

Blame's Topography: Standing on Uneven Ground

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Samuel Reis-Dennis

Rice University

Abstract: Attempts to illuminate the nature of “blame” have shaped recent philosophical discussion of free will and moral responsibility. In this paper I show how, in at least one context, this search for a theory of blame has led us astray. Specifically, I focus on the contemporary debate about the “standing” to blame and argue, first, that theorizing about blame-in-general in this context has assumed an impoverished moral psychology that fails to reflect the range of blaming emotions and that conflates these emotions’ distinctive logics; and, second, that such theorizing has encouraged the propagation of misleading theories of blame’s “norms.” Rather than searching for the nature of blame, I employ and defend an alternative methodological approach that focuses on the psychology and ethics of *specific* reactive emotions. I then show how an agent’s own bad behavior can alter the appropriateness of these various attitudes in distinctive ways. Marking these distinctions leads to some surprising conclusions. For example, it allows us to move beyond the assumption that the wrongness of standingless blame is fundamentally a matter of hypocrisy.

*I: Introduction*¹

Once upon a time, philosophers sought to discover whether or not human beings possessed free will. But members of the search party could not come to a shared understanding of what free will was. To make things more concrete, many agreed that the kind of free will worth caring about was whatever kind would support judgments of “moral responsibility.” But what was *that*? Energized by P.F. Strawson’s (1962) “Freedom and Resentment,” which encouraged philosophers to appreciate the importance of the “reactive attitudes” to interpersonal relationships, the searchers narrowed their focus yet again, concluding that free will is whatever would make one morally responsible, and that to be morally responsible is to be properly subject to these attitudes, especially *blame*. But what is blame? The urge to answer this question has generated a profusion of articles and books attempting to analyze this once under-theorized concept.

¹ I am grateful to Vida Yao, Susan Wolf, Doug MacLean, Tom Hill, Derk Pereboom, Geoff Sayre-McCord, Matthew Dennis, Elizabeth Reis, and Pamela Reis for discussion of these ideas and feedback on various versions of the paper. I also benefitted from presenting earlier drafts at a meeting of the American Philosophical Association, where Juan Piñeros Glasscock commented on the paper, at the Vrije Universiteit Normative Philosophy Workshop, where Romy Eskens commented on the paper, and at the Rice University Undergraduate Philosophy Club.

In this paper I show how, in at least one context, this drive to understand blame's nature has led us astray. Specifically, I focus on the contemporary debate about the "standing" to blame and argue, first, that theorizing about blame-in-general in this context has assumed an impoverished moral psychology that fails to reflect the range of blaming emotions and that conflates these emotions' distinctive logics;² and, second, that such theorizing has encouraged the propagation of misleading theories of blame's "norms."

In doing so, I aim to show how participants in this debate have failed to attend adequately to the psychology and ethics of the specific blaming attitudes that generate worries about standing in the first place. I concentrate especially on the differences between reactions we might colloquially label "righteous indignation" and "resentment," showing how an agent's own bad behavior alters the appropriateness of these attitudes in distinctive ways. Marking these distinctions allows us to reject and move beyond the near-universal assumption in the current literature on the standing to blame, namely, that the wrongness of standingless blame is fundamentally a matter of hypocrisy.

Throughout the paper, I employ a distinctive methodological approach that I hope my discussion (at least partially) vindicates. That is, in order to determine whether or not one has the "standing to blame," I believe that we must first investigate the psychology of the *specific* emotion (or the details of the specific judgment) being felt or expressed rather than theorizing about the "nature and norms"³ of blame-in-general. Assuming the blaming reaction is emotional,

² Of course, philosophers contributing to the broader literature on responsibility and blame have made significant contributions by focusing on *individual* blaming attitudes. For a few important examples, see Morris (1976), Frye (1983, chapter five) Taylor (1985), Murphy and Hampton (1988), Wolf (2011), and Nussbaum (2016), among many others. My criticism here is directed toward theorizing about *blame-in-general*, which has been an agenda-setting trend in the moral responsibility literature for the last two decades. Some especially influential accounts include Hieronymi (2004), Sher (2005), Arpaly (2006), Scanlon (2008), McKenna (2011), Wallace (2011), McGeer (2013), Fricker (2016), and Shoemaker and Vargas (2021). I thank two anonymous reviewers for suggesting this clarification.

³ This phrase comes from the subtitle of Justin Coates and Neal Tognazzini's (2013) edited volume on blame.

this will require an understanding of that emotion's logic or mode of functioning: what it responds to, what it aims at, how it can be rationally resolved. With this logic in hand, we may then determine whether or not the specific reaction in question is fitting—whether it accurately represents its object. This judgment of accuracy or inaccuracy will, in turn, inform further ethical deliberation about the emotions we ought to feel and express “all-things-considered.” If the emotion's representation is inaccurate, then its expression will involve false and potentially self-serving claims that others would be right to discount or dismiss.

II: Background

Does having done the same thing that one is blaming another for render that blame inappropriate or wrong? If such blame it is inappropriate or wrong, how and why is it inappropriate or wrong?⁴

The standard answers to these questions are that blaming under such circumstances *would* be wrong, and that this wrongness is a matter of hypocrisy. R. Jay Wallace (2010) holds that the hypocrisy consists in a failure to meet an obligation of self-scrutiny that blaming generates (326). He explains that such failure of self-scrutiny “offends against a presumption in favor of the equal standing of persons [...] fundamental to moral thought” (328).⁵

Kyle Fritz and Daniel Miller (2015) offer a similar theory, arguing that blame is objectionable when it reflects a “differential blaming disposition,” which is incompatible with a

⁴ I believe that these questions drive the most interesting aspects of the contemporary philosophical conversation about the standing to blame. In asking them, I am interested in both felt “internal” blaming attitudes and their expression.

⁵ Rejecting the terminology of “standing,” Matt King offers a similar view of the wrongness of blaming others for wrongs one has also committed, explaining that “hypocritical” blamers violate “norms of priority” by attending “to the faults of others when they ought to be attending to their own” (280).

commitment to the equality of persons. According to this view, a commitment to the equality of persons is the very basis of blame, and so differential blaming is self-undermining.

Patrick Todd (2019) offers a more straightforward explanation of the non-hypocrisy condition. He argues that we have the standing to blame if and only if we are genuinely committed to the values that the blamed agent transgressed. Ultimately though, he declines to explain *why* lack of commitment to the values under attack undermines one's basic standing to blame, writing "This is, I submit, a question to which we presently do not have an adequate answer" (371).

The standard approach, then, assumes that hypocrisy is the vice "standingless" blaming reflects, and then attempts to show that hypocrisy violates a general "norm" or "commitment" of "blame." In what follows, I will suggest an entirely different understanding of the impropriety of blame for acts the blamer has committed. To characterize blame of this kind, I will use the term "impure" rather than "hypocritical," for, as I will explain, I do not believe that such blame need be hypocritical at all.⁶ By focusing on the appropriateness of *specific* blaming attitudes, I will aim to resolve Todd's unanswered question: *Why* does the performance of bad actions render blame for similar actions inappropriate?

⁶ A recent paper by Daniela Dover (2019) is a refreshing exception to the dominant approach. Dover's paper distinguishes between different ways of expressing impure moral criticism and shows that there is no general "norm" that forbids impure criticism (Dover calls it "hypo-criticism") in all cases. Dover argues that legitimate disapproval of such criticism targets *independent* vices expressed *either* by blamers' behavior (it is weak-willed, self-indulgent, needy, etc.) *or* by their criticism (it is priggish, sexist, harsh, etc.), rather than the *conjunction* of their behavior and their criticism (408-415). While I agree that there is no norm against impure blaming-in-general, I believe that Dover underrates the extent to which we *do* rightly object specifically to the conjunction of bad behavior and impure criticism, at least when that criticism expresses certain specific emotions. Indeed, I will suggest that the vices impure criticism evinces are often *constituted* by this conjunction.

My central claim is that the impropriety of impure blame cannot be understood apart from its *unfittingness*.⁷ That is, certain kinds of impure blame do not accurately represent their objects; they implicate blamers in misperception.

While the argument will not depend on any especially complicated or controversial assumptions about fittingness, two brief caveats are necessary at this point. First, I am committed to the idea that there is an important sense of emotional fittingness best explained in terms of *emotional accuracy*. As D’Arms and Jacobson (2000) and others have argued, this evaluation of accuracy is distinct from ethical assessment of what one should feel and express, “all-things-considered.”⁸ Second, I deny that charges of representational inaccuracy are “merely” epistemic criticisms with no further ethical implications, for two reasons.⁹ First, as incorrect construals or “appraisals,”¹⁰ they imply falsehoods that others are justified in discounting or dismissing. Second, emotional misconstruals are more than just false. As I will repeatedly emphasize,

⁷ In her lively “Hypocritical Blame is Unfitting” (forthcoming), Rachel Achs also identifies unfittingness as a way in which specifically *hypocritical* blaming goes wrong, arguing that “it is an enabling condition on blame’s fittingness that the blaming subject be committed to the norm she blames a target person for violating” (1). I leave discussion of this proposal aside in this paper because my aims here go beyond characterizing the problem with hypocrisy. In fact, I will argue that impure blame—blame for what one has also done—need not be hypocritical in Achs’s sense at all. I will show how such non-hypocritical impure blaming can still give rise to concerns about standing that are best understood in terms of unfittingness.

⁸ My argument here is compatible with a range of methods for determining what our emotions represent. The method I favor is *interpretive*: We come to understand what an emotion represents by offering an interpretation of the events and behaviors that the emotion responds to, how the emotion inspires us to behave, and how the emotion can be rationally resolved, *when we are functioning well and seeing the world clearly*. This is an inescapably ethical enterprise, for it depends crucially on a substantive (and always contestable) notion of sound functioning and clear perception within a real human culture. An assertion of an emotion’s appropriateness is inseparable from ethical approval of the overall outlook the attitude is embedded in. Still, this “ethical” approach maintains a distinction between fittingness and all-things-considered moral justification. It does not involve a “moralistic fallacy.” There is a world of difference, for example, between arguing that guilt is *never fitting* because the moral system it belongs to is a sham unworthy of our investment, and arguing that one should banish guilt because doing so would be optimistic. With that having been said, I should emphasize once more that the argument of the paper does not depend on this view. This is because my strategy in the main text is to *stipulate* the content of the emotional responses I am concerned with, and that strategy is compatible with many approaches to investigating what emotions represent. My argument succeeds if the emotional responses I imagine strike the reader as familiar attitudes that we would call (forms of) “blame.” The reactions I describe need not be the only interesting kinds of righteous indignation and resentment, for example; they only need to be common responses that are rendered unfitting by impurity and thereby give rise to concerns about their subjects’ “standing” to feel and express them.

⁹ For further background on this challenge, and a response, see Svavarsdóttir (2014) and Yao (2023), respectively.

¹⁰ This is the non-cognitivist language that D’Arms and Jacobson (2023) favor.

emotional misperceptions can reflect and constitute moral *vices*. When expressed, inappropriate emotions communicate not only misleading but often self-serving and objectionable claims.

III: Blame's High Horse

A newlywed couple have divided the task of writing thank-you notes for wedding gifts they have received. The husband procrastinates on his half of the thank-you notes for weeks and begins to feel a gnawing sense of guilt. As weeks become months, the mere sight of the wedding gifts becomes painful. Eventually, he feels so guilty and ashamed that he cannot bear another day with the shadow of the thank-you notes looming over him. As he finally sits down to the task, his wife walks in and groans, "The thank-you notes! I guess I should get started on my half, too...."

I submit that the husband lacks standing to feel and express some forms of blame toward his wife for her failure to write her half of the thank-you notes. Some forms of blame? "Blame," is a term we use in a variety of ways to cover a range of reactions, many of which have distinctive conditions of correctness. Some of these responses are obviously fitting and justified in this case. The husband might reasonably believe, for example, that both he and his wife acted wrongly and wish that they would have done better.¹¹ He might even alter his relationship with his wife slightly, perhaps questioning his tendency to expect her to take the initiative in household tasks.¹² If one wishes to call these reactions "blame," then the husband has the standing to blame his wife. His own failure does not render these particular responses inappropriate or wrong.

But however one wishes to label things, there is at least one attitude that seems to drive much of our interest in the standing to blame that the husband *cannot* appropriately feel precisely

¹¹ This is roughly Sher's view of blame.

¹² This is roughly Scanlon's view of blame.

because of his own wrongdoing. Specifically, he cannot legitimately feel a blaming emotion that I will call “righteous indignation.”

In discussing righteous indignation, I will not need to defend a particular theory of its essence. Indeed, it does not matter (for my purposes) what we *label* the emotional complex I will describe. There are, of course, theoretically developed treatments of righteous and indignant attitudes in the philosophical literature,¹³ but because my aim here is to identify the reactions that drive our interest in the “standing to blame,” I need only to sketch the basic contours of a recognizable blaming attitude that ordinary people understand to be undermined by impurity. For this purpose, I can rely on righteous indignation’s plebian Wikipedia entry (2023), which summarizes definitions from Merriam Webster and the Standard Dictionary.

‘Righteous’ means [...] in accord with divine or moral law or free from guilt or sin. It may also refer to a morally right or justifiable decision or action or to an action which arises from an outraged sense of justice or morality. ‘Indignation’ is anger aroused by something unjust, mean, or unworthy. The *Standard Dictionary* describes indignation as a ‘feeling involving anger mingled with contempt or disgust.’

Impure blamers may not legitimately feel either righteousness *or* indignation, at least as Wikipedia defines the terms. They cannot properly feel righteousness because they are not faultless: they have transgressed in the same fashion as their targets. They cannot properly feel indignation because indignation involves looking down upon one’s target, and their own bad behavior has lowered them to blamed agent’s level. The husband in the thank-you note example could coherently judge both himself and his wife to be morally lowly, but looking upon her with indignation’s contemptuous *downward* gaze would involve a misconstrual.

¹³ See Frye on righteous anger and Macalester Bell (2013) on contempt, for example.

How significant is the conclusion that it is unfitting to feel this form of righteous indignation—contempt underwritten by a sense of one’s own purity—when one has also performed the action one is criticizing? The answer depends on the extent to which our considered judgments about the loss of “standing” to blame emerge from our sense of the impropriety of impure righteousness and indignation. And in fact, I believe that this is exactly where many of these judgments originate. Charges of standingless blame are often reactions to the experience of being looked down upon or judged by unworthy spectators. Wrongdoers who level such charges are quick to employ idioms of elevation. One might defensively assert that the impure blamer that has no right to sit on a “high horse,” to act “high and mighty,” to “look down on” others or “*stand* in judgment” of them. Indeed, the phrase “*standing* to blame” itself implies uprightness and elevation.

The husband’s righteous indignation in the thank-you note example would be inaccurate because his own failure would invalidate his implicit claim to purity and rectitude. This particular kind of inapt blaming, however, would not make him a hypocrite, at least not in the traditional sense of someone who professes commitment to standards that he is not committed to.¹⁴ The hypocrite engages in pretense or posturing, feigning moral investment and hiding his true character. (Indeed, the word “hypocrite” comes from the Greek *hupokrisis*, meaning “acting of a theatrical part.”) This is not what the husband is doing. His experience of guilt and shame both evince and partially constitute a genuine commitment to the values in question.¹⁵

¹⁴ Both Todd’s and Achs’s accounts of hypocrisy, which focus on the blamer’s investment in the values at stake, are admirably faithful to the concept’s history.

¹⁵ Here, one may reasonably wonder whether feelings of guilt and shame automatically imply that an agent is committed to the values his behavior transgressed. For example, we would hesitate to say that a person locked into a persistent cycle of wrongdoing followed by guilt and shame, followed by yet more wrongdoing, and so on, is fully committed to the values in question. But not every guilty and ashamed wrongdoer is stuck in such a pattern. We may imagine, for instance, that this is first lapse of this kind for both husband and wife in the thank-you note example. Even in such a case, the husband’s failure *in this instance* would render downward-looking righteous indignation inappropriate. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for prompting this clarification.

If not hypocrisy, what vice might the guilty husband's righteous indignation reflect? The answer depends on the psychological explanation of the particular emotional response. Perhaps, for example, he has convinced himself that his actions, though also deficient, are somehow not as bad as his wife's. The vice behind that kind of misconstrual would not be hypocritical fakery but *conceit*, the internal overestimation of one's own position and attendant disdain for others. The life of the hypocrite is one of deception. He does not really care about shared values but pretends to be fully devoted. The life of the conceited person, on the other hand, is one of *self*-deception. Although his investment is legitimate, he sees himself as nobler than he really is.

Conceit leads us to focus on others' faults, making their shortcomings vivid¹⁶ as we congratulate ourselves on our own loftiness. In ordinary language we sometimes do call this self-deceptive superiority "hypocrisy," but the distinction between the two vices I am highlighting, whatever we choose to call them, is ethically significant. Being hypocritical, or knowing a hypocrite, is qualitatively different from being conceited or knowing a conceited person. We might trust and rely on a conceited person where we would not trust and rely on a hypocrite. On the other hand, we might find a conceited person's unfounded haughtiness insufferable in a way that a hypocrite's duplicity, though disquieting, is not. It is not immediately obvious which kind of person would be a more appealing or effective politician, for example, or which vice would be more alarming to discover in one's own child.

In conflating our blaming attitudes, the dominant approach to standing obscures the ethically significant distinction between hypocrisy and conceit. The non-generalizing approach, on the other hand, rewards us with a richer psychology, and, as a result, a more nuanced ethics. Not only does attention to righteous indignation furnish a compelling explanation of the

¹⁶ My discussion of emotional focus is inspired by Michael Stocker (1987).

inappropriateness of a specific and significant form of impure blaming, but it sheds new light on the vices that impure blame can express.

IV: Getting Even

I have suggested that some of our strongest intuitions about the loss of “standing to blame” arise in response to impure righteous indignation. But what about our other blaming attitudes? What about resentment, an emotion that philosophers have often treated as *the* paradigmatic blaming emotion since Strawson’s influential essay? In fact, impurity can undermine resentment’s fittingness as well, but *not* for the same reasons it invalidates righteous indignation. Once again, only a non-generalizing approach to the psychology and ethics of blame can illuminate the distinctive way in which it does so.

As was the case with my use of “righteous indignation,” I am not attempting to legislate use of the *word* “resentment.” Nor do I need to defend of an “account” of resentment against other contenders. Rather, I need only sketch the psychological profile of a distinctive and familiar response to wrongdoing that most of us would readily call blame.¹⁷

Resentment, as I will understand it here, is an angry response to wrongful insults and injuries inflicted by others. Characteristically, it implies the thought that the wrongdoer cannot be allowed to get away with what he has done—that the wrongdoing cannot stand. It motivates victims to strike back, punish, and seek justice. More specifically, it involves the perception that wrongdoing has disturbed a social equilibrium. Transgressions unduly elevate wrongdoers: Through their bad behavior, offenders send a message that they are “above the law,” and they

¹⁷ Nevertheless, the rough outline I will offer has an impressive philosophical pedigree going back at least to Aristotle, Seneca, and Nietzsche. In more recent years, it has been taken seriously by a range of theorists, including Morris, Murphy, Hampton (1988), Solomon (1993), Miller (1998), Nussbaum, Reis-Dennis (2021), and Silva (2022), among others.

benefit concretely from their ill-gotten gains. Victims, on the other hand, are unduly lowered: They (and any onlookers) receive the message that they are unworthy of respect, and they suffer concrete losses. Resentment is a leveling emotion. It involves a drive to restore balance by lowering the offender and/or raising oneself. We express its logic with a mix of economic and weighing metaphors: it explains our urge to “settle scores,” “get even,” and balance the “scales of justice.” We can restore the sociomoral equilibrium resentment protects by “making wrongdoers pay” and “doling out payback”—this is why resentment notoriously can lead to violence and revenge—but we typically hope that victims seek resolution through the moralized humbling (and raising) of the apology ritual rather than through extramoral retaliation.

With this rough understanding in mind, let us return to the newlywed couple and suppose that the ashamed and guilt-stricken husband reacts to his wife’s dereliction with resentment. That is, imagine that he perceives his wife’s inattentiveness to the thank-you notes as a kind of slight that raises her above him. Longing to restore equilibrium, he wishes for her to humble herself.

Some may wonder whether this reaction would be misguided—either unfitting or just plain immoral—whether the husband had written his thank-you notes or not. But imagine that the husband *had* promptly taken care of his half. Would it be unreasonable for him to feel affronted by his wife’s neglect? Her actions speak for both of them as a couple, and their joint failure to express timely gratitude shames them: they have, in some sense, failed to pay their debts.

But this is not our version of the case. And whatever one thinks of the ethics of this kind of resentment, this husband’s impurity presents a *distinctive* problem for his blame: He misconstrues the situation when he judges that his wife’s neglect elevates her above him. In fact, they have wronged each other in exactly the same way and are thus (roughly) on the same

level.¹⁸ The husband, then, lacks standing to be either righteously indignant *or* resentful, but for different reasons. Righteous indignation is unfitting because he is in no position to look *down* on his wife; resentment is unfitting because he is in no position to look *up* at her.

Although they both fall under the heading of “blame,” righteous indignation and resentment are different emotional reactions with distinct psychological profiles and ethical implications. The vice associated with impure resentment may be hypocrisy or conceit, depending on the case, but impure resentment of the kind I have sketched may also reflect an envious and exacting will to dominate others in a way that impure righteous indignation does not. In a rule-following person, the resentful desire to lower an offender can reflect a defensible (perhaps even commendable) sense of justice and self-respect. In a person who has also performed the same bad acts, however, it more likely reflects a jealous and insecure compulsion to guard one’s own (unduly) superior position by keeping others down.¹⁹

V: Unequal Reactions

¹⁸ This evenness helps to explain why a more likely reaction, at least in my family, would be joyous relief.

¹⁹ In discussing righteous indignation and resentment, I have focused on blaming attitudes that involve a construal of their targets as either above or below their subjects. I have done so because I believe that the (in)correctness of these emotions lies at the heart of both everyday and philosophical interest in the standing to blame. Nevertheless, one might wonder about the propriety of *other* impure blaming attitudes. Suppose, as an anonymous referee has suggested, that the husband was *annoyed* with his wife for her failure to write her half of the thank-you notes. Might such a response simply be *unfair* without being *unfitting*? In fact, I do believe that the husband lacks the standing to be annoyed precisely because his annoyance would be unfitting, and that this explanation sheds light on the kind of unfairness such annoyance would involve. Annoyance is an emotion that represents its object as something that “impinges unpleasantly on some concern of mine” (Roberts 2003, 218). When I imagine the husband’s annoyance being “unfair” or otherwise objectionable, I imagine an attitude that (inaccurately) construes *his wife’s failure* as the primary frustrator of his ambitions to maintain certain kinds of relationships or to avoid shame. My reaction is also informed by the fact that annoyance is characteristically an emotion of superiority. We are annoyed by little things: leaky faucets, repetitive noises, gnats. Annoyance can bleed into contempt, which, as I have stressed, would be inapt here. This is not to say, however, that characterizing the impropriety of annoyance in terms of “unfairness” is off track. The kind of annoyance I am imagining involves a misperception that reflects *self-absorption* or *conceit*—vices that involve outlooks on the world that we may colloquially describe as unfair.

I have been trying to show that focusing on *particular* blaming attitudes, especially righteous indignation and resentment, yields richer and more precise ethical explanations of impure blamers' loss of standing than the dominant, abstract approach can provide. As we have seen, Todd's suggestion—that the impropriety of impure blame stems from the blamer's lack of commitment to the values in question—will not explain the judgment that the guilt-ridden husband's anger (whether righteously indignant or resentful) in the thank-you note case is unfounded. But those who hold views that tie the impropriety of impure blame to some form of inequality may be better positioned to make a rhetorical move in response to this example. Take the case of righteous indignation, for instance: a person who has committed the very act he now condemns with righteous indignation has not scrutinized himself enough to realize that he is not faultless. He also looks down upon his target, and this inflated posture, it could be argued, implies some objectionable inequality. How do these alternative proposals, which hold that impure blaming expresses an objectionable inequality that undermines standing to blame-in-general, fare in comparison to the non-generalizing explanations that I have offered?

As I have been stressing, there are many negative reactive attitudes we might call “blame,” and their conditions of appropriateness vary. I will show that attention to this range of possible blaming emotions reveals that it is possible to manifest differential dispositions and failures of self-scrutiny but nevertheless remain justified in feeling fitting negative reactive attitudes in response to others' shortcomings. Differential dispositions and insufficient self-scrutiny, then, do *not* automatically undermine one's standing to feel all of the emotions we may classify as “blame.” Only by focusing on the fittingness conditions of specific emotions, rather than on “blame,” “criticism,” or “the reactive attitudes” in general, can we explain when

differential dispositions and insufficient self-scrutiny do and do not render one's emotions inappropriate.

First, consider a case of interpersonal disappointment.²⁰ Two siblings who once shared lofty ambitions have sunk into dreary lives. One of them, despite being resigned to his own fate, feels disappointed in his sister for not making a better effort to realize her childhood dreams. The disappointed brother is not disappointed in himself. In fact, his opinion of his own abilities is so low that he does not think anyone ought to be disappointed in him. To be clear, the brother is not angry, and he does not look down on his sister. His disappointment springs from feelings of esteem and love for her that perhaps he ought also to have for himself.

Of course, the more we build a sense of superiority into the brother's feeling of disappointment, or picture him "standing in judgment" of his sister, the more objectionable his emotional response will seem. If, for example, the brother assumed the role of an imperious father figure ("I'm disappointed in you, young lady"), then his disappointment would reflect an inapt righteousness and would be unfitting. But the kind of disappointment I have in mind need not involve a sense of injustice, or of one's own elevation or purity. It is natural to harbor high hopes for people we look up to and admire. When they let us down, the pain of disappointment we feel need not imply resentment or scorn; it can slide toward sadness rather than anger.

The mere fact that the disappointed brother does not engage in the kind of critical reflection on his own life that would inspire (fitting) *self*-regarding disappointment does not undermine his *other*-regarding disappointment. He manifests a differential disposition and a

²⁰ In stressing that the emotion I have in mind is "interpersonal," I wish to set aside disappointment that one might feel toward, say, the world in general, or in response one's lottery ticket not coming up a winner in the weekly drawing. Rather, I mean to focus on a reactive attitude one may reasonably feel only toward another person one has serious expectations of—a feeling most at home in the context of intimate relationships in which one party has (perhaps repeatedly) let the other down.

failure of self-scrutiny, but because his perception of his sister as having fallen short of expectations is accurate, his feelings of disappointment remain fitting. Perhaps he ought to feel disappointed in himself too, and perhaps his failure to self-scrutinize reflects some deficiency of character, but there is nothing inappropriate or self-undermining *about the disappointment itself*.²¹

Interpersonal distrust also illustrates the point. Imagine a policeman who sees his partner plant evidence on a suspect. It would be fitting and reasonable for the officer to adopt an attitude of distrust toward his partner even if he had recently planted evidence himself.²² Again, we may frame the case so that the officer's distrust evinces a differential disposition by supposing that he sees himself as totally trustworthy and pure. Moreover, we can imagine that in forming his distrusting attitude, the officer has entirely declined to examine his own character and past behavior. But while his badly distorted self-perception and his unwillingness to self-scrutinize are evidence of character flaws, they do not render his *distrust* of his partner inappropriate or wrong. Perhaps neither man should trust the other, but the officer does not lose the "standing" to distrust his partner because of his own deceitful behavior.

This example is instructive because it illuminates a difference between the reactive attitudes of distrust and righteous indignation. A righteously indignant version of the officer and a distrustful version may share mistaken ideas of their own moral purity and rectitude. But while the fittingness of righteous indignation depends on the accuracy of the subject's perception of himself as purer or loftier than his target, the fittingness of distrust does not. Where the appropriateness of distrust and disappointment depend on features of their targets and their

²¹ I am tempted to say that the brother retains the "standing" to feel disappointed by his sister's failure, but I admit that this sounds strained. Concerns about "standing" arise primarily when some form of righteousness or anger is involved.

²² This would qualify as blaming for Fritz and Miller, as well as for Scanlon.

targets' actions, the fittingness of righteous indignation depends on a more complex sociomoral relationship between blamer and blamed.

I believe that this observation explains the initial appeal of the self-scrutiny and differential-disposition views. Feelings of righteousness and indignation imply that some (perhaps deficient) self-evaluation has *already* taken place and that this evaluation has produced an image of the blamer as purer and more elevated than his target. And if I am correct that righteous, indignant anger is one of the blaming attitudes that paradigmatically gives rise to concerns about “standing,” then it makes sense that one might conceive of standingless blame as involving both deficient self-scrutiny and a (certain kind of) differential blaming disposition.

Nevertheless, the foregoing examples show that failures of self-evaluation and differential dispositions only undermine a blamer's standing to react emotionally by rendering *specific* negative reactive attitudes unfitting. The reason we lack standing to feel impure righteous indignation is not because such feelings would violate a blanket prohibition on differential blaming, or a general duty to self-scrutinize. If impure reactive attitudes were illegitimate for those reasons, the brother and the police officer in the cases I discussed above would lack standing to feel their respective reactive attitudes as well. But they do not. Rather, the problem with impure righteousness and indignation is that such feelings are necessarily unfitting. They imply a view of the world that is not only false but also expressive of familiar vices.²³

VI: Two Abstractions

²³ As an anonymous reviewer has generously noted, my approach is well-positioned to accommodate recent insights about the phenomenon of “hypercrisy.” The hypocrite (see Lippert-Rasmussen 2020 and Tierney 2021) is harder on himself than on others in response to equivalent wrongdoing, but this “differential disposition” does not seem to undermine his standing to blame those others. Hypercrites create problems for views that locate the wrongness of impure blaming in some kind of unequal treatment. Because my explanation appeals to the unfittingness of specific blaming attitudes rather than a general norm of equal response to equal wrongdoing, it has no difficulty dealing with them.

At this point, those who hold that impurity undermines our standing to blame by rendering that blame hypocritical may wish to refine their position. They might explain that in using the term “blame,” they mean to focus specifically on *hostile* or *angry* reactive attitudes, and that disappointment and distrust do not count.²⁴ Even the angry emotions, however, are not monolithic; impurity, even when paired with a lack of self-scrutiny or a “differential blaming disposition,” does not always undermine our standing to feel and express them. There is simply no non-distorting general method for determining when we do and do not enjoy the standing to angrily blame. Rather, we must attend to, rather than abstract away from, specific angry emotions and contexts.

To make this point, I must begin by introducing another form of abstraction encouraged by the standard approach. Theorizing about blame-in-general has tended to yield accounts that make one’s “standing” to blame depend entirely on internal mental processes. (Does the blamer care about the values in question? Did the blamer self-scrutinize? Does the blamer evince a differential disposition?) But we should consider the possibility that one’s standing to angrily blame can depend on *social* factors including (but not limited to) the successful performance of ritual, concrete humbling and raising, and the passage of time. Real human social practices shape blame’s topography. But because these practices express and give rise to specific emotions in specific contexts, the generalizing approach to blame must ignore them and, as a result, overlook the terrain’s roughness.

Consider the following scenario that played out at the sleepaway camp I attended as a child: Every summer, the bunk would informally settle on one unlucky camper to pick on—calling him names, covering his face in shaving cream while he slept, putting toothpaste in his

²⁴ This response is not open to Fritz and Miller, however. For them, to “blame” is just to feel a negative reactive attitude in response to a perception of wrongdoing (119).

shoes, etc... The next summer, the same bunkmates would choose a new sacrificial lamb from among their ranks, and one of last year's bullies would become this year's victim. The former target, happy to avoid a second straight summer of abuse, would eagerly join in.

Does the new victim in such a scenario have standing to angrily blame his tormenters? Once again, the answer depends on the specifics of the emotional and social response at issue. If his blame is righteous and indignant—if it involves “standing in judgment” of the other campers—then the bunkmates would be right to dismissively roll their eyes at expressions of it. Such an attitude would imply a false and self-serving claim of purity, and the new victim's sudden moralism would seem awfully convenient given his newfound social lowliness.

But suppose the camper had already been feeling guilty about his behavior the previous summer and had truly committed himself to becoming a gentler person and a better friend.²⁵ Would he have standing to feel and express righteous indignation *then*? Here, the attitude-by-attitude method helpfully reminds us (in a way the standard approach would not) that because we are dealing specifically with *righteous indignation*, the crucial concepts are *purity* and *uprightness*. Restoration of standing would require cleansing rehabilitation.

My own sense, although I cannot fully defend it here, is that such cleansing rehabilitation could not be achieved through an internal change of heart alone. The reason is that the camper's wrongdoing the previous summer was irreducibly *social*. It consisted not only in his feeling and expression of substandard “quality of will,” but in the elevation of his own relative social position and the corresponding drop in his victim's. The process of purification is also social in

²⁵ Of course, professing such a commitment would be a surefire path to yet more ridicule.

this way. It is achieved through a kind of collective negotiation that relies on a combination of the passage of time²⁶ and rituals that effect humbling and raising.

The standard approach, which makes one's standing to blame contingent on *internal* states and processes, obscures this point. The problem with the new victim's righteous indignation would not be the violation of some free-standing "norm" of blame that required self-examination, non-differential treatment, or endorsement of certain values. Nor would it be the contravention of a general injunction against hypocrisy. Rather, the problem would be that his construal of the situation, and, as a result, his self-presentation, would be false. He would be seeing himself as pure and upright, and the legitimacy and force of his righteous blame would depend on the veracity of that appraisal. But purity and uprightness are not solely determined by one's internal mental states; in this case, the social circumstances would falsify his implicit claims to them. His bunkmates would be right to reject these claims just as we are justified in dismissing, ignoring, and even objecting to false and self-serving *explicit* assertions, especially those that express the moral vices I have discussed.

Acknowledging that the fittingness of a blaming attitude can depend on external factors has implications for theorizing about the relationship between blame and "blameworthiness." Consider the following "fit-value biconditional"²⁷: "An agent S is blameworthy for x if and only if it is fitting to blame S for x." I have been suggesting that the fittingness of blame depends on the blaming response in question and its specific appropriateness conditions. And I have just argued that because we are social beings living in physical world, our sense of appropriate

²⁶ As Walt Whitman wrote in "Reconciliation," "the hands of the sisters Death and Night incessantly softly wash again, and ever again, this soil'd world" (273). For recent philosophical discussion of the relationship between the passage of time and emotional change, see Na'aman (2021) and Phillips (2022).

²⁷ The terminology comes from Achs and Na'aman (2023). Although I have limited my discussion to blameworthiness, I am sympathetic to their general arguments for the need to qualify fit-value biconditionals.

emotional response will always be informed by social context. It follows, then, that if we accept the above biconditional, “blameworthiness” cannot be determined solely by the quality of one’s will, one’s level of rational control, or other internal, psychological conditions. Rather, it will also be informed by external, social factors including the specifics of relevant relationships, rituals, and histories, as well as the concrete consequences of one’s behavior.²⁸

But one need not agree with my substantive ethical claims about the relationship between social factors and fitting emotions to see a larger point: a verdict on the propriety of righteous indignation does not imply a verdict on the propriety of other forms of impure blame—even angry and emotional ones. For the final time, let us turn to resentment.

As I noted earlier, resentment (as I have characterized it, at least) roughly implies a perception of one’s unjustified lowness in a social hierarchy and a desire for the kind of leveling that would restore equilibrium. Does the bully-turned-target have standing to *resentfully* blame the bunkmates? I believe that he does. As a result of the other campers’ wrongdoing, the victim finds himself looking up at them in a social hierarchy—suffering the humiliation and indignity of their pranks and taunts. To use Roberts’s term, the “defining proposition” of his resentment might be something along the lines of, “They have no right to treat me like this and it cannot stand. I need to get even.” This response strikes me as fitting and justified (perhaps even good) regardless of whether it involves self-scrutiny or “differential dispositions.” Suppose the boy reacted by resentfully filling one of his *tormentor’s* shoes with toothpaste. Such an escalation may not be morally ideal, but the bullies could not seriously claim that the boy’s own bad behavior the previous summer undermined his “standing” to retaliate. On the contrary, the

²⁸ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for prompting me to discuss this implication of my view.

resentful reprisal would be seen as a perfectly legitimate move in the bunk's little honor culture.²⁹

When this year's victim resentfully objects to his treatment, he does not want to lecture, preach, castigate, or scorn; he just wants to reclaim his rightful position relative to his fellow campers. His own previous bullying does not undermine or invalidate the feelings that would spur him to do so, except in one case....

How should he feel about last year's victim? The kind of resentment I have been considering is about restoring a justifiable balance among members of an ethical ecosystem. Last summer's mischief elevated all of the bunkmates above their unlucky target; this summer, that victim has the opportunity to partially satisfy his resentment by doling out payback to one of his "creditors."³⁰ While it may be psychologically understandable for this year's victim to be particularly furious at being bullied by last year's victim (he may see it as a special indignity to be picked on even by the likes of *that guy*), his ethical grounds for resenting last year's target are weaker than his grounds for resenting the others. The reason is simple: Resentment (as I understand it here) is a response to a relative disequilibrium of status that arises as a result of wrongdoing. There is surely wrongdoing between the two victims, but because there is now equal wrongdoing on both sides, there is no *relative disequilibrium* between them. As a result, resentment would be inapt; last year's victim is getting even. Two (equivalent) wrongs may not make a right, but they do invalidate resentment.

²⁹ To be clear, I am not arguing that "making someone pay" or "doling out payback" would be a morally *good* response (though I am not assuming that it would be a morally bad one, either). The point is simply that the boy's impurity does not invalidate his resentment: He had been on even terms with the others; now he is beneath them and (reasonably) wishes to restore his relative position.

³⁰ See Miller's "Clint Eastwood and Equality" for a fascinating discussion of the differences between doling out payback and making someone pay.

We are now in a position to return to Todd's crucial question: "Why is it, exactly, that [one] lacks the standing internally to blame [a wrongdoer], when he is himself so willing to perform such actions" (371)? My answer is that one lacks such standing to blame only if one's performance of the same bad actions renders *specific* blaming emotions unfitting. To feel a blaming emotion when one has transgressed in the same way as the blamed agent can (but need not) amount to a kind of perceptual failure or misconstrual, depending on the emotion and the circumstances that give rise to it. The problem with impure blame is not that it violates a general prohibition on differential dispositions, insufficient self-scrutiny, or even hypocrisy, but rather that it can be invalidated by its own internal, emotional logic. When others learn of such inapt blame, they are right to discount it as misguided, dishonest, self-serving, or otherwise vicious.

VII: Conclusion

I began with a brief sketch of the rise of blame as a concept of interest to philosophers of free will and responsibility in the wake of "Freedom and Resentment," and I wish to conclude by offering some tentative suggestions for moving that story forward in future work. In particular, I am interested in what it might mean to heed Strawson's injunction to abandon abstract theorizing about free will and focus instead on the psychology and ethics of the reactive attitudes. Of course, a complete treatment of this interpretive and methodological question would be well beyond the scope of this paper, and so I hope that readers will take these brief concluding remarks in the exploratory spirit in which I intend them.

Strawson's essay reminds us that the practices, expectations, emotional patterns, and rituals that give our lives structure and meaning have a social and political history. They both determine and are determined by our material circumstances, our aspirations, and our needs. As

such, they are not to be flippantly discarded in the name of abstract metaphysics without substantive moral argument. They “do not merely exploit our natures, they express them” (82).

By enjoining us to focus on “what it is actually like to be involved in ordinary interpersonal relationships” (67), “Freedom and Resentment” raises the prospect of dissolving infamously intractable questions of metaphysics into questions of psychology and ethics. It invites us to get a grip on philosophical concepts (free will in this case) by attending to the real-world ethical questions they purport to help us answer, and to the emotional and sociocultural life in which those questions arise. Strawson seems to suggest, moreover, that once we remind ourselves of where we are and what we care about, we may find that straightforward ethical and psychological inquiry is all we need to address our concrete concerns. We may not require a theory of free will, for example, if we can answer the ethical questions that matter without one.³¹

One way of putting the point of this paper is that we can make progress in our thinking about the standing to blame by internalizing and applying this methodological strategy. According to this reading of Strawson, the rejection of free-will metaphysics does not buy one a license to hunt for the essence of “moral responsibility” by searching for the nature and norms of “blame.” I have tried to show how in the context of the debate about standing, such theorizing about blame-in-general has tempted authors to levels of abstraction and systematization from which it is difficult to acknowledge and appreciate ethically relevant psychological differences among our blaming attitudes as we actually experience and express them. It is not true, as we have seen, that “differential” blaming need be self-undermining, or that there is a norm of blaming that requires self-scrutiny. Nor is it true that we retain a blanket standing to blame as long as we are genuinely committed to the values our blame defends. Indeed, it is not even true

³¹ Of course, I have not shown that we can answer these ethical questions without a theory of free will here.

that the problem with standingless blame is that it is hypocritical, or that standingless blame need be hypocritical at all.

As an alternative, I have offered, and then attempted to demonstrate, what I see as a Strawsonian method for making progress in moral psychology and ethics: begin with real-life ethical questions and answer them by attending carefully to the psychology and ethics of particular responses and their contexts.

I do not claim to have decisively proven this method's superiority here. While I suspect that one could productively extend the approach I have outlined to dissolve questions about the nature of blame and blameworthiness, agents' "degrees" of blameworthiness, the relationship between blame and luck, and even the nature of "moral responsibility" itself,³² I acknowledge that any verdict on the method's usefulness must depend on the results of serious and sustained attempts to apply it beyond the case of the "standing to blame" that I have explored. These concluding remarks are merely suggestions for a path forward.

What I do hope to have shown is that the non-generalizing approach *can*, in principle, be fruitful—that it has the potential to help us appreciate the psychological and ethical complexity of our lives. We need not worry that rejecting the pull of more abstract theorizing will leave us with nothing to do. Articulating the psychology of specific reactive responses and then making an ethical "assessment of the gains and losses to human life, its enrichment or impoverishment" (73), which accrue as a result of their roles in our social ecosystems, is no small task. Indeed, doing so in a way that illuminates rather than distorts is a philosophical achievement—a worthy extension of Strawson's hotly-contested legacy.

³² See [redacted].

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