Sher on blame

In this paper I consider the argument propounded by George Sher in his book *In Praise of Blame*[i] to the conclusion that blame is an essential constituent of morality, that the latter would be inconceivable without it.

Sher maintains that the concept of blame has two distinct components: a belief that someone has behaved badly or has a bad character *plus* something else. It is specifying the nature of the 'something else' which creates most of the difficulty, and much of Sher's book is devoted to grappling with this problem.

Before providing his own analysis of blame, Sher presents three existing alternative views and finds fault with all of them. The first is a proposal 'favored by some utilitarians . . . that what we are doing when we blame someone is expressing our disapproval of his behavior or character in a way that we hope will change it' (Sher 2006, 13; see also 71-4). He rejects this theory on the grounds that blame does not always have to be overtly expressed, but can be just a private thought (Sher 2006, 74). The second theory, of which Michael Zimmerman is an exponent (1988, 38-9), is that 'what blaming someone adds to believing that he has acted badly or is a bad person is some sort of further belief—for example, that his misbehavior has somehow stained his "moral record" or reduced his "moral balance"' (Sher 2006, 13; see also 75-8). This view is rejected on the grounds that its advocates cannot explain why we should take any interest in people's 'moral balance' over and above our interest in the fact that they have acted badly (Sher 2006, 78). The final theory considered by Sher is that to blame someone is to react to her with some negative emotion such as anger or hostility.[ii] He rejects this view on the grounds that its defenders cannot give a credible explanation of why some people are *worthy* of blame. Acting badly or having a bad character cannot be enough in itself—we are not entitled to be angry with just anyone of whom this is true (Sher 2006, 87).

The theory of blame subsequently offered by Sher himself to replace these inadequate views (and I agree that they are inadequate) is that to blame someone is to believe that she has done something wrong or that she has a bad character plus also to have the desire or wish that she not have done this wrong thing or that she not have this bad character (Sher 2006, 14; see also 93-114). This account has such merits as the fact that it evidently allows blame to be a purely private matter (for the desire referred to need not be expressed), and the fact that it explains why when one blames another one has certain dispositions, namely: to feel anger or hostility to that person, to reproach or reprimand her, or (when the person blamed is oneself) to apologize for what one has done. (But notice that unlike in the third of the existing theories considered by Sher, blame is not *identified* with such dispositions.)

Sher moves on from the presentation and defense of this analysis to consider the question of why those who act badly or have a bad character might be considered *worthy* of blame (Sher 2006, 115-138). His answer is that this follows from the very nature of morality, more specifically from certain formal features which, it is agreed by almost everyone, moral principles must possess. They must be *practical* (primarily for guiding action), *universal* (applying to everyone), *omnitemporal* (applying at all times), *overriding* (having priority over virtually every other consideration) and *inescapable* (such that no-one can opt out of their requirements). The practicality of moral principles entails that if one accepts a moral principle one must have at least some desire to do what it says. Their universality and omnitemporality respectively entail that this desire must apply to others besides oneself, and must extend beyond the present to the past and future. Finally, their overridingness and inescapability together entail that this desire must have the sort of strength that would be needed to give rise to a disposition to feel anger and hostility.

As well as showing why it is appropriate to blame those who have done wrong or who have a bad character, Sher also thinks that this theory explains why such people *deserve* blame, since, he argues, to make such a desert claim *is* just to state that such blame would be appropriate (Sher 2006, 131).

I turn now to the evaluation of Sher's theory.[iii] I accept that *if* his analysis of blame is correct, this entails that morality generally renders blame appropriate for wrongdoers, and roughly for the reasons explained by Sher. However, I want to establish the following:

(i)   Sher has not in fact succeeded in explaining why blame, understood in terms of his analysis, can be *deserved.*
(ii) Sher's analysis of blame is in any case incomplete in a way that casts additional doubt on the claim that wrongdoers generally deserve blame.

First, to explain why, even if we accept Sher's analysis of blame, we should reject his account of why people deserve blame, understood in his sense. The reason for this has to do with a certain

conceptual point about desert, namely, that whenever a person negatively deserves something, what she deserves (in the strictest moral sense) must be something that she experiences as bad or unpleasant. It is clear that Sher is working with a rather more anemic version of desert, whereby to say that someone deserves something (positive or negative) means little more than that it would be appropriate for her to receive it. But as a matter of conceptual necessity, this is not enough for desert. It also needs the fact that the deserving person would experience what she deserves as pleasant (in the case of positive desert) or as unpleasant (in the case of negative desert). Nothing in Sher's analysis of blame explains why a person for whom blame was, according to that analysis, appropriate ought to be treated in a way that she would find unpleasant. For being the subject of a belief that one has acted badly plus a desire that one not have acted in this way is not an intrinsically unpleasant thing. True, Sher's account does readily explain why someone might deserve blame in *his* sense of the word. For it is indeed the case that if someone has done something bad, thus flouting or ignoring some requirement of morality, it would be appropriate both to believe that this is the case and to wish that she had not done it. But that fact is not sufficient to establish that she deserves blame in the full sense of (negative) desert, requiring treatment that she would find unpleasant.

Now to establish my second point, which is that Sher's analysis of blame is incomplete. To make the point with sufficient care, I need to distinguish between what I shall call *third person* and *second person* blame. Third person blame is expressed when *A* says sincerely that she blames *B* for something, but has no particular intention that *B* know this. In contrast, second person blame is expressed when *A* says that she blames *B* with precisely this intention. It is expressed by using 'I blame you for . . .' and similar phrases.[iv] There is also of course *first person* blame, in which one blames oneself, and which usually takes the form of guilt feelings.

Second person blame appears essential to our overall concept of blame, and so any satisfactory analysis of blame must deal successfully with it. Now, in this connection, it is important to note that to express second person blame to someone is not merely to report one's own attitudes to her or to what she has done. If you sincerely say to someone 'I blame you for *X*,' then you will necessarily be doing something that she is likely to find unwelcome. Those who are learning the use of the word in its second person occurrence have to realize this, on pain of not fully grasping what is involved in this speech-act. Notice that this characterization does not require a blamer to *intend* that the blamee be distressed. That need not be my aim in blaming you for something, but, in doing so, I must believe that there is some likelihood[v] that you will find it unwelcome.

We need not concern ourselves with the psychological or sociological origins of the speech-act of expressing second person blame. No doubt they have something to do with the survival value of a certain kind of social control. The important point for us here is that second person blame exists and seems to form an essential part of our entire notion of blaming. In particular, an understanding of second person blame seems essential to a correct account of third person blame. For if *A* blames *B* in the third person sense for doing *X*, then this seems to mean—at a minimum—that *A* believes that *B* did *X* in such a way as to satisfy standard criteria for moral responsibility and that because of this, according to conventional moral precepts, one would be justified in expressing second person blame to *B*. Again, first person blame can be regarded as equivalent to either third or second person blame, with the special feature that the person blamed is identical to the person who is blaming. In other words, one expresses first person blame either by saying to another that one blames oneself (third person) or (perhaps less often) by saying to oneself something along the lines of 'I blame you' (second person).

So blame is a more complex matter than even Sher's sophisticated analysis allows for—and in a way that brings into question his belief (which he is far from alone in holding) that wrongdoers generally deserve blame. Given the stronger conception of blame that I have advocated here, as opposed to Sher's weaker concept, it still needs explaining why this would be the case—in particular why wrongdoers would ever deserve to be the recipients of *second person* blame, i.e., to be addressed in a way that they would be likely to find unwelcome.

The defect that I have identified in Sher's analysis of blame is no trivial matter, particularly given one of the major aims announced in his book, which is to try to establish that some people deserve blame without having to address the complex issue of determinism and its implications for moral responsibility. If I am right, Sher only manages to avoid getting stuck in this quagmire by missing out the very element in the nature of blame that makes moral responsibility and determinism relevant—its necessary connection with the idea of wrongdoers' being treated in ways that they find unwelcome. (If determinism is true, how can anyone ever deserve to have an unwelcome feeling?) Bring that element back in—as, I have argued, we are conceptually obliged to do—and determinism is seen to be as threatening as ever to our established practices of blame and of holding people morally responsible for their actions.

I want to end with a clarification. Up to now, the impression may have been created that Sher and I are very far apart on the question of blame. However, at least where practical ethics is concerned, the difference is not as great as it appears. The reason for this is as follows. Sher maintains, as we have seen, that a logically necessary condition for blame is the presence of a belief that someone has acted badly or has a bad character plus a desire that she not have acted thus or not have such a character. Such a belief-desire pair tends to give rise to certain dispositions such as anger or hostility. But Sher is undecided about whether these dispositions are themselves also logically necessary for blame. My own view, which I defended above, is that the belief-desire pair is not sufficient. But in any case, Sher recognizes the possibility of a kind of 'stripped down' blame, which requires *only* the belief-desire pair, not the dispositions normally associated with them. He then briefly addresses the question of whether it would be possible for human beings to make do with just this stripped down version. He is not sure of the answer to this question, but suggests that 'it may be possible to improve the quality of our social relations by lowering the condemnatory volume and compensating for any resulting diminution of social control in other ways' (Sher 2006, 138). I thoroughly agree.

[i] George Sher, *In Praise of Blame*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

[ii] Sher 2006, 13; see also 78-91. P. F. Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment and other essays* (London: Methuen, 1974), 1-25 is mentioned as one of the main sources for this view.

[iii] I focus entirely on blame for bad acts, ignoring bad characters. This is because I do not want to get embroiled here in the discussion of whether it is ever right to blame a person for her bad character. (Of course, whether or not it is ever right, I would maintain that it is never deserved.)

[iv] There are in fact a great variety of ways of expressing second person blame. They do not all use the word 'blame' or any synonym of it. If my wife says to me 'You didn't do the washing up' in a certain tone of voice, this can be an expression of second person blame.

[v] By this I mean a likelihood *all other things being equal.* In some cases I might know that the blamee is particularly thick-skinned and will feel no distress.