

Blaming

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Abstract

In the last two decades, blame has become a core topic in ethics, philosophical moral psychology and, more recently, epistemology. This chapter aims at clarifying the complex state of the debate and at making a suggestion for how we should proceed from here. The core idea is that accounts of blame are often motivated by very different background goals. One standard goal is to provide a unifying account of our everyday blame practices. The chapter argues that there is reason to think that this goal is not achievable. Another goal is to provide the tools for solving or clarifying important social or philosophical problems. The chapter suggests that this is what theories of blame should focus on.

1. Introduction

Since about the mid 2000s, blame has become a widely discussed philosophical topic. While the early debate mostly focused on the relationship between blame and responsibility, blame as a phenomenon is now examined on its own and approached from many different directions. This has generated lively discussions and many insights. However, it has become hard to say how the different accounts of blame relate to each other. The aim of this chapter is to help keep track. It starts (section 2) with a brief overview of three families of theories of blame

(see Tognazzini and Coates 2018 for a more detailed overview). In section 3 I will propose that an important, but often not explicitly discussed, question is “what should we want from a theory of blame?”, and I will present two answers. In section 4, I will critically discuss the proposal that a theory of blame should give a unifying explanation of our everyday blame practices. In section 5, I will propose an alternative. The idea is to start with the most interesting moral and philosophical problems that are related to blame (think of free will problems). Philosophical theories of blame should primarily help us solve these issues, but do not need to provide unifying explanations.

2. What is Blame? A (Very) Brief Overview

According to a family of recent theories that I will call *functionalist theories*, the nature of blame must be accounted for in terms of its function (see Wang 2021 for different functions of blame). Consider the question of what the heart is. A plausible answer starts by looking at what the heart does: it pumps blood. Based on this observation, one can say that the heart is whatever fulfills this function in the bodies of certain living things. Functionalist accounts of blame approach the question of what blame is by looking at what blame does in our minds and social practices. They describe that function and contend that blame is whatever fulfills it. Some theorists propose that the function of blame is to signal the blamer’s commitment to norms and values (Shoemaker and Vargas 2021). When I think that people violated a norm I accept, then I can signal my commitment in various ways, such as confronting them, coldly de-friending them on social media, or experiencing resentment without changing my open conduct—in the latter case I would also be the addressee of the signal. All this is blame, according to the view under consideration, because it signals my commitment to the norm. Other functionalist accounts argue that blame’s function is to express one’s protest (Smith

2013) or to initiate or sustain conversations about what the blamee did (McKenna 2013; Mason 2019, chap. 5). Whatever plays these roles, the idea goes, is blame because to blame just is to respond in a way that fulfills one of these functions.

The second, older family of theories holds that the nature of blame cannot be accounted for in terms of its function. For lack of a better word, I call them *non-functionalist theories*. They approach the question of what blame is by looking for attitudes that are present in all blame responses and that explain why these responses count as blame. A classic non-functionalist account inspired by Peter Strawson (1962) identifies certain emotions as the core of blame (e.g., Wallace 1994, chaps. 2, 3; 2011; Wolf 2011; Menges 2017; Portmore 2022). It says that to blame someone is to have a certain emotion, such as a kind of anger in case of blaming others and guilt in case of self-blame. Another non-functionalist account contends that the core of blame is a certain desire-belief pair (e.g., Sher 2006; Arpaly and Schroeder 2014). On this view, to blame is to believe that someone acted badly and to desire that the person had acted better. The emotions and conduct that we often associate with blame must, then, be explained by reference to the desire-belief pair.

A third family of views combines functionalist with non-functionalist ideas, which is why I call them *mixed theories*. According to one such theory developed by Tim Scanlon (2008; 2013), blame partly consists in judging that someone impaired a relationship that we have with that person—the non-functionalist ingredient. When a friend tells a mean joke about me, I can judge that she thereby impaired our friendship. My response is only blame, according to this view, if it plays a specific social or mental role, namely, to revise our relationship according to my judgment. This can be done in various ways, such as resenting or coldly de-friending her—the functionalist ingredient. Miranda Fricker's (2016) account of blame can be understood as another mixed theory. It says that blame necessarily involves a judgment that a person is at fault—the non-functionalist ingredient. In paradigmatic cases this judgment is communicated, which can be done in very different ways—the functionalist

ingredient.

To sum up, functionalist theories of blame answer the question of what blame is by referring to whatever plays certain mental or social roles. Non-functionalist theories say that specific attitudes constitute blame independent of their mental or social roles. And mixed theories say that to blame is to have a specific attitude together with whatever plays a certain social or mental role.

3. Theories of Blame: What Should We Want From Them?

To find out which theory of blame to accept, we need to know how to evaluate them. We need to ask: what should we want from a theory of blame? Unfortunately, this question is rarely discussed. In what follows, I will present two mostly implicit motivations for developing theories of blame.

One starting point for a theory of blame is the observation that blame is a common and potentially problematic phenomenon in our everyday lives: we blame each other all the time in very different ways even though most of us do not like being blamed and we see that blame often goes wrong. This is philosophically interesting. Thus, we can ask: what is the essence of these different things that we call blame? The goal is to provide a unifying explanation of our everyday thinking and talking about blame and of our blame responses. The best theory would identify the common core of all blame responses—be it the fulfillment of certain social or mental functions, a certain group of attitudes, or a mix of both. Thereby, it would explain why all the different responses are blame responses. Call an approach along these lines *unifying*.

An alternative motivation for developing theories of blame is to solve problems that we are confronted with in moral or philosophical thinking. Consider, for example, debates about free will. Many authors characterize free will in terms of responsibility (for an overview see

O'Connor and Franklin 2021): it is the control that is necessary for being responsible for something. Responsibility is often characterized in terms of praise- and blameworthiness: your being responsible for something is your being such that it is in principle appropriate to blame or praise you for that thing if it is bad or good. Thus, free will can be characterized in terms of the control that is necessary for blameworthiness. Therefore, one way to better understand what free will is, is to develop a theory of blame: once we know what blame is, we can better understand what free will is because free will is characterized in terms of being worthy of blame. Thus, philosophers who are interested in free will may be motivated to develop theories of blame. Below, I will present further questions that can motivate one to develop theories of blame. In general, I will call an approach of this kind *problem-driven*.

These approaches are highly idealized. Actual theories of blame are often partly unifying and partly problem-driven, and often it is unclear to which of the two categories a specific theory belongs. But it is useful to work with the idealization because I will now show that a fully unifying approach is problematic.

4. Problems for Unifying Explanations

Let us take a closer look at theories that aim at a unifying explanation of our blame practices. The standard but often implicit way to achieve this goal is to propose an inference to the best explanation. The approach is, roughly, this: we know from our everyday lives that our blame practices have certain features, and a philosophical theory of blame should explain these features. It should identify the common core of all blame responses that can explain the various features that our blame practices have.

Here is a list of uncontroversial explananda that a theory of blame should explain (see, e.g., Smith 2013; Shoemaker 2013; Shoemaker and Vargas 2021):

- (1) blame can be private or public;
- (2) we can blame ourselves, people close to us, absent people, and even people we have never met, or who are long dead;
- (3) we can blame people without experiencing a feeling;
- (4) blame seems to be something people can be worthy of;
- (5) blaming people often has a sting in the sense that it is often bad for the target of blame.

If we could show that one theory can explain these features and another cannot, then we have reason to prefer the first theory over the second. However, different accounts of blame can make sense of them in similarly good ways. Take for example Scanlon's account (2008, chap. 4). It says that blaming people is, roughly, revising the relationship one has with them because one takes them to have impaired this relationship. Such a revision can happen in one's mind by changing one's attitudes towards the other person, but the response can also be expressed in open action by, for example, writing an email. One can change the relationship one has with oneself, by, for example, feeling guilty, but not every relationship revision needs to involve a feeling. On the assumption that we have a moral relation with every person, we can also revise it with long dead or distant people by, for example, not desiring that they had or have a happy life. Some people seem to be worthy of such a relationship revision, namely those who have impaired the relationship. As many people like having good relationships, it is stinging for them when their relationships are revised.

There are questions about Scanlon's account of blame (e.g., Chislenko 2019). But the general picture is well-suited to explain the features listed above. Now consider the emotion account that says, roughly, that to blame is to have an emotion towards blame's target. We can keep the emotion to ourselves or express it. We can be angry at the long dead or at our neighbor, and we are often angry at ourselves or feel guilty. Many people don't like being the target of these emotions, which explains the stinging aspect of blame. Insofar emotions can be

appropriate, it also seems as if some people are appropriate objects of angry blame, which is why it seems as if some people are blameworthy.

A standard worry about the emotion account is that it cannot make sense of the fact that we sometimes blame people without experiencing a feeling (e.g., Sher 2006, 88). However, this rests on confusing emotions with feelings (see Menges 2017, 259). According to (almost) all theories of the emotions, having an emotion is closely connected with having feelings (see Scarantino and de Sousa 2021). However, there is room to have an emotion without feeling something in a particular moment. For example, I can be sad about my friend's death ever since she died five years ago. This can be true even if I have not constantly felt sadness for five years. The same can be true for blame emotions. I can resent my neighbor ever since she put up an ugly fence five years ago even if I have not constantly experienced resentment.

Again, there are questions about the emotion account. Generally, though, it can explain the core features identified above, just like the relationship view. The same is true for most other accounts of blame. Thus, I believe that we cannot determine which account to accept by checking how they explain these features of our practice.

Theories that aim at a unifying explanation may present additional features of our practice and demand that they should also be explained. Consider

- (6) to blame is not simply to believe something (Sher 2006, chap. 1);
- (7) we sometimes blame people for what they would do in certain circumstances even if, in fact, they are not in these circumstances and don't do it (Shoemaker & Vargas 2021);
- (8) we sometimes blame people even though we believe that they are not blameworthy (Pickard 2013);
- (9) while it is mostly inappropriate for adults to blame children, it is often appropriate for children to blame other children (Reis-Dennis 2021);
- (10) blame is "the characteristic reaction of the morality system" (Williams 1985,

177);

(11) there is non-moral blame such as epistemic or causal blame (Boult 2021; Chislenko 2021);

(12) judging someone to be at fault for something and being against this something is a form of blaming (e.g., Arpaly and Schroeder 2014, 161);

(13) if one has forgiven people then it is inappropriate to keep blaming them (e.g., Hughes and Warmke 2022, sec. 2.3).

Some of these explananda come in tension: theories that explain one of them have problems explaining some of the others. For example, it is hard to see how one can make sense of, first, the idea that blame is the characteristic response of the morality system and, second, the idea that there is non-moral, epistemic or purely causal blame, such as blaming the brakes for the crash. An obvious reply is to distinguish between moral blame on the one hand and non-moral blame on the other and to say that one is only concerned with one of them. Note, however, that this reply already gives up on the goal to offer a unifying explanation of our blame practice. Our practice seems to involve moral and non-moral blame, which is why a unifying account of blame *itself* must make sense of both. Focusing on, for example, moral blame would only aim at an explanation of some *kind of* blame, which is not enough for a fully unifying explanation.

Let me show in more detail how two explananda come in tension by focusing on (12) and (13). Fricker (2016, 170) considers a situation in which I think that it is the drivers' fault that there is a strike and you think that it is the company's fault. It seems correct to say that I blame the drivers and you blame the company. Every theory of blame, the idea goes, should explain this. Some theories have problems meeting this requirement. The emotion account, for example, says that my response is not blame unless I have an emotion. However, there are situations in which I find fault and do not have any emotion. Other theories can explain why my response is blame. For example, my finding fault signals my commitment to certain

norms, expresses protest, or initiates a conversation with you or myself. Functionalist theories that say that every response that fulfills one of these functions is, therefore, a blame response, can explain why my response is a blame response. This seems to be an advantage of functionalist theories.

Now, take explanandum (13). Imagine that, after an adequate apology, I have forgiven my sister for ruining my last birthday. However, I do not forgo blaming her. Intuitively, there would be something unfair, unfitting, incoherent, or odd about my blaming her for it. Every theory of blame should explain this, the idea goes. Some theories of blame, such as the emotion account, have no problem here. It says that to blame is to have an emotion, such as resentment. Obviously, there is something odd about forgiving my sister for ruining my birthday and, at the same time, resenting her for it. Thus, the emotion view can explain the oddity. Functionalist theories, by contrast, have problems here. They say that every response that plays a certain role is a blame response. However, there are some responses that play the relevant roles, and there is nothing inappropriate about forgiving my sister and, at the same time, responding in some of these ways. Imagine that I speak in a cool and quiet moment to close friends about how I was hurt by her conduct. This seems to be fine. There is nothing odd about forgiving *S* for having done *x* and, in a cool and quiet way, discussing *S*'s having done *x*. This signals my commitment to certain norms, is a form of cool protest, and invites my friends to have a conversation about the status of ruining peoples' birthdays. Thus, the functionalist theories that explain how judging people to be at fault for something and how being against this something is a blame response thereby fail to make sense of the idea that forgiving people makes it odd to keep blaming them.

Generally, there is reason to think that theories that can make sense of (12) have, therefore, problems making sense of (13) and vice versa. That is, accounts that explain why finding fault is a blame response have difficulties explaining why forgiving makes blame inappropriate. Reversely, accounts that explain why forgiving makes blame inappropriate

have problems explaining how finding fault can be a blame response.

It is unclear how to solve the tension. One attempt says that judging a person to be at fault and being against it—which fulfills certain functions—is not sufficient for blaming. Something must be added, such as an emotion. However, it is unclear how to justify this claim. For, in our everyday practice, it is completely fine to say of my friend, who does not have a blame emotion, that she blames the company for the strike. Alternatively, one could say that forgiving a person for doing something and blaming the person for this thing fit together. But again, it is hard to argue for this. Imagine that I tell my sister: “I still blame you for what you did on my last birthday.” It seems fully appropriate for her to reply: “I thought that you forgave me, I thought that we settled this.” Thus, there is a real tension between these two potential explananda.

To sum up, first, accounts of blame that aim at developing a unifying explanation of our everyday practices typically adopt the method of proposing inferences to the best explanation. Second, there is an uncontroversial group of explananda and the standard accounts make sense of them. These explananda do not help settle which theory is best. Third, there is a group of more controversial potential explananda. They consist in features of our everyday practices that can be explained by some theories but not by others. Importantly, no theory seems to be able to explain all of them because some of them come in tension with each other.

5. The Problem-Driven Approach

How should we proceed? I see three options. The first is to keep looking for a unifying account of all features of our blame practice. The second is to start a discussion about which aspects of our blame practices really are explananda and which aren't. Thus, before developing our theories of blame, we should spend more energy making clear what the theory

aims at explaining and, more importantly, *why* the theory should explain these and not some other features. The third option is to give up on the goal of developing a unifying explanation of our blame practices by identifying a common core. One attractive alternative (I'm not claiming that it is the only one) is to adopt the problem-driven approach. The idea is to start with an interesting social or philosophical question that has something to do with blame (of course, the problem should not be "what is the common core of all blame responses?"). Then, we can use theories of blame as tools to answer that question. Thus, we should want from theories of blame that they help us solve important social and philosophical problems. In what follows I will present two such problems.

First, plausibly, blame often goes wrong, is destructive, painful, and an instrument of the powerful to keep others down. However, it also seems plausible that blame is sometimes important to make clear that we do not accept certain forms of conduct. Thus, we are confronted with a problem: what are the aspects of our blame practices that are worth preserving and what are the aspects we should try to get rid of?

Let me start with the valuable aspects. Some argue that blame helps strengthen the norms and values that a well-functioning society needs (e.g., Wallace 1994, 69). Others propose that blame responses fit perfectly with the relational structure of moral norms (Darwall 2006, pt. 1; Wallace 2011) or that blame practices facilitate shared moral knowledge (Sliwa 2019). Others again suggest that blame practices help develop and sustain human capacities to respond to reasons (McGeer 2019). And some argue that it is of non-instrumental value when the guilty suffer appropriately in being (self-)blamed (e.g., Clarke 2016; McKenna 2019). Some of these aspects seem worth preserving. A world that lacks these aspects of our blame practices is, therefore, in some respect, worse than our world.

Now consider the problematic aspects of blame. Blame has a sting and is often harmful. Insofar harm is non-instrumentally bad, blame is often non-instrumentally bad. Moreover, blame and counter-blame can easily escalate and lead to destructive resistance rather than

constructive conversation (e.g., Pereboom 2021, chap. 1). The anger involved in many blame responses can cloud our senses and make us ignore important features (e.g., Pettigrove 2012). Certain blame practices are problematic on a social level (for the following, see Zheng online first). Consider the idea that in the face of worldwide injustice, morality demands that we do what we can to make the world a just place. If we fail in some instance by not going to yet another demonstration or not giving yet another sum to charity, it appears inappropriate and de-motivating to blame us in standard ways. However, some form of criticism seems necessary to remind us of the ideal to make the world as just as possible. Thus, we need a better way to respond to some of our failings in an unjust world than standard blame responses.

Recall that the question we are concerned with is “what are the aspects of our blame practices that are worth preserving and what are the aspects we should try to get rid of?” Theories of blame should help us answer it and they can do so without developing a unifying explanation of our blame practices. All we need is a plausible characterization—not a unifying explanation—of relevant parts of our blame practices. Such a characterization does not need to offer necessary conditions for blame, nor does it need to identify its core element. It should identify a group of responses that clearly are blame responses. Then, we can sensibly ask what is good and what is bad about *them*. For example, resenting others and feeling guilty are surely blame responses. Perhaps, there is blame without resentment or guilt, but it makes sense to ask what is good and what is bad about resentment- and guilt-blame. This is an interesting question. An answer to it can be the basis for proposing social reforms. Perhaps, we can re-shape our practices by preserving the good things about our current practices and getting rid of the bad ones. Perhaps, things are more difficult and the very features that make blame in some respect good make it in other respects bad (see McKenna 2019; Reis-Dennis 2019). The conclusion would then be that there is something tragic about our blame practices because we cannot have the good without getting the bad. More generally, theories of blame

do not need to identify the core of blame for helping us discuss the question of what is good and what is bad about it. All we need are detailed characterizations of important kinds of blame.

Second, take free will problems again. Intuitively, there seems to be something unjust about blaming people if what they did was determined by something beyond their control—this is what R. Jay Wallace calls “the seductive lure of incompatibilist pictures in ordinary moral consciousness“ (Wallace 1994, 117). On the other hand, there seem to be blame responses that are clearly appropriate even if the targets of blame were fully determined. Obviously, we can appropriately blame the brakes for the crash in a deterministic universe and signaling commitment to the moral norm not to ruin people’s birthday in a cool and reasonable way seems unproblematic even if the world is deterministic. This confronts us with a problem: what, exactly, are the blame responses skeptics and incompatibilists should be concerned with, and what are the responses they do not need to worry about? We need an answer to this question to make sure that incompatibilists, compatibilists, skeptics, and so on, talk about the same thing when they ask if humans can be blameworthy (even if determinism is true).

Some of those who doubt that humans are blameworthy in our world characterize the responses they are concerned with in terms of negative emotions or the (harmful) expressions of negative emotions (Pereboom 2014, 128; 2021, chap. 2; Rosen 2015). Others account for blame in terms of punishing conduct (G. Strawson 1994; Caruso and Morris 2017). A third view argues that the relevant kind of blame should be understood in terms of claim forfeiture (Menges 2021). The idea is that the relevant kind of blame involves some response that would normally infringe the right of its targets and the belief of the blamers that the targets have forfeited this right just because of what they did and how they were when they did it. Skeptics can argue that, because of determinism or luck, humans never forfeit their rights just because of what they do and how they are. Therefore, skeptics conclude, the relevant kind of blame

always infringes the rights of their targets.

Once it is clear what part of our blame practices skeptics are concerned with, they should admit that other parts of our blame practices are unproblematic (see Pereboom 2021). Similarly, those who try to defend the idea that humans in our world are sometimes blameworthy for what they do should make clear what they take blame to be. Then, it will probably turn out that some defenders of blameworthiness have one thing in mind when they defend human blameworthiness and some skeptics have something else in mind when they argue against human blameworthiness.

Generally, it is reasonable to discuss what kind of blame should be at issue in debates about free will without first developing a unifying explanation of our blame practices. What we need is a characterization of certain aspects of our blame practices. Then we can ask if these aspects are undermined by skeptical or incompatibilist arguments.

There are other problems that can motivate theories of blame that I cannot discuss in detail here. Think of the debate about the responsibility gap in machine ethics that is based on the question of who is blameworthy when an “intelligent” machine, such as a self-driving car, causes serious harm without any human fault (see, e.g., Matthias 2004; Nyholm 2018). With this question in mind, we could look at different kinds of blame and ask: is this kind of blame appropriately directed at the consumer, the designer, or the machine itself? Depending on how one construes the relevant kind of blame, the answers will probably vary. For example, it seems appropriate to judge that a machine caused something bad and to be against the machine’s causing it. It also seems appropriate to initiate a conversation about the machine’s harmful conduct with others. According to some theories, we would, thereby, blame the machine, and this seems to be perfectly fine. But it seems less obvious that we can appropriately revise our moral relationship with the machine. Thus, machines may be the appropriate target of blame in some respects, but not in others. More generally, a theory of blame may help clarify or even bridge the responsibility gap.

Similarly, we can start with the question of when people lose the standing to blame others. A hotly debated question is if and why having committed a certain wrongdoing without having adequately apologized for it undermines the standing to blame others for a wrongdoing of the same kind (e.g., Fritz and Miller 2018; Todd 2019; see King's chap. 26 in this volume). Again, it is important to make clear what kind of blame is at issue, for it seems plausible that having done the same wrong undermines the standing to some forms of blame but not to others. We do not need a unifying account of the blame practices. Rather, we need accounts of different kinds of blame and to discuss whether some of these kinds of blame can be fully appropriate coming from someone who performed the same wrongdoing in the past and has not adequately apologized for it.

6. Conclusion

What should we expect from a theory of blame? One answer is that we should want a unifying explanation of our blame practices. I have suggested that current accounts fail on this because, first, it is unclear what explananda the theory should focus on and, second, because some potential explananda are in tension with each other. I have then suggested that this would not undermine the importance of developing philosophical accounts of blame. The key idea is to start with more specific problems such as: “What is good and what is bad about our blame practices?”, “What is the kind of blame that should be at issue in debates about incompatibilism or skepticism about free will and responsibility?”, “What kind of blame should be at issue in debates about the responsibility gap?”, “What is the kind of blame that is undermined when we have performed the same wrongdoing we blame others for?” These and other questions can be fruitfully discussed without a unifying explanation of our blame

practice.¹

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Further Reading

The best overviews on blame are the papers by Justin D. Coates and Neal Tognazzini (“Blame” in E.N. Zalta (ed.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2018.

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<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/blame/> and “The Nature and Ethics of Blame” in *Philosophy Compass* 7, 2012: 197-207). The book they edited *Blame: Its Nature and Norms*, (New York: Oxford University Press 2013) still shapes the discussion. For a representative functionalist account of blame, see Shoemaker and Vargas “Moral Torch Fishing: A Signaling Theory of Blame,” *Noûs* 55 (2021): 581–602. For powerful defense of a non-functionalist account see Portmore “A Comprehensive Account of Blame: Self-Blame, Non-Moral Blame, and Blame for the Non-Voluntary,” in A.B. Carlsson (ed.) *Self-Blame and Moral Responsibility*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2022); 48–76. For a classic mixed theory see Scanlon *Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, Blame*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press (2008), ch. 4.

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