

Epistemic Blame as Relationship Modification: Reply to Smartt

Abstract: I respond to Tim Smartt’s (2023) skepticism about epistemic blame. Smartt’s skepticism is based on the claims that i) mere negative epistemic evaluation can better explain everything proponents of epistemic blame say we need epistemic blame to explain; and ii) no existing account of epistemic blame provides a plausible account of the putative force that any response deserving the label “blame” ought to have. He focuses primarily on the prominent “relationship-based” account of epistemic blame to defend these claims, arguing that the account is explanatorily idle, and cannot distinguish between epistemically *excused* and epistemically *blameworthy* agents. I argue that Smartt mischaracterizes the account’s role for judgments of epistemic relationship impairment, leading to mistaken claims about the account’s predictions. I also argue that the very feature of the account that Smartt mischaracterizes is key to understanding what epistemic blame does for our epistemic responsibility practices that mere negative epistemic evaluation cannot.

Keywords: epistemic blame; blame; reactive attitudes; epistemic normativity; epistemic responsibility; justified belief; excuses; epistemic relationships

1. Introduction

In a recent article, Tim Smartt (2023) argues for skepticism about epistemic blame. Skepticism about epistemic blame is “the view that we have good reason to think there is no distinctively epistemic form of blame” (1). Smartt’s main claims are that: i) mere negative epistemic evaluation can better explain everything proponents of epistemic blame say we need epistemic blame to explain; and ii) no existing account of epistemic blame provides a plausible account of the putative force that any response deserving the label “blame” ought to have. As part of his argument, Smartt takes issue specifically with the most developed account of epistemic blame in the literature, the relationship-based account (Boult 2021a, 2021b). A central focus of Smartt’s objection is that the account is explanatorily idle, and misclassifies cases of *excused* epistemic agents as epistemically blameworthy.

In this short paper, I defend the relationship-based account against Smartt’s objections. I argue that the relationship-based account is not explanatorily idle, and does not misclassify cases of excused epistemic agents as epistemically blameworthy. Smartt mischaracterizes the account’s role for judgments of epistemic relationship impairment, leading to mistaken claims about the account’s

predictions. I also argue that the very feature of the account Smartt mischaracterizes is key to understanding what epistemic blame does for our epistemic responsibility practices that mere negative epistemic evaluation cannot. Along the way, I do two new things for the literature: i) I offer a more skeptic-resistant way of articulating the phenomenon that proponents of epistemic blame think we need epistemic blame to explain. Developing on work by Boulton (2021a), I do so by bringing out a distinction between the significance that epistemic evaluations can have for an epistemic community, versus the significance that epistemic evaluations can have for *evaluators*, and argue that skepticism about epistemic blame leaves us with inadequate resources for explaining this distinction. ii) I argue that there are untapped resources in Scanlon's distinction between *meaning* versus *permissibility* which can further illuminate the role judgments of epistemic relationship impairment play in taking epistemic blame beyond mere negative epistemic evaluation. These resources have so far gone largely unrecognized in the literature, including in existing defenses of the relationship-based account. Properly understood, the relationship-based account remains a compelling and comprehensive approach to epistemic blame's role in our epistemic responsibility practices.

2. Blame, Negative Evaluation, and Engagement with Epistemic Norm Violations

According to Smartt, the primary motivation for thinking there is an epistemic kind of blame is the usefulness of this idea in explaining how epistemic agents modify the epistemic behavior of others, to promote coordination across a community (Smartt 2023, 1818). According to Smartt, a complete account of our epistemic practices should be able to explain this coordination; proponents of epistemic blame think developing an account of epistemic blame is the best way of doing so.

Smartt disagrees. Drawing on Dogramaci (2015), he argues that “ordinary epistemic evaluations” are already capable of doing this job:

“ordinary epistemic evaluations have at least two social roles, both of which aim at modifying the epistemic behavior of others to promote coordination across a community. Evaluation plays a Deference role, regulating how much trust we should place in someone whom we might treat as an epistemic surrogate. And it plays a Compliance Pressure role, encouraging underperforming members of a community to do better so that they might become worthy surrogates (Smartt 2023, 1819).¹

¹ Smartt attributes related claims to Craig (1990), Schafer (2014), and Hannon (2019).

If Smartt is right about ordinary epistemic evaluation, perhaps it can do everything proponents of epistemic blame argue we need epistemic blame to do. If ordinary epistemic evaluation can do everything proponents of epistemic blame argue we need epistemic blame to do, considerations of parsimony may require rejecting epistemic blame.²

Rather than getting into substantive debate about Smartt's claims about the role of epistemic evaluation in our epistemic communities, I will agree for the sake of argument.³ In my view, explaining how epistemic agents modify the epistemic behavior of others to promote coordination is simply not the primary goal proponents of epistemic blame are interested in. Rather, these theorists are interested in a more basic phenomenon. As Boulton (2021a) points out, it seems there is an important difference between:

- i) judging that someone has fallen short of an epistemic norm or standard (perhaps even culpably so), and;
- ii) being *exercised* or *engaged* by one's judgment that someone has fallen short of an epistemic norm or standard.

In moral philosophy, a similar sort of observation has motivated theorists of moral blame to argue against purely *cognitive* accounts of the nature of moral blame. Because of the clear difference between believing that someone has done something morally wrong (and is perhaps blameworthy) and being somehow exercised or engaged by that fact, it is widely held that moral blame must consist in something over and above mere judgements of moral norm violation, or moral scorekeeping (Coates 2020; Coates & Tognazzini 2013; Scanlon 2008, 137; Sher 2006, 76-77; Wallace 2011). Proponents of epistemic blame are impressed that the same sort of distinction seems to apply in the epistemic domain. It is one thing to believe—or even express the belief—that someone has epistemically failed

² Boulton (forthcoming, Ch. 1) considers Dogramaci-style views about the function of epistemic evaluation as a potential source of concern about epistemic blame. For reasons similar to those offered here, he is not convinced they pose a problem for epistemic blame.

³ I will note that I find Smartt's claims here implausible. Even if negative epistemic evaluation can play the roles Smartt and Dogramaci say it does, a further question is whether it can play that role equally *effectively* as epistemic blame. It may be the case that epistemic blame is *better* at playing the Deference and Compliance roles, in which case it may be an important notion to have in our theoretical toolbox. Thanks to [removed] for suggesting this point.

(perhaps culpably so). It is another to be engaged, exercised, or in some robust sense *bothered* by that person's epistemic failing.

Negative epistemic evaluations alone do not seem capable of making sense of this distinction. After all, negative epistemic evaluations can be made in entirely disengaged ways, or even in ways attended by a kind of *pleasure* (consider judging that your rival has epistemically failed). Simply pointing out that negative epistemic evaluations can function to promote coordination in epistemic communities does not show that negative epistemic evaluations always serve as vehicles for the kind of engagement that constitutes a distinctive element of our epistemic practices. It does not establish that negative epistemic evaluations can account for the difference between observing that someone has epistemically failed and being exercised by that failure.

Smartt might reply that his account of epistemic evaluation can capture the difference between i) and ii) as follows. He might argue that not *all* epistemic evaluations function to promote coordination across an epistemic community, though many of our epistemic evaluations do. Perhaps the difference between i) and ii) can be spelled out in terms of the difference between a kind of functionless form of epistemic evaluation (“mere epistemic judgment”) and a form that contributes to coordination across an epistemic community. Perhaps the social dynamics at play in this latter kind of epistemic evaluation just are constitutive of what's at issue in ii), and thereby constitute the “distinctive” element of our epistemic practices that epistemic blame theorists are interested in.

I am not convinced. This proposal may be sufficient to underpin a difference between the significance that certain evaluations can have *for the community*—namely, a tendency to promote coordination versus a tendency to be functionless. But that is not the same thing as accounting for a difference in significance that those evaluations can have *for evaluators*. Note that many of Dogramaci's examples of epistemic evaluations that promote coordination are simply instances of people asserting that someone is irrational, or that they have unjustified beliefs. These may well be significant for the community, in the sense of being capable of promoting coordination. But it also seems entirely possible that they can (at least sometimes, perhaps often) have *that* significance without being of any significance for the agent making them. So even those who agree with Smartt's functional picture should also agree that there is an additional difference between mere epistemic evaluation and epistemic evaluation that the evaluator is in some sense exercised or engaged by. Pointing to epistemic evaluation's functionality alone does not seem capable of making sense of this distinction.⁴

⁴ Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing this issue.

This leaves us with an important question. How do proponents of epistemic blame account for the distinction between i) and ii)? What exactly *is* epistemic blame such that it makes sense of this distinction? There are different approaches in the literature. Smartt is primarily concerned with the relationship-based account’s use of the notion of *epistemic relationship modification* to do the job. I turn now to defend the account against his worries.

2. Smartt’s Objection to the Relationship-Based Account

According to the relationship-based account, epistemic blame is a distinctive kind of relationship-modification. The view has been developed and defended in most detail by Boulton (2021a, 2021b, forthcoming). But versions of it have also been discussed or endorsed by Greco (forthcoming), Schmidt (2021, forthcoming), Woodard (2023), and Flores and Woodard (2023).⁵

According to the account, epistemic relationships are comprised of reciprocal sets of intentions, expectations, and attitudes that are oriented around the cultivation and utilization of our epistemic agency. Let a *token* epistemic relationship be an actual set of intentions, expectations, and attitudes that two or more epistemic agents have which are oriented around the cultivation or utilization of their epistemic agency.⁶ Let the *normative standard* of an epistemic relationship be an idealized set of such intentions and expectations—a set constituting a *good* or *best* kind of epistemic relationship that two or more epistemic agents might hope to stand in. According to the view, judgments of epistemic blameworthiness are just judgments that an epistemic agent has done something (formed a belief, engaged in inquiry, made an assertion, etc.) that impairs one’s epistemic relationship with them—where “impairment” entails falling short of the normative standard of the relevant epistemic relationship. An epistemic blame response then consists in a *modification* to one’s intentions and attitudes in a way that reflects or is made fitting by this judgment of epistemic blameworthiness.⁷ Paradigmatically, this consists in adjusting one’s intentions to epistemically trust the

⁵ The view also has strong affinities with Kauppinen (2018), and is inspired by Scanlon’s work on moral blame.

⁶ According to Boulton (2021a), epistemic agents also stand in epistemic relationships with themselves. I set this complication aside for present purposes.

⁷ See Boulton (forthcoming, Ch.3) for detailed discussion of how to understand the relationship between judgment of impairment and actual modifications in the relationship-based account. Eugene Chislenko (2020) has developed a challenge for Scanlon’s original view about moral blame regarding the idea of modifications “reflecting” or being “made fitting by” judgments of blameworthiness. Boulton (forthcoming, Ch. 3) takes up this worry in the epistemic context and responds.

word of the agent on matters within a given domain.⁸ But it may also consist in (or be attended by) other things, such as feelings of frustration, or intentions to associate less with the agent in certain contexts.

A core motivation of the account is that by putting epistemic relationship modification at center stage, the account can do justice to the characteristic engagement that epistemic blame has over and above mere negative epistemic evaluation (thus warranting the title “blame”), without invoking attitudes or behaviours that in some sense seem out of place in the epistemic domain (such as attitudes widely taken to be constitutive of *moral* blame—i.e. resentment, indignation, and so on). An additional but closely related motivation is that the account seems plausible precisely where relationship-based approaches to *moral* blame have notoriously run into trouble. Many have worried about relationship-based approaches to moral blame because they think angry reactive attitudes are central to our moral blaming practices. By not giving those attitudes a central role, the relationship-based approach seems to leave something out. But this feature of the approach is exactly what is attractive about it in the epistemic domain. Angry reactive attitudes simply do not seem to play the same kind of role in our epistemic practices, per se; and so, by making sense of blame’s characteristic engagement without them, the relationship-based account of epistemic blame remains plausible (cf. Boulton 2021b).

According to Smartt, the account misclassifies cases of excused or exempt epistemic agents. The reason the account goes astray here is because of the role it gives to reductions of epistemic trust. Consider an agent who violates an epistemic norm (say, fails to proportion their beliefs to the evidence) but does so out of “diminished cognitive agency.” Perhaps they are four years old, perhaps they have been brainwashed, or perhaps they are under the control of a manipulative demon (Smartt 2023, 10). Such agents seem to have good excuses for violating epistemic norms. Some may be (presently) exempt from our blaming practices altogether. Importantly, it also seems legitimate to *reduce one’s epistemic trust* in such agents, at least on certain topics or within a given domain. After all, their violation of an epistemic norm manifests diminished cognitive agency. It seems imprudent to continue relying (in the same way, to the same degree) on someone you’ve realized has diminished cognitive agency.

According to Smartt: “the relationship modification account holds that if we reduce our trust in someone in response to an epistemic failing, we thereby count as blaming them” (2023, 1821). Since it seems fair to reduce our epistemic trust in these agents, and since reducing epistemic trust just is a

⁸ Or reaffirming a previously formed intention to trust the person less in the relevant domain or on certain matters.

kind of epistemic blame on the relationship-based account, Smartt reasons, the relationship-based account entails that it's fair to epistemically *blame* these agents. But we've already stipulated that these agents have a good excuse. So, it's *not* fair to epistemically blame them. So, the relationship-based account seems to misclassify cases of epistemically blameless agents as epistemically blameworthy.

3. Reply: Understanding Epistemic Relationship Impairment

Contra Smartt's characterization, the relationship-based account does not say that epistemic blame consists in reducing one's epistemic trust in someone in response to an epistemic failing. Rather, the account says that epistemic blame consists in modifying one's epistemic relationship with a person in a way that reflects a judgment that they are epistemically blameworthy, where this entails (the judgment that) they have done something to *impair* one's epistemic relationship with oneself or others. Here is why this is important.

Smartt assumes that epistemically excused agents can “impair” their epistemic relationships with others in the same way that epistemically blameworthy agents do. There is a sense in which this seems right. Even if an agent is excused, by violating epistemic norms they create barriers to knowledge-sharing and production. But there is also a natural, and more robust, sense of “epistemic relationship impairment” which requires falling short of the normative standard of the relevant relationship (Boult 2021b, 818). This is the kind of impairment the relationship-based account makes central to epistemic blame. In doing so, the account draws on the independently plausible (and widely defended) idea that, when all goes well, epistemic agents in epistemic communities have certain legitimate expectations of one another concerning the running of their intellectual lives (Goldberg 2017, 2018; Chrisman 2022, Ch.6).⁹ These expectations are constitutive elements of good epistemic relationships. Engaging in epistemically blameworthy conduct amounts to a way of falling short of legitimate epistemic expectations. Importantly, good epistemic relationships do not involve agents expecting other agents to avoid epistemic failings even when they have a legitimate excuse. Rather, good epistemic relationships involve agents expecting others to avoid epistemic failings, *unless they have a legitimate excuse*, or perhaps some overriding reason not to (cf. Boult 2021b, 818). Reducing epistemic

⁹ The literature on culpable ignorance and moral responsibility is one place where support for this idea can be found. See Moody-Adams (1994, 291), Rosen (2003, 79), and FitzPatrick (2008, 603, 612). The literature on normative defeaters to knowledge and justified belief is another very different place where support can be found. See Pollock (1986, 192), Meeker (2004, 162–163), Senor (2007, 207), Record (2013, 3, 8), and Miller and Record (2013, 122, 124).

trust in response to a judgment of epistemic blameworthiness is a way of holding someone to a normative epistemic expectation—it is a way of epistemically blaming them. Merely reducing epistemic trust in someone, full stop, is not. Thus, the proponent of the relationship-modification account can agree with Smartt that it may be entirely fair to reduce one’s epistemic trust in an agent with diminished cognitive agency. But this does not amount to epistemically blaming them. It just amounts to prudence.¹⁰

This all sounds right as far as it goes. But perhaps there is a deeper worry lurking in Smartt’s objection. How does a judgment of epistemic relationship impairment, understood along these lines—i.e. as a judgment that someone has fallen short of the normative standard of an epistemic relationship—really make a *difference* to epistemic blame? If it turns out that people can legitimately engage in the same sorts of behaviours and attitude modifications—reductions of epistemic trust—even when they do not make these judgments, and if this has the same consequences for everyone involved, is this not a difference without a difference?

I have two things to say in response. First, the nature of epistemic blame is not exhausted by its consequences. In my view, this is a point that has hitherto not been properly appreciated in the epistemic blame literature, even amongst proponents of the relationship-based account. As Scanlon articulates in his original account of moral blame (a central source of inspiration for the relationship-based account), moral blame is not simply a response characterized by a concern for whether someone has violated a norm, or in other words has done something *impermissible*. It is a response characterized by a concern for the “meaning” of a person’s actions and attitudes—that is, to what those actions or attitudes reveal about how the agent regards their relations towards others (Scanlon 2008, Ch.4).¹¹ Moral blame is capable of playing this role in virtue of the judgments partially constituting it. In Scanlon’s framework, judgments of blameworthiness just are judgments about the meaning of a

¹⁰ An anonymous referee points out that an alternative response to Smartt here is to simply reject the assumption that reducing epistemic trust in excused epistemic agents is ever appropriate. Perhaps it is appropriate or fitting to merely treat them as less reliable, where this falls short of reducing epistemic trust (cf. Schmidt 2021, sect. 4.2). One way of motivating this idea would be to argue that genuine trust reductions are interpersonal in a way that the actions or attitudes of excused agents, as such, are not. Of course, this raises complex questions about the difference between trust and mere reliance.

¹¹ See Schmidt (2021, Sec. 4.2) for a related, but different way of framing this idea. According to Schmidt, the crucial difference between genuine blame, and responses that may outwardly resemble blame, is that blame is a response to the person’s *character*.

person's actions and attitudes. They are thus a crucial element of the nature of moral blame, and can make the difference between a blamer and someone acting out of prudence who nevertheless engages in similar sorts of behaviours and attitude adjustments. According to the relationship-based account of epistemic blame, the same point holds in the epistemic domain. Epistemic blame is a response to the meaning of a person's epistemic conduct—that is, to what that conduct (methods of inquiry, doxastic attitudes) reveals about how the agent regards their epistemic relations with others. Epistemic blame is capable of playing this role in virtue of the judgments partially constituting it. Judgments of epistemic blameworthiness are thus a crucial element of the nature of epistemic blame, and can make the difference between an epistemic blamer and someone acting out of prudence who nevertheless engages in the same sorts of behaviours and attitude adjustments.^{12 13}

Second, we should not to get carried away with claims about consequences in the first place. It is arguably a contingent matter of fact that relationship modification done in response to a judgment of relationship impairment will tend to have wider-ranging interpersonal consequences for the target of blame than instances of relationship modification done in the absence of such a judgment (for example, when the would-be blamer judges that the target has a good excuse). Why is this? When someone genuinely impairs their epistemic relationship with another, they reveal themselves prone to culpably epistemically fail in a wide-ranging set of circumstances. Typical ways of impairing epistemic relationships involve culpably flawed epistemic dispositions (e.g. dogmatism, proneness to wishful thinking, intellectual laziness). When someone has simply made an honest mistake, or has a good excuse for their epistemic failing, this need not entail that they are prone to culpably epistemically fail in a wide-ranging set of circumstances. The reason for their exculpation may be some environmental or exogenous factor that constrains the scope of likely epistemic failings for the person in question.

¹² The role for judgment has been emphasized by Boulton (2021a). But to my knowledge, the distinction between meaning and permissibility has not been invoked in this context. Some authors may wish to avoid taking on this commitment. If so, they will need to find another way of explaining the difference between epistemic blamers and those acting out of prudence who nevertheless engage in the same sorts of behaviours and attitude adjustments. As fn. 13 notes, Schmidt's approach may be one option, and there may of course be others.

¹³ See Boulton (forthcoming, Ch.4) for discussion of whether assigning judgment such a central role generates problems for the relationship-based account's ability to make sense of irrational blame. How does all of this jibe with the claims made earlier about how judgments *alone* (about norm violations, or even blameworthy norm violations) seem incapable of capturing the engagement characteristic of blame? The basic idea is that *neither* such judgments, *nor* certain behavioural and attitudinal reactions, are capable of capturing the engagement characteristic of blame alone: only certain behavioral and attitudinal reactions *manifesting* the relevant judgment are capable of doing so.

This sounds right when it comes to environmental or exogenous excusing conditions. But what about agents who are *exempt* from our epistemic responsibility practices altogether (for example, by being permanently cognitively impaired)? Such agents may be prone to epistemically fail in equally, if not more, systematic and reliable ways than agents who genuinely impair epistemic relationships. This may be so, but it also seems like an especially plausible place to press on my initial point about meaning. It is part of the nature of an epistemic blame response to reflect the meaning of an agent's epistemic conduct—and not just be a way of dealing with the outward effects of an agent's epistemic conduct. In good epistemic relationships, judgments of epistemic relationship impairment—judgments that someone has fallen short of *legitimate epistemic expectations*—will underpin an appropriate difference between epistemic blame and prudence.¹⁴

4. Conclusion

A closer look at Smartt's characterization of the relationship-based view reveals why it is no surprise that he thinks a) negative epistemic evaluation can do all the work proponents of epistemic blame think we need epistemic blame to do, and b) why he thinks no existing account of epistemic blame can account for the putative force of epistemic blame. If epistemic blame is understood along the lines of Smartt's interpretation of the relationship-based account, it seems incapable of doing much more than mere negative epistemic evaluation, in addition to lacking the "force" needed to justify calling a response *blame*. But that isn't how we should understand epistemic blame.

Drawing on work from Boulton (2021a), I have offered a more skeptic-resistant way of articulating the phenomenon that proponents of epistemic blame think we need epistemic blame to explain—one that is consistent with Smartt's claims about the function of epistemic evaluation. We simply note the difference between the significance that epistemic evaluations can have for an epistemic community versus the significance they can have for epistemic evaluators. Reflecting this, I have also deployed Scanlon's distinction between *meaning* versus *permissibility* to further illuminate the role judgments of epistemic relationship impairment play in taking epistemic blame beyond mere negative epistemic evaluation. In my view, these resources are already implicit in the relationship-based framework as defended by Boulton, Schmidt, Flores and Woodard, and others. But further development of them reveals the resilience of the relationship-based account in the face of powerful skeptical arguments, such as Smartt's. The relationship-based approach remains an attractive account of the

¹⁴ Thanks to [removed] for discussion.

nature of epistemic blame, and the important role epistemic blame plays in our epistemic responsibility practices.

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