means having an emotion episode that acts as a vehicle for conveying a particular moral content. Therefore, moral agency is argued to be manifested in communicative exchanges between a *claimant* and a *defendant*. While many human and nonhuman agents are justifiably exempted from ascriptions of moral responsibility, this does not necessarily exclude such agents from the community of moral agents altogether. Toddlers and dogs, for instance, seem capable of other-directed reactive attitudes, like resentment, and could, therefore, qualify as participants in moral responsibility practices with respect to the claimant position. Therefore, we may have reason to adopt a distinct *claimant-directed* participant stance to some beings, even if they fail to qualify as apt targets of blame. This expanded theoretical room for moral agency is argued to make explicit further normative considerations.

1. Introduction

Young children, adults with allegedly moral responsibility-undermining conditions, nonhuman animals, and machines are typical examples of entities denied moral agency in the philosophical literature. A central premise, underscoring much skepticism, is the assumption that moral agency designates entities that are eligible for ascriptions of moral responsibility, like blame or praise (McKenna, 2012; A. M. Smith, 2013; Shoemaker, 2007;

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Watson, 2011; See also Talbert, 2022). Since it would be inappropriate, unfair, or unreasonable to hold toddlers, adults with late-stage dementia, and nonhuman animals, among others, morally responsible for their conduct, they are denied moral agency and assumed to be justifiably exempted from the moral community (Ayala, 2010; Hew, 2014; Johnson, 2006; Korsgaard, 2006, 2010; McKenna, 2012; Musschenga, 2015; Parthemore & Whitby, 2013; Rowlands, 2012; Shoemaker, 2011, 2015; Tognazzini & Coates, 2018; Wallace, 1994; Watson, 2004).[1]

The present paper sets out to challenge this widely assumed skeptical position, by targeting its basic premise. While many human and nonhuman agents are justifiably exempted from moral responsibility, this does not necessarily justify excluding them from the community of moral agents altogether. Increasingly, philosophers are questioning the assumption that young children, adults with purported agency-undermining conditions, and nonhuman animals are exempt from moral responsibility (Behdadi, 2021; Brandenburg, 2019; Burroughs, 2020; Svirsky, 2020), as well as challenging the appropriateness of a purely objective stance to such agents (Jeppsson, 2021; Kennett, 2009). Building on these critiques, this paper argues that many discussions overlook a crucial aspect of how inclusion and exemption in the moral community can be understood. I propose that determining the boundaries of moral agency requires considering not only an agent's eligibility for moral assessment but also their capacity to *hold* others morally responsible.

This paper, therefore, asks if some typically moral agency-exempted beings, with toddlers and dogs being primary examples, can blame others. Following a broadly Strawsonian (1962/1982) approach, moral agency is understood as a socially situated participatory competence to engage in communicative exchanges involving reactive attitudes. Acknowledging the dialogic structure of moral participation gives us reason to consider eligibility requirements for not only one, but *two*, positions in a moral exchange: the one directing blame (*moral claimant*) and the one subjected to blame (*moral defendant*). While toddlers and dogs may be ineligible for (most or all) ascriptions of moral responsibility and thus ineligible with respect to the *defendant* position in a moral exchange, they seem to be capable of other-directed reactive attitudes, like resentment. As such, they could qualify as participants in moral responsibility practices with respect to the *claimant* position.

Moreover, the suggested dialogic structure and social situatedness of moral agency are argued to explain and justify asymmetries of responsibility between participants. Psychological capacities and social and material resources required for the propriety and fairness of blame are unequally distributed among participants. Therefore, it seems plausible and reasonable that some agents may primarily, or only, be eligible in the position of moral

claimant. Finally, extending moral claimancy to beings beyond typical adult humans is argued to make explicit important normative implications.

The next section (2) presents Strawson's (1962/1982) social-emotional conception of moral responsibility and situates this approach within a dialogic framework. Section 3 proposes that some of the hostile reactions of typically moral responsibility-exempted agents, like toddlers and dogs, may constitute cases of blame. However, this claim is put to question by the *objective anger argument*, which states that the exemplified reactions can be explained (away) in terms of nonmoral varieties of anger. I refute this counter-argument by following the *communicative emotion* account of blame to specify criteria for *participant anger* (4). The inferred require-ments, in turn, support the adoption of a distinct *claimant-directed* partici-pant stance toward some defendant-exempted participants (5). I, then, consider a final worry (6): the *argument from symmetry*, according to which the claimant and defendant positions of moral agency are inseparable due to relying on the same underlying capacities and skills. I question the force of this argument by appeal to considerations of intelligibility and fairness for the propriety of blame. Lastly (7), I point to some further ethical and moral epistemological implications raised by these discussions.

2. Moral agency as a socially situated participatory competence

Attending to the practical nature and structure of moral agency provides an underexplored avenue for reevaluating the skeptical position regarding the moral agency of young children and nonhuman animals.

2.1. The participant stance

In his landmark essay *Freedom and Resentment* (1962/1982), P. F. Strawson rejects determinism-based skepticism about moral responsibility by claim-ing that humans are naturally predisposed to and unable to refrain from the everyday emotional responses fundamental to our social practices of hold-ing responsible. These *reactive attitudes*, like gratitude, resentment, and remorse, are responses "to the quality of others' wills toward us" (1962/1982 p. 70). Our disposition to respond with such attitudes toward the conduct of others reveals a commonplace expectation or demand for "good-will or regard" (1962/1982, p. 64).

Central to Strawson's account are the different perspectives one can take toward the behavior of others. From the *participant stance*, we view and relate to other agents as apt targets of reactive attitudes. From this perspec-tive, "he or she is seen as a responsible agent, as a potential term in moral relationships, as a member (albeit, perhaps, in less than good standing) of the moral community (Watson, 2004, pp. 225–6). However, taking an

objective stance toward someone indicates the opposite assumption. That is, we view the other party as temporarily or permanently unfit for the general moral demand and subsequently ineligible for the corresponding reactive attitudes. Instead, we relate to the entity:

> as an object of social policy; as a subject for what, in a wide range of sense, might be called treatment; as something certainly to be taken into account, perhaps precautionary account of; to be managed, handled, cured or trained; perhaps simply to be avoided. (Strawson, 1962/1982, p. 66)

In this way, the participant and objective stances track who is and who is not eligible for ascriptions of moral responsibility. Importantly, attending to the distinctive features of the participant stance provides a theoretical basis for distinguishing emotional reactions that originate from within the moral perspective from those that do not. Establishing such criteria is key for defending the main claim of this paper, namely, that many typically moral agency-exempted beings may still qualify as participants in moral responsibility practices. However, determining the distinguishing features of the participant stance requires spelling out in more detail the nature and structure of participation in moral responsibility practices. Fortunately, the dialogic development of Strawson's theory offers a promising starting point.

2.2. The case for two participatory positions

According to a popular elaboration of Strawson's account, participation in moral responsibility practices can be understood in terms of a dialogic communicative exchange. The basis for this idea is the claim that (some of) the reactive attitudes are communicative in nature (Darwall, 2006; Fricker, 2016; Macnamara, 2015a, 2015b; Mason, 2019; McKenna, 2012; Shoemaker, 2007, 2015; Wallace, 2019; Watson, 2004). Hence, the requirements of moral agency can be clarified by appeal to "moral address" (Watson, 2004, p. 229).[2] To take the participant stance toward someone would therefore make "sense only on the assumption that the other can comprehend the message" (Watson, 2004, p. 230) inherent in reactive attitudes.

Participation in moral responsibility practices can thus be characterized as engaging in a specific type of communicative exchange (McGeer, 2012, 2013; McKenna, 2012) or "blame conversation" (Mason, 2019, p. 104), where reactive attitudes act as messages. The following communicative episode illustrates a common type of moral exchange between typical adult humans[3]:

> **Food stand**: *A person (A) is standing in line to get lunch from a food stand. Suddenly, someone (B) forcefully steps on A's foot while attempting to pass through the line.*

> *Irritated and in pain, A groans while directing an angry look at the perceived transgressor. B hears them, turns around with a surprised expression, and answers by lowering their head, gritting their teeth, and lifting their hands with the palms turned toward A. In response, A's facial expression softens, and they turn their attention back toward the food stand.*

When we look at moral agency as the participation in an everyday type of communicative practice surrounding expectations, norms, or standards of considerate or appropriate behavior, it becomes clear that an essential dimension of such agency is overlooked if reduced to questions about being on the receiving end of moral responsibility ascriptions – the *moral defendant*. When asking whether an entity is a participant, we are likewise required to pay attention to the question of what it means to be the moral messenger – the *moral claimant*.

In effect, the participant stance should be viewed as involving (at least) two distinct sub-stances; a *defendant-directed* participant stance and a *claimant-directed* participant stance. When we take the first perspective toward someone, we view them as eligible for blame and similar reactive attitudes and ascriptions. When we take the second stance, we view them as the kind of entity that can make moral claims and demands on us and others. In effect, we may have reasons to take a claimant-directed participant stance toward (some) entities despite exempting them as moral defendants.

In the following section, I will suggest that some of the aggressive and hostile behaviors of typically moral agency-exempted beings appear to be made from within the defendant-directed participant stance and, therefore, constitute blame. This, in turn, means that some such beings are moral claimants and may be eligible to be treated as such. Specifying moral claimancy, therefore, has implications for the theoretical *scope* of possible moral agents but possibly also for our everyday practices.

3. Participating as moral claimant

Having established the centrality of the participant stance and the claimant-defendant distinction, I will now turn to consider whether toddlers and dogs can inhabit the claimant position in a moral exchange. The reason for focusing on these cases is because they represent entities who are typically denied moral agency in the philosophical literature but whom we interact with on a daily basis. Additionally, both toddlers and dogs can communicate with adult humans. Despite belonging to a separate species, dogs are exceptionally proficient at recognizing and interpreting human social communication (Albuquerque et al., 2016; Kaminski & Nitzschner, 2013; Müller et al., 2015).

Moreover, dogs and young children are known to engage in various practices of *social maintenance*, such as reacting to perceived violations of standards and responding to such reactions (Behdadi, 2021; Butovskaya et al., 2000; Fujisawa et al., 2005; Hardecker et al., 2016; Horowitz, 2002; Miklósi, 2007; Vaish et al., 2010, 2016; Westlund et al., 2008; Ziv et al., 2021). Moreover, they seem to be able to take intentions and beliefs into account when socially and morally evaluating other agents (Baird & Astington, 2004; Hilton & Kuhlmeier, 2019; Schünemann et al., 2021; Vaish et al., 2010; Völter et al., 2023). Young children recognize and react positively to apologies (C. E. Smith et al., 2010), and dogs and many nonhuman animals also engage in post-conflict reconciliatory behaviors (Aureli et al., 2002; Baan et al., 2014; Cools et al., 2008; Cordoni & Palagi, 2008; Walters et al., 2020) which may be analogs to making amends. Dogs also initiate communicative exchanges with humans (Miklósi et al., 2000) and exhibit reconciliatory behaviors toward us (Cavalli et al., 2016).

In both cases below (and in the rest of this paper), blame is understood as a subset of characteristically hostile and confrontative responses. Hence, resentment, indignation, and other forms of directed "moral anger" act as placeholders for moral address (MacLachlan, 2010; Nichols, 2007, p. 413; Prinz, 2007). While one can judge someone to be morally responsible without thereby also *holding* them responsible, I am only interested in the latter. I will, therefore, leave aside questions concerning private blame and forms of moral appraisal that are void of emotion and motivationally inert. The reason for this is because of limited space but also since paradigmatic blame is widely assumed to involve anger, hostility, and aggression (McGeer, 2013; Shoemaker, 2018; Wolf, 2011). Moreover, the saliency of aggressive or hostile reactions makes this subtype of blaming responses particularly suitable for comparative considerations compared to cooler blaming responses, like contempt or disdain (Mason, 2019 Ch. 5; Bell, 2013a).

> **Nour the toddler**: *A three-year-old, Nour, is watching her parent bake a cake. She excitedly asks if she can lick the frosting off the beaters, and her parent promises to hand them over to her as soon as he is done mixing. After finishing the cake, however, the parent, out of sheer habit, rinses the beaters in the sink. Upon seeing this, Nour's facial expression undergoes a familiar transformation. Her calm composure is replaced by a pouting mouth and furrowed brows, followed by angry cries directed at her parent.*

> **Molly the dog**: *A dog, Molly, is resting on the couch. A (human) visitor approaches to greet Molly. Upon realizing that the visitor is reaching toward her head, Molly ducks away and licks her snout. When the visitor continues to try to pet Molly on the head, Molly's ears get pinned back, and she tries to deflect the visitor's hand. However, when the visitor does not stop reaching for her head, Molly starts to growl. When he does not respond, Molly finally retorts to snarl and snaps her teeth in the air.*

In each case above, the agent's non-linguistic reaction seems to be directed toward someone. While blame is often portrayed to involve speech acts, like critical remarks or angry questions, the food stand scenario (2.2) shows that it certainly does not have to. Even typical adult humans can, and commonly do, morally address (and respond to) one another non-linguistically, using angry and surprised vocalizations, hostile postures, disapproving facial expressions, and changes in physical distance. Limiting our understanding of directed blame to explicit and linguistically mediated communication runs the risk of excluding a considerable portion of everyday human practices from the domain of moral responsibility interactions.[4]

In addition, the reactions of Nour and Molly appear to have been elicited in response to conduct readily characterized as displaying substandard quality of will or disrespect. For example, Nour's angry cries directed at her parent can be taken to tell us that she blames her parent for having failed to keep his promise to her. Similarly, in light of what we know about social norms in dogs, Molly's growl and snap can be taken to express that she takes the human stranger to have greeted her in a rude or inappropriate manner (Kuhne et al., 2012). Notably, paradigm examples of blameworthy actions, such as intentional acts of violence, were deliberately excluded from the mentioned scenarios. The focus here is not on whether the human adults in these examples are blameworthy, but rather whether the reactions of Nour and Molly may constitute instances of blame. Whether some such blame is apt or justified is a *further* question.

3.1. The objective anger argument

However, the case for attributing moral claimancy to toddlers and dogs is far from definitive at this point as one may explain their angry reactions toward us in ways that do not presuppose the participant stance. Shoemaker alludes to this point when stating that "some creatures, such as babies and bears, clearly get angry too" but that their anger "may merely be goal-frustration" (2015, p. 90). As such, their behavior, while clearly hostile or aggressive, is not *participant anger*.[5] On an objective stance reading, Nour's anger may simply be a reaction to not getting something she really wants. Likewise, Molly's hostile reaction may be explained in terms of annoyance at an uncomfortable state of events.

Similar to when typical adult humans get angry at mere things, like a pair of malfunctioning headphones, or events, such as stubbing one's toe against the doorframe, the objective stance seems sufficient for explaining what is going on. Although one may scream, kick, or even swear in such instances, we do not typically take annoyance or frustration *per se* to count as blame. This is because the agent, while clearly angry, is not reacting in response to what they (reasonably speaking)

perceive to be moral failures on the part of an agent. In other words, the skeptic may claim that Nour and Molly's reactions can be readily explained (away) in terms of attitudes and strategies inherent to the objective, as opposed to the participant, stance. There is therefore no sound basis for ascribing moral claimancy to Nour and Molly.

4. Blame as participant anger

To support the extension of moral claimancy to Nour and Molly, one needs to show that their anger cannot be suitably characterized within the resources of the objective stance. In this section, I will follow a specific account of blame to formulate distinguishing criteria for participant anger.

4.1. The communicative emotion account of blame

According to a widely embraced approach, directed blame can be distinguished from other reactions by its content and function. While suggestions differ (see, for example, Bell, 2013b, sec. 2; Shoemaker & Vargas, 2021), I will stay true to the Strawsonian commitments of this paper. According to Colleen Macnamara, blaming responses are negatively valenced communicative emotion episodes that aim for a particular response in an intended recipient (2015a, 2015b). In this way, other-directed reactive attitudes, such as resentment and indignation, belong to a larger class of emotions that via their expression "evoke emotional responses in others . . . " and that " . . . some of these responses constitute emotional uptake of the very representational content of the original emotion" (Macnamara, 2015a; see, p. 2020; Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Keltner et al., 2013).

According to a general emotion model, the content of an emotion, like participant anger, comprises the following modalities: somatic-affective, cognitive, and behavioral (Lazarus, 1991). These components each fulfill specific roles in the emotion's overall strategy (Roseman, 2018). The emotional content distinctive of participant anger can therefore be understood in terms of a specific "sentimental syndrome" (Shoemaker, 2015; see, p. 89; Averill, 1980), distinguishing it from objective anger (Scarantino, 2014) by involving certain sensations and feelings, particular evaluations or appraisals, and specific action tendencies (Macnamara, 2015b; Shoemaker, 2015, 2018). Hence, by attending to how a specific angry episode *feels*, how it *construes the world*, and what behaviors it *motivates*, one can begin to map out how participant anger differs from its objective counterparts, like frustration anger. Importantly, the communicative emotion account of blame provides a fruitful avenue for distinguishing participant anger,

while retaining the sentimentalist and relational tenets of Strawson's original theory.

4.1. Participant anger

Participant anger is triggered by events or actions marked, evaluated or appraised as, in some sense, offensive (Macnamara, 2015b; Nichols, 2007; Rosen, 2015), slighting (Shoemaker, 2015, 2018), or seriously inappropriate (McGeer, 2013). Such appraisals are typically accompanied by phenomenal states, such as bodily sensations of heat and tenseness and feelings of anger (McGeer, 2013; Nichols, 2007; Rosen, 2015; Shoemaker, 2015, 2018). Finally, participant anger disposes toward particular "action tendencies" (Roseman et al., 1994, p. 207) that involve facial signatures and actions characterized by hostility, aggression, and confrontation (Bell, 2013b, 2013b; McKenna, 2013; Shoemaker, 2015). As such, they function as vehicles for a type of (morally charged) message. This brings us to the communicative aim of participant anger.

The communicative aim of participant anger consists of two elements. First, participant anger has a backward-looking aspect by virtue of negatively appraising an action, attitude, or agent. This evaluative element can be understood in terms of the formal and particular objects of the emotion (Kenny, 1963; Kriegel, 2012). The particular object of participant anger is the appraisal of, say, a specific conduct as wrong, bad, inappropriate, offensive or disrespectful, and so on. The formal object of participant anger is the marking or appraising of the conduct as blameworthy (Strabbing, 2021) or angersome (Shoemaker, 2015, 2018).

Secondly, participant anger likewise conveys a positive message by virtue of a prescriptive claim, directive, or demand (Darwall, 2006; McGeer, 2013; Shoemaker, 2007; Talbert, 2012; Walker, 2006). The action-priming nature of participant anger explains how it serves as an uptake-evoking moral message. After all, "[m]any paradigmatic messages' have 'the function of evoking uptake" (Macnamara, 2015b, p. 564), and reactive attitudes and other forms of moral address are typically conceived of as urging, requiring, demanding, inviting, deserving, or calling for a particular *response* in the recipient or target.[6] In this way, participant anger can be argued to involve several parts that work together to convey a moral message. When Nour and Molly express their anger, they are conveying several things: That the behavior (or omission) of the defendant is below of, or transgressive of, their expectations of appropriate, good, or right conduct. Their anger likewise demands, calls for, or urges, the defendant to respond.[7]

While suggestions differ about the nature and intended audience of these communicative functions (Bell, 2013b; Shoemaker & Vargas, 2021), most popular suggestions are co-extensive.[8] For the purposes of this

paper, I will focus on proposals that are inherently dialogical, that is, accounts that assume that (some) directed blame is intended for the perceived transgressor (Darwall, 2006; Macnamara, 2015b, 2015b; McKenna, 2012; Shoemaker, 2007, 2018; A. M. Smith, 2013; Walker, 2006). In addition, given that the claims of this paper point toward the possibility of inter-generational and inter-species moral communities, I am particularly sympathetic to functional accounts focused on social negotiation and co-regulation (McGeer, 2013, 2019; Sie, 2000). These accounts highlight how the sensitizing and cultivating functions of directed blame can increase social cohesion by moving group members to co-adjust disparate understandings of "the good", "the appropriate", "the right", etc.

To conclude, the communicative emotion account of blame clarifies that blame involves a communicative emotion that disposes the agent to convey its content to a recipient. The reason for these action-priming effects is that participant anger aims for a particular response. Following the described conception of the content and function of participant anger serves to help us determine whether young children and dogs, as well as other typically moral agency-exempted agents, qualify as moral claimants.

5. Specifying the requirements of moral claimancy

Having defined participant anger, we can now begin to distinguish instances of genuine blame from objective species of angry or hostile reactions and subsequently, determine whether toddlers and dogs qualify as moral claimants.

5.1. Differentiating participant anger from objective anger

To counter the challenge posed by objective anger, one needs to differentiate blame from similarly looking reactions by way of criteria that are applicable to the reactions and features of agents such as Nour and Molly. Luckily, the communicative emotion account of blame can provide just this. By defining the success conditions of participant anger and comparing them to those of, say, frustration anger, one can distinguish the expected behavioral patterns of anger that originate from the participant and objective stances respectively. These predictions may then be used to assess the particular cases under consideration.

According to the communicative emotion account, the functional aim of directed blame is to convey its content to the recipient. Shoemaker (2007) has described this aim in the following way: "What we actually want ... is that our fellow agents be able to hear and understand our pleas in order to appreciate and respond to those pleas ... " (p. 97).

Directed blame thus aims for *uptake*. This implies that participant anger, like other communicative emotions, is responsive to cues *indicating* uptake. Participant anger should therefore diminish in light of expressions and behaviors that show that the defendant has *gotten the message*. I will refer to attitudes that have this signaling function as *moral response*.

Moral response is a reply to moral address, like directed blame, and is aptly expressed via reactive attitudes like guilt, remorse and regret and through behaviors like apologies, excuses, and making amends.[9] In the food stand scenario (2.2), A's initial reaction to B's conduct is quickly subdued and mollified when B responds in a manner conveying that they recognize A's invitation and acknowledge the transgression or injury. Therefore, I argue that moral response has the functional aim of conveying uptake. It communicates that one has recognized the claimant's reaction *as* moral address and, just like moral address, it can take various expressions and convey various forms of uptake-related messages (see also Schmader & Lickel, 2006).[10]

Frustration anger, on the other hand, while being a type of anger, differs in both content and function from participant anger. For one, frustration anger appraises situations or objects as preventing the agent from doing or attaining what they want. Its function is to move the agent to overcome, move, or find a way around an obstacle or impediment (Haidt, 2003). When a frustrated agent manages to overcome the impediment, their anger subsides. This is because frustration anger has attained its functional aim. So, while a goal-frustrated agent may feel angry and heated and behave aggressively toward, say, a log blocking the road (for example, by kicking it), the agent is not disposed to address the log in any true sense. Their reaction does not have its source in the participant stance and therefore does not aim for a response from the log. On the contrary, the angry agent would be surprised (and probably terrified) if the log were to respond to their blame.

As such, while goal-frustration may involve aggression toward something or someone it is not communicative in the sense of inviting or urging a qualified response from an agent. Needless to say, frustration anger and participant anger often coexist (Shoemaker, 2018, p. 73). For instance, a student who finds themselves disrupted by a loud and rowdy visitor at the library's quiet space, may experience both species of anger simultaneously. They may feel resentment because they perceive the rowdy visitor as displaying disrespect or indifference for others. But the student may also feel frustrated because they are disturbed in the middle of challenging course work. While it may be difficult to differentiate between participant and objective anger in practice, it is only by considering their distinct elicitors, contents and functional aim that we can hope to determine whether the behaviors and expressions of agents like Nour and Molly qualify

as blame and, by extension, whether they are moral claimant participants and eligible for moral response.

The key difference, then, between participant and objective anger is that the former, but not the latter, presupposes that the object is a communicable, in-group agent. In other words, participant anger *presents* the object to which it is directed as someone with whom a moral exchange is possible. That is, as an agent with the skills required to aptly respond to, internalize and conform to norms, rules or standards of right, good, respectful, or appropriate conduct.

5.2. The appropriateness of moral response

Having differentiated the content and function of participant anger from objective anger, we are now in a position to determine whether the reactions exhibited by Nour and Molly can be appropriately characterized in terms of blame. In Strawsonian terms, we can begin to discern whether their reactions are made from within or from outside of the participant stance. The answer, I propose, lies in examining the subsequent steps of the unfolding moral exchange, specifically how the proposed claimant reacts to the response of the perceived defendant.

To illustrate, imagine that Nour snubs her toe on a stone. Nour may express anger, but she does not expect to get a response from the stone. In contrast, when Nour thinks that another child or an adult has treated her (or someone else) wrongly, she addresses them on the assumption that they are appropriately responsive to blame. This, in turn, means that Nour's anger aims for uptake of its content. For example, if Nour's parent were to send her to her room, calling her *naughty* or laughing *at* her, he would not be signaling (full) uptake. As such, Nour's anger will not have attained its functional aim. For Nour's anger to fully subside, her parent must show (sincere) signs of recognition. For example, by expressing regret, explaining that he did not mean to break his promise, saying he is sorry he forgot, etc. Even young children consider an agent's intentions when making moral judgments (Baird & Astington, 2004; Hilton & Kuhlmeier, 2019; Vaish et al., 2010) and appear to understand and appreciate when someone is seeking forgiveness (C. E. Smith et al., 2010)

Similarly, while Molly might get frustrated with, say, mosquitos, there is a crucial difference in the way she directs anger at mere "objects" and the way she sees and behaves toward communicable in-group agents. In the first case, Molly does not try to make use of any true communicative attempts but goes directly to measures typical of the objective stance, like avoidance or elimination (killing the mosquitos). Likewise, Molly is sensitive to (some) excusing and exempting conditions. For example, she can adapt and modify her reaction in light of (social) cues indicating that the offender did not

mean to, such as when an action seems to have been due to an accident (Behdadi, 2021; Schünemann et al., 2021; Völter et al., 2023). In addition, Molly also modifies her response when the other party is very young and therefore not an appropriate target of participant anger. For instance, dogs, like humans, are generally much more tolerant when the transgressor is a puppy (Allen & Bekoff, 2005, p. 130).

If Molly's angry and hostile behaviors were merely intended to remove or avoid a perceived nuisance she may just as well have treated the visitor the way she treats mosquitos. For example, she could have gone straight to biting him or running away from him. Instead, Molly is clearly in the business of communicating *with* him. Molly made several attempts to remind the visitor that his behavior is bad, wrong or seriously inappropriate and turned hostile and aggressive first when her polite reminders had been ignored. Conversely, usually, when a dog or a human behaves in an inappropriate or offensive manner, Molly expresses her disapproval with them on the assumption that they can be expected to understand and respond appropriately to such address. That is, they will get *that* she is angry with them, understand *what* she is angry about, and readjust their behavior and commitments accordingly (reflecting the communicative aims of moral anger). The visitor may express uptake of Molly's blame by, say, quickly backing away, lowering his head, averting his gaze, and by talking to her softly. And, of course, by conforming to canine greeting norms in the future. This is as opposed to, for example, scolding her because he believes she is *disobedient* or *aggressive*.

Needless to say, many of the ways in which adults may provide reasons in response to blame, are not viable in communicating with toddlers and dogs. While dogs and toddlers are not on par with adult humans, they clearly give uptake to *some* forms of moral response, like apologies, restating one's good-intentions, reparative attempts, etc. For example, Behdadi (2021) cites a large body of empirical studies indicating that canids engage in exchanges about perceived transgressions of social play rules. Importantly, these exchanges seem "to involve relevant equivalents to human reason giving, expressed via movement, vocalizations, posture, position and direction of body parts, etc." (2021, p. 10). Similarly, studies indicate that young children recognize and appreciate apologies and that they distinguish intentional from unintentional action in moral evaluation (Baird & Astington, 2004; Hilton & Kuhlmeier, 2019; C. E. Smith et al., 2010; Vaish et al., 2016).

Given the functional aim of moral response to express uptake, there are some forms of moral response that, at least some, typically moral agency exempted beings would anticipate and recognize as such. For example, young children and dogs appear to give uptake to expressions and behaviors signaling that the perceived defendant, initial appearances notwithstanding, is (re)committed to good, appropriate, or considerate behavior. Therefore,

I argue that young children and dogs, among others, qualify as moral claimants. This means that it makes sense to attend more carefully to their angry, hostile, and untoward reactions toward us and consider whether a moral response might be warranted.

6. The argument from symmetry

A final worry about attributing moral claimancy to agents who are exempted from moral responsibility concerns a presumed "condition of symmetry" (Russell, 2004, p. 300) or interdependence (McKenna, 2012) between being and holding responsible. For instance, a central premise of McKenna's (2012) conversational theory of moral responsibility is that there is a mutual interdependence between an agent's capacity to hold others responsible and their capacity for being responsible. McKenna supports this claim by comparing a moral agent to a "competent speaker of a natural language" who has "skills both to express herself, thereby making contributions to dialogue, and also the interpretive skills needed to understand others." (2012, p. 85). Just like a speaker of a natural language, a moral agent's "acting skills and her holding-responsible skills are similarly enmeshed" (2012, p. 86).

From these assumptions, one can extrapolate an *argument from symmetry*, according to which it would be a mistake to ascribe moral claimancy to toddlers or dogs since the features underpinning holding responsible presuppose the features required for being (appropriately held) responsible. In short, being capable of internalizing and conforming to moral considerations goes hand in hand with recognizing and responding to cases of non-conformity. Participating as moral defendant and participating as moral claimant are made possible by the same skill set or competence. Hence, assuming that toddlers and dogs are not appropriate targets of most (or any) moral claims and demands, they likewise cannot be appropriate makers of such claims or demands.

I concede that it appears to be true that the basic features underpinning participation as defendant and claimant are one and the same at the *individual level*. However, none of this seems to support the conclusion that members of a moral community necessarily have to be symmetrically "coaccountable" (McKenna, 2012, p. 91) *to* one another. What I turn against, therefore, is the assertion that the responsibility *between* two parties necessarily must be symmetrical or equal.

Some participants qualify as moral claimants, and may be eligible for moral response, despite not being appropriate targets of the moral expectations or standards pertaining to relations between typical adult humans. This is because the appropriateness of blame depends on socially and circumstantially contingent factors. An evident constraint

on blame, given a communicative understanding, is *intelligibility*, that is, whether the intended target is capable of uptake of the particular content (Macnamara, 2015b; McKenna, 2012). Moreover, directed blame inflicts costs on the perceived violator by the "attitudinal pressure" (Wallace, 2019, p. 99) imposed by hostility and confrontation. As such, the appropriateness of blame also depends on conditions of *fairness* (Wallace, 1994). It is widely assumed that it would be unfair to inflict "the emotional content of the demand – particularly the 'sting' of resentment" on beings who cannot respond appropriately (Hutchison, 2018, p. 218).

Imagine, for instance, a situation where a toddler and an adult are asked to leave a pan of freshly baked cookies for half an hour. The experiential and developmental differences between these two agents give that the same task imposes different costs on them. It is more difficult for a toddler than for a typical adult human to abstain from tasting a cookie for 30 minutes. The psychological makeup of the former puts her at a higher risk of failing to inhibit conflicting impulses and motivations (Tiboris, 2014). Because conforming to many moral standards is very difficult for toddlers, their transgressions generally do not implicate substandard quality of will. Hence, it would not be appropriate to hold them to the same standards as one does typical adults by, for example, blaming them.

Similarly, nonhuman animals, like dogs, are differently endowed than typical adult humans. Imagine the differential means available to an adult human versus a dog to attend to, recognize, and internalize new standards of appropriate conduct. While a human may misinterpret, overlook, or disregard canine greeting norms, she is in a much better position to reassess and readjust her behavior and commitments. She has the cognitive and cultural means to access vast sources of scaffolding (such as other humans, books, or other written sources) to help her reflect on and be sensitized to considerations regarding respectful interaction with members of other species (see Meints et al., 2018).

A dog, on the other hand, lacks these resources.[11] She may not be capable of recognizing and thus morally internalizing the content of a human's anger at, say, being jumped on. Alternatively, she might understand the reaction *as* blame but not be able to comprehend what state or object it targets. Nevertheless, even if she were to recognize both the formal and particular object of the anger in question, she might not be able to respond in a fitting manner because of strong conflicting motivational pulls.

In light of these considerations, I argue that dogs and toddlers, most often, are *claimant-heavy* participants in moral responsibility practices. Differences in experience, perception, inhibitory capacities, generalization, communicative modes and styles, emotional regulation, and scaffolding resources, not to mention asymmetrical *relations of power*, are just some variables that can explain and justify why some agents may be exempt from

(much) blame. However, diminished eligibility as moral defendant does not automatically exclude an agent from moral responsibility practices altogether. This is because such a participant may still be very perceptive of and responsive to perceived transgressions or harms of others.

Hence, while Nour or Molly may not be fully eligible for moral address, we seem to have reason to reconsider the justifiability of exempting them from moral responsibility practices altogether. Adopting a distinct claimant-directed participant stance toward an agent serves to situate them as a potential source of moral claims and demands. The attribution of moral claimancy thus goes beyond seeing someone as a passive object, or recipient, of moral concern. As such, considering young children, nonhuman animals, and others, as moral claimants means being open to the possibility that some of the hostile, antagonistic, unruly, seemingly mad, and untoward behaviors directed toward us by such agents may be potential messages with moral content, inviting, urging or calling for recognition.

7. Concluding remarks

I have argued that there are some beings with diminished eligibility as moral defendants who still seem capable of blame understood as participant anger. Therefore, these beings qualify as moral claimants and may warrant a moral response. Of course, the argument for a distinct claimant participatory position in moral responsibility practices raises several additional questions in need of further inquiry. For instance, regarding the particular suitability of moral response, that is, when and how one should take a claimant-directed participant stance and on what grounds.

Moreover, the notion of moral claimancy expands on recent calls to attend to the normative implications of animal morality (Benz-Schwarzburg & Wrage, 2023; Monsó et al., 2018), and the concept of *claimant injustice* (Carbonell, 2019) may extend to numerous entities beyond typical (albeit disenfranchised) adult humans. For example, consider the extent to which the confrontative, antagonistic, or non-compliant behaviors of toddlers, nonhuman animals, and other typically exempted and marginalized groups go unheard, are ignored, misinterpreted, or subjugated to censure and punishment. Moreover, since docility and compliance are key behavioral traits selected for by humans in domesticated and captive animals, the moral claimancy of the latter are at risk of being systematically suppressed (see, for example, Clutton-Brock, 1992).

In this way, the notion of moral claimancy likewise links to discussions in political philosophy concerning the inclusion and citizenisation of non-linguistic human populations (Simplican, 2015) and to suggestions for extending concepts such as *resistance*, *assent*/*consent*, and, not least,

epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) to agents beyond typical adult humans, like persons with late-stage dementia (Spencer, 2023), and nonhuman animals (Blattner et al., 2019; Colling, 2021; Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2011; Meijer, 2019).

In addition, recent suggestions about the *agency cultivating* (Vargas, 2013, 2018) or *scaffolding* (McGeer, 20155) potential of moral feedback bring forward the importance and implications of *moral audience* (Jefferson & Sifferd, 2023). The notion of moral claimancy and the possibility of extending the claimant-directed participant stance to entities beyond adult humans, make explicit a significant but under-appreciated moral epistemic implication: Systematic dismissal or ignorance of large populations of moral claimants may compromise, and even corrupt, the moral sensitivity and responsiveness of typical adult humans.

Notes

1. Note, however, that this is not taken to signify that such agents lack moral status.
2. Watson (2004) introduced the term *moral address* following Stern's assumption that when blaming another, "we engage in dialogue" Stern (1974, p. 79). See also McKenna (1998, p. 126).
3. This scenario is modeled after McGeer's forgiveness trajectory (McGeer, 2012, p. 305).
4. Moreover, this runs the risk of *anthropofabulating* about moral claimancy, that is, tying "the competence criteria for cognitive capacities to an exaggerated sense of typical human performance" (Buckner, 2013, p. 853).
5. Shoemaker (2015, 2018) talks about "agential anger" (p. 91) and "blaming anger" (p. 74).
6. See Macnamara (2015b), footnote 11; 2013, footnote 25) for helpful overviews of the so-called *response claim*.
7. Note that the function of blame need not play any significant role in the proximate motivations, responses, and judgments of moral participants.
8. For example, blame may serve as a moral protest or a disapproval (Bennett, 2013; Hieronymi, 2001; McGeer, 2013; McKenna, 2012, 2013; A. M. Smith, 2013; Talbert, 2012), to affirm the claimant's moral commitment, and to serve as a *commitment signal* (McGeer, 2013; Shoemaker & Vargas, 2021). Blame's intended target may be the claimant, the defendant, or potential onlookers (Bell, 2013b). The communicative account likewise aligns with recent claims on the educating, reminding, co-regulative, transformative, (re)calibrating, or fostering role of blame (Bell, 2013b; Bennett, 2013; Björnsson & Persson, 2012, 2013; Dill & Darwall, 2014; Duff, 1986; Fricker, 2016; Macnamara, 2011, 2015a; Mason, 2019; McGeer, 2013; McKenna, 2012, 2013; Talbert, 2012; Tsai, 2017; Vargas, 2013).
9. Moral response has also been described as being brought "to remorse for what they have done, so that they come to be appropriately moved by new, shared reasons" (Fricker, 2016, p. 176), "contrition and reform on the part of the blamed" (Talbert, 2012, p. 108), being made "to recognize his guilt and repent what he has done" (Duff, 1986, p. 70), internalizing moral norms (Vargas, 2013), or the alleged wrongness (Dill

& Darwall, 2014), or by being sensitized to moral considerations (McGeer, 2012, 2015).

10. See Haidt (2003) for suggestions about the elicitors and actions tendencies of shame, embarrassment, and guilt. See also Roberts (1995), Hughes and Warmke (2017), Baumeister et al. (1994), Keltner et al. (1997), and Keltner and Buswell (1997).

11. Of course, dogs can be *trained* to refrain from jumping up on people. However, a dog may not be able to internalize human moral address.

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