

# BEING SYMPATHETIC TO BAD-HISTORY WRONDGOERS\*

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*For many philosophers, bad-history wrongdoers are primarily interesting because of what their cases might tell us about the interaction of moral responsibility and history. However, philosophers focusing on blameworthiness have overlooked important questions about blame itself. These bad-history cases are complicated because blame and sympathy are both fitting. When we are careful to consider the rich natures of those two reactions, we see that they conflict in several important ways. We should see bad-history cases as cases about whether and how we should blame, rather than as cases giving us ready insight into the nature of moral responsibility.*

Many complicated cases of blame are bad-history cases, cases where a wrongdoer ostensibly deserving of blame also has suffered terribly in the past. Robert Alton Harris is perhaps the most famous example in the philosophical literature: as an adult, he murdered two teenage boys, but as a child, he was abused and neglected. For many philosophers, these bad-history cases are primarily interesting because of what they might tell us about the interaction of moral responsibility and history. Does Harris's terrible history undermine his responsibility for his crimes, and if so, how? Responsibility questions like these are interesting and important.

However, focusing on those questions has led philosophers to overlook a separate and important aspect of cases like Harris's. These bad-history cases are complicated because blame and sympathy are both fitting. When we are careful to consider the rich natures of those two reactions, we see that they conflict in several important ways. And when we take those conflicts seriously, we see their significant practical, ethical, and dialectical implications. Centrally, we see that the bad-history cases are morally complicated in ways that resist unitary resolution, and thus we see that the bad-history cases are poor cases for moral-responsibility casuistry. We should see bad-history cases as cases about whether and how we should blame, rather than as cases giving us ready insight into the nature of moral responsibility.

## 1. The bad-history cases and intuitions

A bad-history wrongdoer is an agent who commits some wrongdoing, does so while ostensibly possessing the features requisite for moral responsibility,<sup>2</sup> and has an awful history. Robert Alton Harris is perhaps the most famous bad-history wrongdoer in the philosophical

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<sup>2</sup> I do not assume all wrongdoers with bad history possess the features required for moral responsibility. Indeed, in many such cases the wrongdoers clearly are not morally responsible. In such cases, the bad-history puzzle I report here does not arise (though we likely face other complications). Accordingly, I limit my examination in this paper to the cases of ostensibly morally responsible bad-history wrongdoers.

literature.<sup>3</sup> Although Harris is well-known to philosophers working on blame and moral responsibility, I find that revisiting his case continues to powerfully prompt the conflict calling for philosophical investigation.

In the early summer of 1978, teenagers Michael Baker and John Mayeski planned a day of fishing, and they headed to a fast-food restaurant to get lunch before leaving. At the same time, Harris and his brother planned a bank robbery. Needing a car, the Harris brothers spotted Baker and Mayeski and kidnapped them, planning to use the teenagers' car for their robbery. The Harris brothers ordered Baker and Mayeski at gunpoint to drive to a secluded canyon in rural San Diego County. There, Harris promised the teenagers that they would not be hurt. Baker and Mayeski were instructed to walk off, wait some time, report the car stolen, and give a misleading description of the thieves. But Harris then shot Mayeski, first in the back, and then in the head. He chased Baker down, confronting the teenager as he cowered in a bush, telling him to 'quit crying, and die like a man' and then shooting him four times. Harris shot Mayeski again, point blank, with his pistol, before taking a rifle Harris's brother had dropped and shooting Mayeski one final time. Harris later laughed at having shot Baker's arm off, he laughed at the idea that the Harris brothers might pose as police officers and inform the teenagers' parents that their sons had been killed, and he laughed as he flicked bits of Mayeski's flesh off of his pistol. Harris coolly ate a carryout hamburger the teenagers had purchased, scoffing at his brother for failing to join him. Harris and his brother would go on to commit the bank robbery before being captured by police.<sup>4</sup>

Thinking of a suggestion from Peter Strawson, Gary Watson asks what we are to make of Harris's "being unfortunate in formative circumstances" (2004, p. 239 quoting P.F. Strawson 1962). Harris's father, a decorated World War II veteran, suffered from shell shock, and his mother grew up in severe poverty. Both abused alcohol. Harris's father viciously mistreated his entire family, physically abusing all of them and sexually assaulting Harris's sisters. Harris was born months premature after his father, intoxicated and questioning his wife's fidelity, attacked her, sending her into labor. Harris's mother would later say that bringing Harris home from the hospital was like 'taking a stranger's baby home.' Harris's father never accepted Harris. He beat Harris with a bamboo cane, and he threatened to shoot Harris, loading his gun and telling Harris to run. Harris's mother came to resent Harris, perhaps because of the abuse she herself suffered and the poverty under which the family labored. When Harris's father was eventually jailed for sexual abuse, Harris's mother took Harris's siblings and left, abandoning Harris at 14. Harris's mistreatment by his family was exacerbated by his experiences at school. He suffered from a learning disability and from a speech problem, which led to teasing and self-doubt. However, there was no money for treatment. Instead, Harris spent most of his early teenage years incarcerated in youth facilities and prisons, learning to

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<sup>3</sup> My accounts of Harris's crime and of his upbringing are taken from Gary Watson (2004), from coverage by the Los Angeles Times, and from several of the court opinions addressing his case, including *People v. Harris*, 28 Cal.3d 935 (Ca. 1981) and *Harris v. Pulley*, 885 F.2d 1354 (9th Cir. 1989). For other philosophers writing about Harris from a voluminous literature, see Patricia Greenspan (2003), Michael McKenna (2004), Matthew Talbert (2009), Ishtiyaque Haji (2008), Peter Brian Barry (2011), and Mark LeBar (2015). And, of course, Harris's story is dramatic but not unique. Dana Kay Nelkin (2011) discusses the case of Jeremy Gross, who brutally shot and killed a store clerk during a robbery. A jury sentenced him to life in prison instead of the death penalty after hearing extensive testimony about his bad history. For a moving account of the emotional difficulty of serving as a juror in such a case, see Alex Kotlowitz's 'In the Face of Death,' *The New York Times Magazine* (July 6, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Horribly, one of the police officers who arrested Harris for the bank robbery later that day was Detective Steven Baker, Michael Baker's father. At the time, Detective Baker had no idea his son had been killed.

fight and becoming meaner. While confined, Harris was raped several times, and he twice attempted suicide by slashing his own wrists.

Harris is a bad-history wrongdoer. His wrongs were complex, multiple, and overlapping: kidnapping the teenagers, tormenting them, murdering them (in especially despicable fashion), and robbing a bank. He was ostensibly responsible for those wrongs. While the record of Harris's psychological condition is incomplete, he was plausibly reasons-responsive: he was capable of planning and executing a complex crime, and his taunts and attempts to evade capture reveal his awareness that others would see his behaviors as deeply wrong.<sup>5</sup> And Harris's history was beyond awful—several of the individual elements of his history considered alone would render Harris a bad-history wrongdoer, and the terrible aggregate is overwhelming.

When I focus on Harris's crimes and the suffering he caused, I see him as blameworthy. When I think about the terrifying experiences of Baker and Mayeski, I feel anger toward Harris. But when I consider Harris's childhood, I feel sympathy toward him. Harris's story commonly leads to a complex of reactions like this. Even as then-Governor Pete Wilson denied Harris clemency, he noted his great compassion for 'Robert Harris the child.' Similarly, consider how Michael McKenna sees Harris's case: 'The modification of our antipathy can be understood as a psychologically unavoidable effect of learning of Harris's past' (1998, p. 138). And consider Gary Watson's 'complicated and conflicted' reaction to the Harris case, one of 'ambivalence' (2004, p. 244). Why should learning of Harris's history have this effect on our reactions to his case, especially for those of us like myself, Wilson, McKenna, and Watson who seem to continue to take Harris to be blameworthy?

## **2. The common compromised-blameworthiness explanations**

The standard story about the bad-history cases is that they tell us something about the relationship between moral responsibility and history. It is easy to see how that standard story gets going: Many philosophers take the experience of learning about these cases—the experience of feeling conflicted upon grasping the extent of the wrongdoer's bad history—as the experience of intuitions of compromised blameworthiness. We then recognize that blameworthiness is a function of responsibility and wrongdoing. Because learning of the bad-history agent's bad history often changes little about the normative status of their wrongdoing, the standard story then concludes that the bad-history agent has compromised moral responsibility. There are several versions of this standard story.<sup>6</sup>

The first version of the standard story is ahistoricism.<sup>7</sup> On the ahistoricist story, moral responsibility is a matter of the features of the agent and their circumstances contemporary with the wrongdoing. For example, reasons-responsiveness theorists of moral responsibility hold that an agent's moral responsibility for her behavior depends upon her possession of the agential capacities

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<sup>5</sup> In this paper, I assume a reasons-responsiveness account of moral responsibility. Many of the arguments proceed *mutatis mutandis* for other accounts of the accountability sort of moral responsibility.

<sup>6</sup> And, of course, these standard stories are not the only stories. Watson, for example, thinks that we explain this puzzle by pointing to different notions of responsibility. For example, we might think that Harris is attributability responsible insofar as his wrongdoing is properly attributed (perhaps: explained) by his agency, but that Harris is not fully accountability responsible insofar as we should not fully blame him (in light of his history, perhaps). We might then explain our ambivalence about Harris's moral responsibility by noting that he is fully responsible in one sense of responsibility and not fully responsible in another sense. I suspect that David Shoemaker (2015, p. 201) is right that this explanation works only if we think accountability distinguishes between the fairness of the blame response and the fittingness of blame's response.

<sup>7</sup> For arguments regarding the explanatory force of this sort of ahistoricism, see Shoemaker (2015) and David O. Brink (2021).

needed to be responsive to reasons.<sup>8</sup> Because these capacities have causal histories, bad history not surprisingly might mar them. Accordingly, the ahistoricist claims that the bad-history cases are cases of merely apparent responsibility: the bad-history agent's bad history has mucked up the agent's contemporary, moral-responsibility features.<sup>9</sup> On the ahistoricist account, we recognize that the past 'casts a shadow' (to borrow a phrase from John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza (1998)) upon the present, and so we can account for the role the past plays while continuing to insist that contemporary features and circumstances are all that is directly relevant for moral responsibility.<sup>10</sup>

Consider Harris again. Although we have only limited information about his exact mental condition, and although what we know about his condition is limited to what was revealed in the complicated adjudications of Harris's crimes and punishment, surely the grievous ways he was repeatedly mistreated affected him.<sup>11</sup> A psychiatrist testified during Harris's sentencing that Harris suffered from antisocial personality disorder, explaining that Harris's disorder likely arose because of Harris's mistreatment as a child. In later litigation, Harris's doctors offered evidence of a range of other problems, including fetal alcohol syndrome, post-traumatic stress disorder, childhood head trauma, and organic brain damage. Like the psychiatrist at sentencing, these later doctors traced Harris's conditions to his mistreatment early in life. For Harris and for plausibly many bad-history wrongdoers, it is eminently believable that bad-history casts a shadow over adult moral competence.

Even if everyone accepts that bad history can affect later agential features, many philosophers reject the ahistoricist claim that contemporary conditions can capture all of the ways that history matters. There are two main historicist positions. First, moderate historicism claims that certain sorts of history can directly undermine moral responsibility. Consider the taking-ownership condition offered by Fischer and Ravizza (1998, Ch. 8). An agent takes ownership in the relevant sense by coming to see herself as agentially efficacious and as an appropriate target of moral assessments. Fischer and Ravizza claim that this taking-ownership process is the result of an ordinary moral education. When parents and others treat the young agent as morally responsible, the agent comes to see how her agency connects to others' moral expectations and to responses like

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<sup>8</sup> The reasons-responsiveness account of moral responsibility is popular, and there are many compelling advocates of the theory and many different versions of it. For central examples of reasons-responsiveness theories, see Susan Wolf (1990), R. Jay Wallace (1994), John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza (1998), Nelkin (2011), McKenna (2012), Brink and Nelkin (2013), Manuel Vargas (2013), and Brink (2021).

<sup>9</sup> The ahistoricist might more modestly claim that many bad-history cases are cases of partial responsibility. As Justin Coates and Phillip Swenson (2013), Nelkin (2016), Hannah Tierney (2019), and Brink (2021) argue, the reasons-responsiveness accounts of moral responsibility have explanatory space to explain degrees of moral responsibility. The ahistoricist could appeal to partial responsibility to explain both why bad-history agents like Harris are culpable and why that culpability is compromised, all without giving history itself any fundamental role. I thank an anonymous referee for this point.

<sup>10</sup> I set aside an alternative sort of ahistoricism. Kyla Ebels-Duggan (2013) argues that blame is insensitive to history because blame should track the blamee's contemporary attitudes. Because I (and the reasons-responsiveness theorists, and most of the historicist debates) take it that blame is significantly backward-looking, I do not here further consider this form of ahistoricism regarding blame.

<sup>11</sup> At trial, Harris's counsel sought to blame Harris's brother for the worst of the crimes rather than raising a competence defense. At sentencing, prosecutors introduced evidence regarding Harris's mental condition to undermine Harris's belated claim to regret the killings. Harris's mental condition at the time of the crimes was brought up again during his appellate and post-appellate litigation, especially in the litigation over the effectiveness of his trial counsel. The varying procedural and strategic stances leave a disjointed, incomplete record regarding Harris's mental health.

praise and blame. An agent is then morally responsible if and only if both she is reasons-responsive and she has taken ownership for the relevant bit of her moral psychology.<sup>12</sup>

The taking-ownership requirement allows us to identify a difference between Harris and many of the rest of us: unlike many of us, Harris was denied an ordinary moral education. He was abused and neglected, rather than nurtured and taught. Accordingly, on Fischer and Ravizza's account, Harris plausibly lacked the opportunity to take ownership for his agency, thus precluding his taking ownership for his agency. But what is true of Harris is not true of many of the rest of us, because many of the rest of us were given adequate moral educations. And so Fischer and Ravizza offer a historicist account of moral responsibility which tells us that some but not all histories undermine moral responsibility.

The second historicist option yields incompatibilism. Derk Pereboom (2001, 2014), for instance, offers a source argument to support his responsibility skepticism. An agent is responsible for his behavior where the agent is the ultimate source of his behavior. However, we should realize that Harris's bad history, rather than Harris, was the ultimate source of his behavior, because that bad history was the source of the bad character which was the intermediate source of Harris's wrongdoings. Thus, we should blame Harris's bad history, not Harris, for Harris's crimes. But this explanation generalizes. What is easily noticed in the bad-history cases is in fact true for all of us: our character and thus our behavior is the product of outside forces beyond our control. Thus, none of us are ever responsible, regardless of whether we possess the capacities at the core of the reasons-responsiveness theories. Incompatibilists like Pereboom use the bad-history cases as easy-to-grasp examples pushing us to reject compatibilism more broadly.

Although I have my sympathies in the debate between these positions, I mostly leave that resolution for another time. For here, I recognize that everyone should accept that our history affects who we become (although this limited conclusion falls short of the ahistoricist's conclusion that this role for history is the only role history is to play in a moral-responsibility scheme, a matter I am here agnostic on). Moreover, I assume some possible bad-history compatibilism. My arguments here are dialectically important for the debate between the ahistoricists and the moderate historicists, as I will make clear, but my arguments here are also consistent with both ahistoricism and moderate historicism.<sup>13</sup>

There is something puzzling about all of these standard stories about the bad-history cases. On all of the standard stories, our moral-responsibility verdicts in the bad-history cases should turn out to be morally simple, even if philosophically or evidentially complicated. It will surely be difficult to figure out the right theory of moral responsibility, and sifting through the evidence will likewise be difficult or even impossible. However, on the standard stories, there should ultimately be a univocal verdict as to whether or to what degree the agent is morally responsible for their wrongdoing. For example, suppose that the ahistoricist has things correct. Reaching that conclusion might require hard philosophical work, and good, charitable thinkers should be humble about their

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<sup>12</sup> Fischer and Ravizza's account of moral responsibility also includes a tracing element, whereby an agent can be morally responsible for some wrongdoing committed while not reasons-responsive so long as they were responsible for being not reasons-responsive. This tracing provision is intended to address cases like the culpably intoxicated drunk driver, who is responsible for their drunk driving even if (and in fact because) they have drunk to the point of incompetence. The tracing element does not bear substantially on the arguments here, so I set it aside. For skepticism about tracing, see Vargas (2005), Andrew Khoury (2012), Matt King (2014), and my own prior work (2016).

<sup>13</sup> My arguments are also consistent with incompatibilist historicism, but in a trivial way. My arguments point to the implications of conflicts between blameworthiness and sympathy-worthiness, conflicts which the incompatibilist historicist denies can ever arise. Those conflicts arise in cases of blameworthy agents, and the incompatibilist historicist denies that there are any such cases.

confidence in the conclusion. Suppose as well that Harris's bad history marred his moral psychology such that he was below the appropriate threshold for moral responsibility. The evidence for this is likely to be difficult to sort out, especially in the context of high-stakes criminal litigation. However, the ultimate verdict should then be that Harris was not morally responsible for his crimes, and that ultimate verdict itself should not be complicated. Accordingly, insofar as the key element at issue is Harris's moral responsibility for his crimes, there should be, at that point, no remaining discomfort with the case (or, at least, no more discomfort than for any other case of philosophical complication or murky evidence).

However, the bad-history cases are cases of persistent discomfort, discomfort which goes beyond which philosophical theory to adopt and beyond how to read complicated evidence. My sense of these cases, of Governor Wilson's comments about blaming Harris the man and feeling sympathy for Harris the boy, and of the arguments of McKenna and Watson is that it isn't just that figuring out the right verdict is complicated, but that the right verdict itself is complicated. The standard stories do not offer an explanation of that deeper complication. We find complication of the right sort in the relationship between reactions of blame and reactions of sympathy. While the reactions can be simultaneously fitting, the characteristic dispositions marking the two reactions conflict, leaving the reactions in tension. But to see that, we have to attend closely to the particulars of the two reactions.

### **3. Thick reactions and the conflict between blame and sympathy**

The potential for conflict in the bad-history cases arises because blame and sympathy are both fitting at the same time in many of these cases. I assume a standard theory of blame's fittingness: an agent is blameworthy in the sense that constitutes fittingness just in case the agent is responsible for wrongdoing. Here, I also assume that at least some bad-history agents are at least partially responsible for their wrongdoings. (This is my moderate, compatibilist assumption.) Thus, blame is fitting because, by assumption, the bad-history wrongdoer is responsible for wrongdoing. And sympathy is fitting because, by definition, the bad-history wrongdoer has suffered a bad-history.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, on plausible, ordinary accounts of the sorts of facts which make blame and sympathy fitting, both reactions are fitting in the bad-history cases. For example, both reactions are fitting in Harris's case. He certainly committed a number of heinous wrongs, and while the exact state of his mental health remains unclear, it seems that he could tell right from wrong, that he knew that he was harming and terrifying the teens, and that he had volitional control over his actions. And, of course, the ways he was mistreated are more than sufficient grounds for sympathy.

The bad-history cases are just one instance of a more general phenomenon, that of there being more than one fitting response for an agent at a time.<sup>15</sup> Envy and joy can easily overlap—just imagine that a good friend wins an award you were hoping to win. Fear and pride can easily overlap as well—just imagine that your child is bravely taking on frightful risks to rescue others in distress. In fact, I hazard that we are regularly confront overlap cases of some sort, often with even more than two fitting responses. Note that while I focus on two reactions in Harris's case, we also have reason to feel sympathy toward Harris's victims and their families, and we have reason to resent those who mistreated Harris, both those in his family and those in institutional positions who should have helped him. The bad-history cases are thus typical of the overlap cases we face throughout our lives, and if they are exceptional, it is in that they are pressed upon us with particular force because of the reactions involved.

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<sup>14</sup> Of course, some agents might be responsible for their own suffering, but many (and perhaps most) bad-history agents are not like this. For many bad-history agents, much of their suffering has its roots in mistreatment dating back to the agent's earliest days, when the agent had little control over or responsibility for how they were treated.

<sup>15</sup> The case of the charming colleague discussed by Wallace (1994, pp. 76–77) is like this. This colleague is both charming and a (minor) wrongdoer, and so there are two fitting responses, blaming and being charmed, responses which Wallace describes as in conflict.

If there is no conflict in the reactions being fitting, where is the conflict? If we think only of thin, merely cognitive senses of blame and sympathy, we will fail to see any conflict. If, for example, we think that to blame someone is merely to judge them blameworthy (or to judge that their wrongdoing manifests their ill will or was the bad product of a sufficiently controllable bit of agency), and if we think of a likewise thin sense of sympathy, then the two reactions should comfortably co-exist. The fittingness facts comfortably co-exist, and there is little reason to think the corresponding judgments cannot likewise comfortably co-exist.

However, I'm interested in a sense of blame which is richer than merely reaching some judgment about the agent's contribution to their wrongdoing. This richer sense includes a number of familiar, characteristic behavioral dispositions.<sup>16</sup> For example, when we blame, we are thereby disposed to express our displeasure at the wrongdoing, to adjust our relations with the wrongdoer, and to impose harm and punishment on the wrongdoer. None of these behaviors are required in any particular instance of blame; these are merely dispositions, and their effects may be occluded or dormant in any particular case. But these are familiar, ordinary dispositions, common across a range of contexts, and characteristic of blame.

The richer sense of blame also includes a range of important perceptual dispositions.<sup>17</sup> When we blame, we see the other in the light of their wrongdoing. We are disposed to notice evidence of the wrongdoer's culpability, of their ill will, and of the harm they've caused, and we are correspondingly disposed to overlook evidence of excuse, mistake, and innocent interpretation. These sometimes-overlooked perceptual dispositions explain the epistemic impenetrability of blame: once we blame someone, it is hard for new evidence to shift our opinions. These dispositions explain a central sense of forgiveness: we change our perspective on the wrongdoing and the wrongdoer, ceasing to see and interpret the wrongdoer in the light of their wrongdoing. These dispositions also explain much of my experience with ordinary blame. When I blame someone, not only do I find that my blame informs my perception of the wrongdoer's culpability, I find that it steers my perception of the wrongdoer more broadly. This is blame's perceptual sprawl. When I blame a friend for some minor interpersonal transgression, I find that I am more likely to notice their other flaws. This is best explained by recognizing the role perception plays in blame. Finally, blame's perceptual dispositions interact with its behavioral dispositions, as blaming someone inclines us to notice occasions to act on the relevant behavioral dispositions.

We can find parallel dispositions for sympathy.<sup>18</sup> For sympathy, too, we can distinguish between the mere cognitive assessments involved (e.g., that the other has suffered in regrettable ways) and richer, more substantial responses. The richer, more substantial reaction of sympathy includes a wide range of behavioral dispositions. We often sympathize verbally, expressing our reactions to those who are suffering. Sympathy also plausibly disposes us to act to remedy the harms involved. When we sympathize, it is common to feel driven to offer help. And, perhaps, when we sympathize, we adjust our relationships with those for whom we feel sympathy. Plausibly we lower

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<sup>16</sup> These familiar dispositions are discussed by a number of philosophers, e.g., George Sher (2007), T. M. Scanlon (2008), and Michael Moore (2010).

<sup>17</sup> Philosophers are increasingly recognizing the role that perception and attention play in blame and related interpersonal, moral phenomenon. For a sampling from this recent literature, see David Zimmerman (2001), Lucy Allais (2008, 2013), Elisa Hurley and Colleen Macnamara (2010), and King (2020).

<sup>18</sup> Here I sidestep questions about how to classify sympathy alongside the traditionally recognized reactive attitudes, attitudes like resentment and love. Those attitudes are often taken as significant and unified because of their importance for our interpersonal, social lives, and sympathy fits well with them in that regard. However, insofar as the reactive attitudes are reactions to the manifestation of the other's character or will, then sympathy falls outside of the set. These classification matters are important, but not for my present investigation.

our expectations of the person we sympathize, allowing them extra leniency to accommodate their unfortunate experience. As with blame, these familiar behavioral dispositions are merely dispositions—no particular behavior is required in any instance.

Sympathy likewise has perceptual dispositions. Just as blame involves seeing the wrongdoer in the light of their wrongdoing, sympathy involves seeing the sufferer in the light of their suffering. This will dispose us to notice certain evidence, such as evidence of suffering, of loss, and of opportunities to express sympathy or to remedy harm. It will also dispose us to certain interpretations of the evidence we perceive. For instance, insofar as we sympathize with someone, we are plausibly thereby more likely to interpret the harm they have suffered as significant.

Accordingly, in bad-history cases, because both blame and sympathy have characteristic dispositions, we have fitting grounds for a mixed set of dispositions. But once we recognize the nature of these reactions and the nature of their characteristic dispositions,<sup>19</sup> we should also recognize that these reactions conflict and that these conflicts make it often impossible to fully and satisfyingly engage all of the relevant dispositions of blame and sympathy at the same time.<sup>20</sup>

Begin with the expressive dispositions of blame and sympathy. Only so much can be said, there are limits to speaker and audience time and attention, and multiple messages can dilute each other. This suggests some conflict between the expressive dispositions. However, as is evidenced by Governor Wilson's comments, we can acknowledge both someone's culpability and their suffering. Whatever conflict there is in expression is mostly at the margins.

What about in the dispositions to relationship modification? Perhaps there is some conflict there, although making any such conflict precise would require first making precise how sympathy leads us to modify our relationships. In broad strokes, if blame leads us to create distance in our relationships or to reduce our engagement in our relationships, then perhaps we might likewise think of sympathy as leading us to reduce distance in our relationships or to increase our concern and engagement in our relationships. If so, then it is not implausible that there is a conflict in this behavioral dimension. Consider Harris. You might blame Harris by creating distance. After all, who could happily abide the presence of someone who reminds you of the murder and suffering of two teenagers? And it is likewise easy to imagine blaming Harris by marking the relationship with him as one of mistrust and self-defense. What would sympathizing with Harris look like? Presumably very different modifications to the relationship. For example, a relationship defined by sympathy would presumably be one of inclusion and protection. It is not clear that you could easily modify a relationship at the same time to both increase the distance from someone and to create safety and succor for the person you are now distant from.

But set the potential relationship and expression conflicts aside; the conflicts I am most concerned with are, first, the behavioral conflicts between the dispositions to impose punishment and to remedy harm and, second, the perceptual conflicts being seeing the other in the light of their wrongdoing and seeing the other in the light of their regrettable suffering.

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<sup>19</sup> In this paper, I take up the conflicts which we should recognize once we recognize the nature of blame and sympathy. These are conflicts which are revealed by philosophical work on blame and sympathy. Of course, there could be other conflicts revealed by other types of investigation. For instance, it is possible that the dispositions which mark blame and sympathy are grounded in bodily faculties and elements such that the dispositions cannot co-exist. Perhaps blame's dispositions and sympathy's dispositions both demand the engagement of a certain element of the brain, and perhaps that element can only ground one of the relevant sets of dispositions at any time. The possibility of such conflicts would only strengthen the philosophical conclusions I reach in this essay.

<sup>20</sup> Sher (2007) makes a related claim in the course of arguing that blame cannot require any felt emotion, contending that there are limits to how much emotion we can feel. Insofar as Sher is focusing in particular on the felt experience of blame and sympathy, this is a further argument for the sorts of conflicts I am concerned with.



Begin with the conflict between the disposition to punish and the disposition to aid. One way this conflict can arise is between the demands both dispositions place upon our limited resources. We only have so much time and energy, and devoting time and energy to the fulfillment of some motivations precludes devoting that time and energy to the fulfillment of other motivations. Martha Nussbaum (2016) argues that the focus on punishment driven by anger can problematically distract us from making things better for victims of wrongdoing. Thus, we have a conflict in resources between the disposition to impose punishment and the disposition to remedy harm.

It might seem that, at least in terms of their ends, the two dispositions can comfortably coexist. Suppose, plausibly, that to impose punishment is to make someone worse off and that to address suffering is to make someone better off. Couldn't we simply add together those two changes? Think of a bank-account balance: there is no conflict between a given credit and a given debit, and each has its impact on the remaining balance. You might likewise balance out the dispositions inherent in blame and sympathy: the punitive influence is countervailed by the remedying influence, and the net comes out somewhat more modest than either initial impulse.<sup>21</sup>

However, this understanding elides the need to identify the baseline for comparison in assessing the changes urged by the two dispositions.<sup>22</sup> This initial and accommodating read of the relationship between these dispositions might be grounded in a tacit, but-for baseline. A but-for baseline measurement identifies the relevant change by holding everything fixed but the particular response. That is a measure of what would happen or what would have happened. It would not be surprising if we used the person's state prior to the reaction as a proxy for that hypothetical or counterfactual, but-for state. Thus, I tentatively hypothesize that the relevant baselines will display an anchoring effect relative to the person's current condition. The current condition is a readily available and easily processed metric, and given that it is plausibly regularly a good proxy for the but-for baseline, it would not be surprising if dispositions like those in blame and sympathy make use of it. If this is right, then disposition involved in punishment is a disposition to make the person worse-off than they were before being punished, rather than a disposition to make the person worse-off than had they not been punished. This difference will matter where more is going on than just punishment.

If the dispositions are to render changes relative to a baseline grounded in an anchored proxy like this, then the dispositions will conflict. If our psychology displays such an anchoring effect, when I blame you, I am disposed to bring you to some condition worse than your current condition. That is, I am disposed to bring you to that particular state, and not just to bring out some relative change. When I sympathize with you, I am disposed to bring you to some condition better than your current condition. I cannot bring you to a condition both worse and better than your current condition. One or both dispositions must fail, on this account.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the helping and the punishing need not regard the same elements of the agent's life. Perhaps we might impose incarceration as punishment for some wrong while at the same time providing counselling and therapy as sympathy for some unwarranted suffering.

<sup>22</sup> Although there are many sophisticated discussions of relevant comparative baselines throughout philosophy, I find Alan Wertheimer (1990)'s analysis of the baselines involved in identifying coercive threats especially enlightening. That said, it is important to distinguish the moral phenomena which Wertheimer is investigating from the psychological dispositions involved in reactions like blame and sympathy.

<sup>23</sup> I leave it to empirical moral psychology to verify this anchoring effect. For now, this plausible conflict should give us additional reason to suspect that blame and sympathy conflict, reason augmenting the sufficient reasons from the other elements of blame and sympathy. Notice that the bank-account model which denies conflict here also must appeal to empirical moral psychology to confirm its relevant baseline. And, as I argue in the next section, we should expect to perceive and experience conflict here even if, in fact, our dispositions do not display any anchoring effect. That is,

Finally, the perceptual dispositions of blame and sympathy conflict. Both blame and sympathy make demands upon our attention, but attention is a limited resource.<sup>24</sup> If our blame requires that we be sensitive to evidence of the wrongdoer's culpability, and if our sympathy requires that we be sensitive to evidence of the sufferer's suffering, and if both of those sensitivities require attention, then those sensitivities can be in conflict. While we can attend to more than one thing, we cannot attend to infinitely many things, and in fact we can only attend to relatively few things, especially in any detail. Moreover, blame and sympathy are demanding responses. Accordingly, insofar as blame and sympathy both make demands upon limited perceptual resources, they will be in conflict.

The perceptual conflict is more than a conflict of resources. Blame and sympathy give us conflicting instructions. For example, blame directs us to attend to the wrongdoer's ill will, and it directs us to overlook exculpatory evidence. Sympathy, by contrast, plausibly directs us to attend to the sufferer's innocence and to overlook evidence of the sufferer's complicity. But then we are being directed to both attend to and overlook the agent's poor quality of will. There is no problem of capacity here; the problem is one of coherent ends. Similarly, blame and sympathy conflict in how they would have us interpret the evidence we acquire. Blame pushes us to see the wrongdoer's subsequent suffering as good (especially when that suffering is intentionally imposed as a response to the wrongdoer's transgression), whereas sympathy pushes us to see the suffering as regrettable. Those are conflicting interpretations of the same evidence; here, too, there is a problem of coherence, not of resources.

Taking stock: we should recognize a number of different conflicts between blame and sympathy. We should be particularly aware of the conflicts between being disposed to punish and being disposed to aid and the conflicts between seeing someone as a wrongdoer and seeing someone as a sufferer. Of course, these conflicts might only be a starting point—we might well recognize further conflicts and further aspects of these conflicts as our understandings of ourselves, of blame, and of sympathy develop.

Before moving on, there are two important limitations to recognize. First, the exact contours and force of the conflicts will vary from case to case and from individual to individual. It is familiar enough that some of us can get more done than others, having more powerful executive faculties and the like. And our understanding of the nature of attention and of the perceptual dispositions is still developing, so it is more than plausible that some of us have more flexible and more capacious attentions than others. Because of this, these conflicts might press harder upon some of us than upon others.

Second, we should distinguish between episodes and stances of the reactions.<sup>25</sup> In the throes of an episode of blaming, my attention and motivations are strongly commanded by my blaming. But my important blamings persist over time, and during much that time they recede behind other projects. At those times, we might say that I occupy a stance of blaming. That does not mean that I cease to blame. I simply go from episode to stance. And, of course, I might at some point return to a blaming episode. That seems a plausible description of two modes of blaming. But then the conflicts are highest for episodes, and, if they exist at all, are much abated for the more common stances.

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either there is a conflict between the dispositions because of the anchoring effect and so we should perceive a conflict or, even if there is no conflict in the dispositions themselves, we might still experience things as conflicting (here this is only a promissory note). Either way, the dispositions we have to treat those we blame and those we sympathize with will generate the experience of conflict.

<sup>24</sup> For virtually every account of attention, attention is in some sense a limited perceptual resource. For good overviews of the leading accounts of attention, see Christopher Mole (2017) and Sebastian Watzl (2017).

<sup>25</sup> An especially nice description of this distinction is found in Leonhard Menges (2017).

Though this is an important insight, we should be careful about its implications. In the ordinary case, when I go from episode to stance, it is because something unrelated occupies my mind. But I go from stance back to episode when I am reminded of the wrongdoer. If that's so, then sympathy might do the work of prodding from blaming stance back to blaming episode, precisely by bringing the wrongdoing agent back to our minds. More importantly, however, we should recognize that even if stances of blame and sympathy are compatible, and even if a stance of one and an episode of the other are compatible, episodes of both are in tension, and given the importance in our lives of episodes of both reactions, that is a not-insignificant conflict.

Taking stock, we should recognize important conflicts between blame and sympathy. Because of those conflicts, it will often be impossible or taxing to blame someone at the same time you sympathize with them, even if blame and sympathy are both fitting for that person. What are we to make of this lesson?

#### **4. The practical implications of these conflicts**

Begin with the practical implications. Because the reactions are in conflict, and because there are good reasons to engage in each reaction, we face a practical conflict. How should we act in the face of conflicting, important reasons? We can make progress on the question by considering whether or not the values at stake are commensurable values which can be readily traded against each other.

Suppose that the values at stake are commensurable. Suppose, for instance, that instances of both blame and sympathy are justified by way of the justification of their general practices and that those general practices are justified by way of their contributions to our overall happiness.<sup>26</sup> Blame might contribute to our happiness by discouraging wrongdoing, and sympathy might contribute to our happiness by encouraging assistance, aide, and repair. If the competing reactions are grounded in commensurable values like this, then we can resolve the practical conflict by identifying the possibility that best advances those ultimate values. That possibility might be one reaction or the other, it might some mixed or combined reaction, or, perhaps, it might be some third reaction altogether. Thus, if the conflicting reactions are grounded in commensurable values, there may yet be some settled, single right answer about how we should react in any particular case.

But notice that even if there is one settled right answer about how we should react in any particular case, these cases would still be marked by a loss. Suppose, for example, that the shared values underlying blame and sympathy are best served by sympathizing in some particular case. Still, in that case, there is some gain in happiness which blame would have offered. After all, by assumption, fully blaming would have fittingly rectified more past wrongdoing or dissuaded more future wrongdoing, and by assumption those effects are valuable because of their effects in happiness. Accordingly, forgoing some blame in favor of sympathy means losing those opportunities to gain happiness.

And notice that even if there is one settled right answer about how we should react in any particular case, we should still expect to find these cases uncomfortable.<sup>27</sup> Consider ordinary financial transactions. In most cases, there is no experience of conflict. However, once practical resources go short, the tension between the disposition to save and the disposition to spend can feel quite

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<sup>26</sup> We might take inspiration from the two-level justification of retributive practices famous from John Rawls (1955) or from John Stuart Mill's (1998) discussion of the utilitarian justification of blame; but see Matthie Queloz's (forthcoming) skepticism regarding this sort of two-level justification in the case of blame.

<sup>27</sup> I return to the baseline argument from the prior section. In that section, I argued that we might plausibly expect our dispositions to be defined by a psychologically easy baseline, namely the comparison to how things are prior to reacting. Now I present the alternative argument: that, however the dispositions are themselves defined, we might plausibly perceive their effects by relying upon the psychologically easy comparison to how things were prior to reacting. These two arguments are not exclusive.

pressing.<sup>28</sup> The ability to engage in the careful perspective-taking required to see how both of two conflicting dispositions are fully felt in an aggregate result is quite demanding, and our ordinary appreciation thus plausibly relies upon easier evaluations, such as comparing the present to the past. In those easier evaluations, it will be harder to see the effects of the conflicting dispositions. Whenever we confront a mixed case of blame and sympathy, the aggregate effect will have the direction of only one of the original reactions (at most—they might exactly cancel each other out), and the aggregate effect will be less than that warranted by the one reaction alone. Accordingly, I expect that we are inclined to see cases where the dispositions interact as cases where one or both of the dispositions are frustrated, rather than as cases where both are effective. And if so, then even if the reactions are grounded in fungible goods such that there is one stable correct way to react to any particular case, we should expect the cases to be practically conflicted and thus uncomfortable.

It is also possible (and perhaps even likely) that the values at stake in blame and in sympathy are not commensurable. Here are two ways to understand the reactions as incommensurable. First, we might take a virtue-theoretic approach, as Norvin Richards (1988) does in his discussion of forgiveness. Richards argues that we might understand blame and forgiveness as reflecting different virtues. We might understand the one as a virtue of justice and the other of charity.<sup>29</sup> Or, second, consider the moving argument Amia Srinivasan (2018) makes about the conflict faced by African Americans between being angry about the injustice to which they have been subjected and pragmatically acting to improve their own well-being. As Srinivasan argues, it might be that the best strategy for improving one's circumstances is to forego anger. However, anger is a distinctive way of appreciating that some behavior was wrongdoing, an appreciation that plausibly has intrinsic value. Srinivasan argues that the choice between the value of improving one's situation and the value of appreciating the truth of the matter is "all but irreconcilable"—indeed, putting African Americans into that irreconcilable position is a second-order injustice itself calling for recognition and remedy.

We can borrow these arguments to illuminate the bad-history cases. It is not unreasonable to think there are virtues associated with sympathy and to think that there are distinctive modes of appreciation in sympathy as well as virtues and distinctive modes of appreciation of blame. If so, we should expect to see irreconcilable tensions between blame and sympathy, tensions which do not readily admit of tidy, unitary resolution. More generally, if the values at stake between blame and sympathy are irreconcilable, in the fashion we see in Richards, in the fashion we see in Srinivasan, or in some other fashion, there might be no one settled right answer about how we should react in any particular bad-history case.

Real life is often morally complicated, and so we should not be surprised if the bad-history cases reflect these moral complications. On one understanding of the values at stake in our reactions, the complications arise because we have to combine the effects of disparate component reactions. Those combinations will be dissatisfying both because they leave some good unachieved and because their full incorporation of their component elements will be difficult to grasp. On another understanding of the values at stake in our reactions, the complications arise because the reactions do not readily admit of clear combination; there is no currency between them. In that case, we must

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<sup>28</sup> When Jack Pearson took Kate Malone on their first date, he originally had \$9, and he comfortably spent \$5 on tickets to a fair and then \$2 on treats. When it began to rain, however, he faced a tense and difficult choice about whether to spend his last \$2 on an umbrella, precluding the possibility of spending money on games. Though having money available and spending money conflicted practically in all of his decisions, that conflict became psychologically troublesome only at the very last decision.

<sup>29</sup> I should be careful here. I do not mean to take any final stand as to virtue theory and commensurability. If the virtues are unified, the virtue theorist might also think there is one best reaction to particular bad-history cases. I thank an anonymous referee for this point.

choose between incommensurable values. In either case, we should expect to find the bad-history cases morally and practically uncomfortable.

## 5. The dialectical implications of these conflicts

Return now to the dialectical use of the bad-history cases in the moral-responsibility literature. Recall how the dialectic commonly proceeds: A candidate theory of moral responsibility is offered for evaluation. To evaluate the theory, we consider how its evaluations align with our intuitions about specific cases. In particular, we consider a case of a bad-history wrongdoer who appears to satisfy all of the conditions of the candidate theory; thus, the theory tells us that the bad-history wrongdoer is fully blameworthy. Our intuitions, however, are conflicted.<sup>30</sup> We are uncomfortable fully blaming the bad-history wrongdoer, and philosophers use that discomfort to reject or complicate the candidate theory.

However, the conflicts between blame and sympathy provide a sufficient, alternative explanation of our experienced responses to the bad-history cases. Because the reactions of blame and of sympathy conflict, something worthy will be left undone, and we will feel unsettled by the frustration of these two important reactions. Of course, we might nonetheless make the best of the situation, and so perhaps someone supremely confident could be satisfied that they did the best that could be done or at least acted in a permissible fashion, all-things-considered. However, that confidence does not seem to be an appropriate reaction to the high values at stake, and even if so, most of us, marked by ordinary epistemic limitations, uncertainty, and humility, would feel a tinge of regret at the unsatisfied remainder. Thus, the conflicts between blame and sympathy explain the anxiety of the bad-history cases—there is no wholly satisfying option.

This alternative explanation will be hard to avoid by those wanting to make use of the bad-history cases in the historicism debates. The explanation will extend to all real bad-history agents, agents like Harris, but it will also extend to artificial bad-history agents. As long as the agent has bad history—being the victim of secretive neuroscientists meddling in the middle of the night, for example—we should expect to find the agent to be the fitting object of sympathy, and that will be sufficient for my alternative explanation to have purchase.<sup>31</sup> So long as there is bad history, as there will be for every bad-history wrongdoer, the conflicts explanation looms.

This conflicts story does not just provide a sufficient alternative to the moral-responsibility explanations; it provides a superior alternative. According to the standard dialectic, the bad-history cases are casuistically valuable because they are cases we should use to revise our theories of moral responsibility. If that's so, then once we come to the right theory of moral responsibility, we could expect an unequivocal moral responsibility verdict (even if the unequivocal verdict is a partial-

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<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, the arguments in the bad-history literature often follow a nearly standard template: we learn of the wrongdoing then we learn of the bad history. As Kirstine la Cour has suggested in conversation, we should consider a reversed presentation, where we learn first about the bad history and only second about the wrongdoing. If sympathy is less epistemically impenetrable than blame is, we might expect to see that the order matters—a feature the standard story about the bad-history cases would have a hard time explaining.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Bratman (2000), Nomy Arpaly (2002), McKenna (2012), and others have made this point about the manipulation cases. There is something intuitively amiss if one agent secretly and intentionally manipulates some other agent, without any opportunity for objection. If that behavior is wrong, then manipulated agents are victims, compromising our reactions to those cases. Moreover, I am deeply skeptical of the attempts to avoid these explanations by offering increasingly contorted cases or by purporting to target very specific targets of intuition, e.g., by claiming that the intuition is about the fittingness of blame as opposed to being about responsibility for wrongdoing. For similar skepticism about the value of intuitions in the sorts of highly artificial cases sometimes deployed here, see King (2013, p. 69), McKenna (2008, p. 157), Chandra Sripada (2012, p. 569), and Dylan Murray and Eddy Nahmias (2014).

responsibility verdict). From there, we should have a straightforward verdict regarding blameworthiness. Accordingly, on the standard story, once we resolve our theoretical questions about moral responsibility and our factual, case-specific questions, the tension in our responses to the cases should evaporate.

But the tension in these cases is deeper than is suggested by the standard dialectic. As Watson argued, 'Our response is too complicated and conflict for that [viz., a simple modification of our reactive attitudes]' (2004, p. 244). It is not just that it is hard to figure out what to say. Rather, as Watson continues, 'we are unable to command an overall view of [Harris's] life that permits the reactive attitudes to be sustained without ambivalence.' This persistent ambivalence is exactly what the conflicts story predicts. Two valuable reactions are fitting, blame and sympathy. Both of these are important reactions for our interpersonal relationships. Because both of these reactions are fitting in the bad-history cases and because both of them are important, we should feel the tug of each of them. But we cannot fully engage both of them, for the reactions conflict. However we ultimately respond, some fitting reaction will be left unfulfilled, and likely aspects of both. Those important, fitting, but unfulfilled reactions explain the persistent discomfort with the bad-history cases.

Thus, the bad-history cases are put to poor use in the historicism debate. The conflict between the two fitting reactions provides a rich explanation for our conflicted experience with the cases, with no need to appeal to compromised responsibility at all. We have a conflicted response to Harris because we are torn between blaming him and sympathizing with him. Whether that is all of the story remains unclear, but that explanation provides a rich and substantial explanation for our reactions to his case, an explanation that is superior to that on offer from any story that focuses solely on compromised moral responsibility.

Accordingly, we should be humble about the probative value of the bad-history cases for questions about the role of history in moral responsibility.<sup>32</sup> It is certainly true that, for many bad-history agents, their bad history plays a significant formative role for the agent, a role leading to their later commission of wrongdoing. It is also certainly true that philosophers should wrestle with the implications of an agent's formative conditions for moral responsibility and blame. Those are important, deep, and difficult matters. However, we should take care not to engage in casuistry that treats these bad-history cases as about moral responsibility in isolation from the other factors relevant to blame. And recognizing those other relevant factors should make us hesitant to decide for or against some theory of moral responsibility by virtue of whether that theory has the explanatory resources to capture explain our complicated reactions to the bad-history cases. Of course, this humility is consistent with virtually any account of responsibility, historicist or otherwise.<sup>33</sup> The one dialectical move is blocked, or at least tempered, but this is consistent with the truth of your favorite theory of the role of history in moral responsibility.

## 6. Conclusion

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<sup>32</sup> We should recognize, however, that bad history surely bears on the all-things-considered appropriateness of blame. As a referee notes, the conflict in the bad-history cases ordinarily arises between sympathy directed at one part of the agent's life and blame directed at another part of an agent's life. We can see this in Governor Wilson's contrast between the sympathy he feels for Harris the boy and the resentment he feels for Harris the man. We, and Governor Wilson, can only decide how to react to Harris overall if we consider a broader view of his life. We risk forgetting this important breadth if we too-quickly allow blameworthiness to suffice as a case for blame. For now, however: this role for history is not the contentious role for history in the moral-responsibility literature.

<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, nothing I say here has significant import for independent arguments for historicism, e.g., Peter van Inwagen (1983), Jules Coleman and Alexander Sarch (2012), and Khoury and Benjamin Matheson (2018).

Thus, taking seriously the nature of blame and sympathy as reactions, as richer and more complex than mere propositions, reveals blame and sympathy to be reactions which conflict in the bad-history cases. Recognizing that conflict shows these cases to be morally complex cases, and recognizing that complexity undermines the quick casuistic use of these cases in philosophizing about moral-responsibility. But that does not mean that philosophers should turn away from the bad-history cases. Instead, here are two lines of promising inquiry invited by seeing the bad-history cases as conflict cases.

First, we might now investigate important new choices and possibilities. Once we recognize that we cannot both fully blame and fully sympathize, we might then choose how to address that conflict. Even if we lack the degree of psychological control needed to choose in the moment, we might reflect on the two reactions, decide which we like, and then work to modify our behavior and habits by practice. We might decide, for instance, that we want to be more sympathetic, and so we could work to inculcate a habit to direct our attention to the possible grounds for sympathy when we recognize that we're experiencing blame. Of course, this possibility was always open to us—but recognizing that reactions like blame and sympathy are in tension can help push us to see the possibility and to take it seriously.

We might also get quite creative. Insofar as the conflict is mostly between episodes of reactions, we might schedule our episodes. Perhaps it is psychologically feasible in some cases to say, "I am fuming, and I have every right to fume, but I recognize that I should also be sympathetic to this person. I am going to be angry now, but I will make sure to come back later and let myself likewise be fully sympathetic." And, at least in social contexts, perhaps we can divide our labor up. If I think someone deserves both anger and sympathy, perhaps I can comfortably indulge in one of the reactions without reservation if I see you indulging in the other. Thinking about the division of labor might be especially important if we think the criminal justice system is doing institutionalized blame work. Should there be a separate and closely related institution doing sympathy work? How should those institutions interact? And recognizing the complexity of the responses and the ways those complexities conflict might point us to novel mixed responses. We might, for instance, work to separate our behavioral responses from our perceptual responses.

Second, recognizing both the conflicts at issue and the new possibilities they open up informs the ethics of both blame and sympathy. Nothing here is intended to have any direct implications for the fittingness of blame and sympathy. However, insofar as blame and sympathy conflict, each appears to be a cost of the other. Plausibly we can fully blame in the bad-history cases only where we fail to fully sympathize, and vice versa. Accordingly, these conflicts mark important practical costs of both blame and sympathy, practical costs affecting the ethics of both blame and sympathy. These choices and costs push us to ask why we should indulge in the reactive attitudes of blame or sympathy at all. Philosophers often move quickly from some agent being blameworthy to there being a pro tanto reason to blame the agent. But that is a significant move. While surely Strawson was right that the reactive attitudes play an important role in a recognizably human life, we should ask more about the nature of that role. There should be no quick move from fittingness to reason to react. Importantly, once we recognize that we often, indeed almost always, cannot give people every reaction they deserve, we should ask about what is gotten at all from giving people the reactions they deserve. Asking those questions will broaden the ordinary bad-history inquiry: questions about blame should push us to ask questions about social philosophy, and questions about criminal punishment should push us to ask questions about political philosophy.

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