Causal Blame

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Abstract: We blame faulty brakes for a car crash, or rain for our bad mood. I argue that such "merely causal" blame is crucial for understanding interpersonal blame. The two are often difficult to distinguish, in a way that plagues philosophical discussions of blame. And interpersonal blame is distinctive, partly in its causal focus: its attention to a person as cause. Causal focus helps explain several central characteristics of interpersonal blame: its tendency to exaggerate a person's causal role, its weakening through attention to personal history or thoughts about determinism, its characteristic "force" or "sting," and our sense that blame is often harmful or unfair.

I. Two Kinds of Blame

Descriptive theories of blame are varied and blossoming. For George Sher, blame is a set of behavioral and affective dispositions, traceable to a belief that someone acted wrongly and a desire that she have acted differently or have a different character. For Tim Scanlon, blame is a kind of modification of a relationship with someone. For others, influenced by Peter Strawson, blame is best understood as a characteristic range of emotions. Angela Smith and others see blame as, at bottom, a kind of protest. Proponents of each theory tend to think that the others fail to capture important kinds of blaming, or attribute to blame a characteristic that is not essential to it.[1]

These views all draw a distinction between their topic and another, more minimal kind or sense of 'blame'. Examples of this more minimal blame are easy to find. After analyzing a car crash, a forensic expert can tell us: "I blame the brakes; the driver did everything she could." A sister might ask: "We were in such a good mood—how did we get so sad?", and hear her brother answer: "I blame the rain." We might read in the news that "Authorities blamed Hurricane Katrina for five deaths," or see the headline: "Algae Blamed for Green Olympic Diving Pool."[2] This kind of blame is important in practice; the events matter, and it matters what caused them. But there is more to the blame with which we respond to human wrongdoing. Though we do say we blame the

brakes for a car crash, this seems to be just another way of saying that the brakes caused the crash. The attribution of causation of an unfortunate event or state of affairs might be called *causal blame*.

Very little has been said about causal blame. Discussions of blame have focused on the nature and appropriateness of the kind of blame that is distinctively interpersonal—the kind with which we often react when someone hurts our friends, or steps on our feet, or forgets our birthdays. We can call this kind of blame *interpersonal blame*.[3] Discussions of interpersonal blame tend to assume that it is obviously different from causal blame, and obviously the main topic of interest in this area. It is interpersonal blame, not blame of brakes, that they claim is an emotion, a form of protest, and so on. Even discussions of causation, and of causal responsibility, rarely mention causal blame, considered as a kind of blame, except to distinguish it from interpersonal blame and then set it aside.[4] As Tognazzini and Coates (2018, §1) put it, "Almost all philosophical discussions of blame ignore (or mention only to set aside) the form of blame sometimes characterized as causal or explanatory responsibility…. Just what the relation is between causal blame and interpersonal blame is an important question that has not been well-explored." This is an understatement. One searches in vain among contemporary philosophical writing for even one full page on causal blame and its relation to interpersonal blame. The lack of interest is striking.

Close to a full page can be found in Elizabeth Beardsley's (1969, pp. 38-39) discussion of what she calls the "whodunit" or "whatdunit" sense of "blame." But Beardsley hastens to add (p.39n10): "I consider the fact that we sometimes use 'blame' in the sense here discussed to be confusing and regrettable, and should like to recommend the adoption of some other locution for identifying a person causally responsible for an undesirable state of affairs." In causal blame, as Kenner (1967, p. 239) puts it, "All that we are doing is identifying the cause of some untoward event….[This] has nothing to do with moral disapproval." Kenner then goes on to use "blame"

and “moral disapproval” interchangeably, as when he says of someone that he is “not deserving of blame, is not blameworthy, is not to be blamed, *i.e.* is not deserving of moral disapproval”(1967, p. 248). Given this usage, the earlier passage is, in effect, expressing the view that causal blame has “nothing to do” with interpersonal blame. These remarks show more than indifference. They express a substantive doctrine, on which causal blame is not interestingly related to interpersonal blame, and not worth exploring.

This doctrine is badly mistaken. Though it is tempting to think of blame of inanimate objects as “blame” in a different sense, “blame” is not a simple homonym. And as Anscombe (1957, p. 1) puts it: “Where we are tempted to speak of ‘different senses’ of a word which is clearly not equivocal, we may infer that we are in fact pretty much in the dark about the character of the concept which it represents.” We have not been entirely in the dark. But “blame” is not equivocal; the connection to causal blame is, I will argue, crucial for understanding interpersonal blame.

In section II, I argue that “merely” causal blame, of the kind that can target inanimate objects, is often not clearly distinguishable from interpersonal blame in practice. That is, we should not take for granted that there *is* a clear distinction between two kinds of blame to be made here. Section III argues that the difficulty of distinguishing causal from interpersonal blame can distort philosophical discussions of blame, making it harder to judge which of our intuitions about blame are about interpersonal blame. In section IV, I argue that interpersonal blame is distinctive partly in its *causal focus*—its distinctive way, or ways, of attending to a person as cause. This causal focus helps explain several central aspects of interpersonal blame, such as its tendency to overestimate a person’s causal role, its weakening through attention to personal history or thoughts of determinism, and its characteristic “force” or “sting.” Section V concludes with a few brief remarks about the ethical implications of understanding interpersonal blame as a kind of focus.

II. A Blurry Distinction

A forensic expert says: "I blame the brakes for the crash." Her supervisor cuts her off: "I don't think so. Did you see how late he started braking? I blame the driver." A nearby office worker adds, more angrily: "So do I."

There are three things to note in this example. First, the first forensic expert's blame is causal blame. There is no need to imagine anything distinctively interpersonal being directed at the brakes. Second, causal blame *can* also target a person, such as the car's driver. The kind of blame that targets brakes and hurricanes is not a kind from which humans have any special exemption. A forensic analyst can be—and, we might hope, often is—impersonal enough to blame drivers only causally. And we can imagine the second expert still squarely in the realm of causal blame. Third, when blame's target is a person, it can be unclear *which* kind of blame is present. Is the office worker blaming the driver interpersonally, or only causally? This can be hard to determine, even for those who are present. Perhaps the worker is in her first months on the job, when most employees tend to interpersonally blame the driver. Or maybe she is angry, not at the driver, but at the first expert, over an earlier mistake. She might not be able to say herself whether her blame of the driver is interpersonal or merely causal.

Self-reports of blame can often be open to either a causal or interpersonal interpretation—even when an issue is clearly highly charged for everyone involved. Someone might say: "I blame the gun lobbyists for this new wave of school shootings. If they hadn't stopped Congress from enacting gun control laws, none of this would have happened." Is this a case of causal blame with

an added explanation, or interpersonal blame with a justifying thought? It is hard to say, at least without reference to a facial expression, tone of voice, or larger context.

We can now ask: *Why* should it be hard to know whether someone's blaming is causal or interpersonal? One explanation is that, whatever emotions, desires, changes in relationship, or other reactions distinguish interpersonal from causal blame, it can be hard to know whether these are present, at least to an extent that is typical of interpersonal blame. It can also be hard to know whom they target; the office worker might be angry, but only at her colleague, and not at the driver. But I think a large part of the explanation lies in the close connections between causal and interpersonal blame. I want to turn now to bringing out these connections, beginning with the most direct one: Interpersonal blame is, at least often, itself a kind of causal blame.

To see this, it helps to ask: what kinds of objects, or targets, does blame typically have? It is tempting to say: we blame a *person* for an *action*. This formula, "We blame a person for an action," can seem clearly correct, and useful as a starting point. If it is hard to say what sort of reaction blame is, at least we can say what kind of object or target it has. It is interesting that blame would have a target that is structured in this way: a person, for an action. And the formula can seem to capture the everyday experience of blame. You insult me, and I blame you for it. If this is not paradigmatic of blame, it seems hard to know what is.

Nevertheless, the formula "We blame a person for an action" is hopelessly narrow on both counts. As we have seen, we can blame inanimate objects, or living beings other than persons, such as algae. And even in the case of interpersonal blame, adherence to the "person-for-an-action" formula misses the very many situations in which we blame someone, not for an action, but for an event or state of affairs. We blame a driver for a crash, a spouse for a low bank balance, or conservatives for the continued melting of polar ice. We would not understand someone who

claimed to blame a person in this way, while denying that the person has any causal connection to the crash, bank balance, or melting. But the crash, balance, or melting for which someone is blamed need not themselves be actions.

I suspect that these are the most typical cases of interpersonal blame. It is natural to think of blame for an action when we picture a situation in which the facts are well established. You insult me, and I blame you for it; I know what was done and who did it. But in many actual cases, we do not know what was done, or even who did it. We begin with an event or state of affairs, such as a crash, or a loss in a sporting match, or the melting of Arctic ice, and only later identify a cause. Blame's idiomatic expressions reflect this search for a causal explanation. Someone can "place the blame," "take the blame," or even "shift the blame" for the crash to someone else. A "blame game" is, typically, a series of attempts to place or shift blame for an undesirable result.

These are typical marks of interpersonal blame. And yet they are not unique to it, since the blame can be placed or shifted onto brakes, or something else other than a person. We hear over and over again in the Calvin Harris pop hit "Blame": "Blame it on the night—don't blame it on me." This shifting of blame between human and non-human targets might be called *person-to-object shift*. That shift is one illustration of the ways in which the distinction between causal and interpersonal blame can be difficult to draw. We can forget how typical these various examples are—examples in which blame is for an event, the placing or taking of the blame is bound up with identifying a cause, and interpersonal and "merely" causal blame are intertwined and sometimes indistinguishable. I do not know whether blaming it on me, rather than on the night, would be interpersonal or merely causal blame.

III. Arguments about Blame

We now have in view two related phenomena that can be difficult to distinguish: on the one hand, causal blame that is directed at a person, without being interpersonal blame; and on the other hand, interpersonal blame for an event or state of affairs. When a forensic supervisor and a nearby office worker blame a car's driver for a crash, it can be hard to say whether either or both of them blame the driver in a distinctively interpersonal way. The blurriness of the distinction between causal and interpersonal blame makes it difficult to distinguish between them in practice. But it also creates confusion in theoretical discussions of blame. Let's look at two examples.

Descriptive theories often disagree about which emotions or feelings are characteristic of blame. Pereboom (2013, p. 205) writes: "When a parent points out to a child that what he did was immoral and recommends that he not perform similar actions in the future, but does so without indignation but only disappointment, it seems clear that no linguistic error is made when we say that under such conditions the child is being blamed." While Pereboom seems to have interpersonal blame in mind,[5] his example of blame attribution does not distinguish causal from interpersonal blame. And now the waters are muddied. It may well be that no linguistic error is made in saying that the child is being blamed. But this might be because the child is being blamed *causally* for a harmful consequence of her action. Linguistic intuition is not enough here. Our being inclined to call something "blame" does not yet tell us whether it is *interpersonal* blame.

A similar difficulty arises when we ask whether blame must have any affective quality at all. Objecting to what he calls "Strawson's affective account of blame," Sher (2006, p. 89) writes:

> We simply do not have the emotional resources to muster even a twinge of hostility toward each of the innumerable miscreants, scoundrels, and thugs—many of them long dead—whom we blame for what we know to be their bad behavior or bad character. Hence, at least in cases of this less personal sort, the reaction I have characterized as affectless blame really does seem affectless.

Sher denies that blame requires any affect at all; we can blame someone even when we feel nothing. Though this is obviously true about causal blame, Sher (2006, p. ix) has distinguished causal from distinctively interpersonal blame, and decided, as many discussions of blame do, to "confine my attention to blame of this second sort." But now one might wonder whether Sher really does confine his attention strictly to interpersonal blame. Do we in fact blame "innumerable miscreants, scoundrels, and thugs—many of them long dead"—in any distinctively interpersonal way? It can be hard to accept, even in principle, the possibility of distinctively interpersonal reactions that require no emotional resources of any kind. But even if we do accept this possibility, it is natural to suspect that many of Sher's examples are examples of causal blame.[6]

Sher (2006, pp. 89-91) goes on to consider a reply that denies that such examples are examples of blame. But as we have seen, there is no need for Sher's opponent to make this reply. It can be more direct, and more believable, to describe many of these examples as examples of blame, but of the merely causal kind. They fit naturally with the innumerable hurricanes, meteors, and faulty brakes we blame for countless deaths and injuries, in some cases with great emotion, in other cases dispassionately. Of course, when some of us read about a burglary in a newspaper, we do react with distinctively interpersonal blame. My point is only that, in many cases, it is difficult to know which kind of blame we are talking about. This difficulty infects philosophical

disagreements about blame. When we see reactions that are affectless, or sad, or merely disappointed, and find ourselves inclined to call them "blame," we have not yet disentangled the varieties of blame, and cannot be sure we are faced with an example of the distinctively interpersonal kind of blame in which we are most likely interested. The difficulty of distinguishing causal and interpersonal blame explains some of the difficulty in finding a satisfying descriptive theory of interpersonal blame. Our intuitions about which reactions are "blame" will tend to leave open the possibility that the "blame" is merely causal. This is one way in which ignoring causal blame sows confusion about blame in general.

IV. Causal Focus

So far, I have focused on causal blame as a source of difficulty in thinking about interpersonal blame. But a comparison with causal blame also helps to bring out important features of interpersonal blame. Consider another short scene:

The Broken Teapot

A: "You broke my teapot!"

B: "I did not, it fell off the table!"

A: "You put it on the edge and you weren't watching it!"

B: "Oh my God, since when do I have to watch it all the time. It's a teapot."

A: "It's a really nice teapot! I didn't even say you could use it."

B: "Yes you did! I asked you yesterday."

A: “That was just you and me, not for all your friends when I’m not here.”

B: “You never said that. And I wasn’t even there when it fell.”

A: “If your friends weren’t here it would never have fallen off! Stuff always breaks when they’re here.”

B: “If you think they always break stuff why did you leave it on…”

C: “GUYS! Stop blaming each other, it was an accident!”

These characters, A and B, could be married, roommates, friends, or young siblings. They are caught in a blame game, which consists largely in an argument about causation. The teapot is broken; A starts by treating B as the primary cause; B objects; A insists; B de-emphasizes herself, and eventually starts to shift attention to A’s own causal role. C’s interruption “Stop blaming each other!” is not out of place. The thought that the parties are blaming each other is a natural one. And the blame does not seem merely causal. This is blame, of the kind we are interested in when we think about what it is to blame a person. The blame seems typically interpersonal even when we imagine A and B without much felt anger, and even when they are no longer communicating. Why should this be? The blame seems interpersonal, I think, largely because of its focus on causation. Let me explain.

Some people focus on work; others, on pleasure. Some people are interested in Dante, with a focus on his use of visual metaphors. To focus on something, in the sense I have in mind, is to have one’s attention directed toward it.[7] In the argument over the teapot, each party not only attributes a causal role to the other, but pays attention to that role. We can imagine each of them afterwards, brooding, continuing to think about the other’s part in the teapot’s destruction.

Interpersonal blame, I want to suggest, is distinguished partly by its causal focus: its *attention to a person as cause*. To blame someone for a crash is, partly, to focus on her role in causing the crash. We can often dismiss the objects of our contempt; but we think about the people we blame. When we think about them, our attention is drawn to their role in the actions, states, or events we blame them for. Conversely, when we think about those actions, states, or events, our attention is drawn to the causal role of the people we blame. In its strongest form, this focus is a kind of 'tunnel vision', in which this causal role is all one can think about. A drunk driver who kills one's child might be the object of this kind of focus. But this is a particularly extreme case. Focus, like blame, can be intense or relatively mild.

As this last example of the drunk driver should make clear, causal focus is not a kind of reduction, in which someone's actions are viewed merely as an instance of physical causation. More generally, it is not a way of taking on what Strawson (1962) called an "objective attitude," in which we see someone as an object of treatment, management, or manipulation. Causal focus can be quite personal, and is often resentful or even vengeful. Many paradigmatic cases of distinctively interpersonal interaction are cases of causal focus.

In some cases, blame can also focus on someone as playing a causal role that is more attenuated than being the primary cause. Someone can be a collaborator, or an enabler, or—like A's friend B—just fail to prevent a disaster. Some might call all of these "being a cause." It may be more precise, but less elegant, to describe causal focus as attention to a person as playing a causal role. I will stay with the simpler formulation, but it is worth remembering that there are many ways to be "a cause."

Of course, not just any attention to causation will count as interpersonal blame. I might react to an insult with mirthful laughter at its wit, or with aesthetic interest or linguistic curiosity,

all the while admitting that you were wrong to insult me. I have not said what kind of attention is characteristic of interpersonal blame: whether the focus must be angry or indignant, or include a desire for change or an element of protest. I do not claim to be giving a complete theory of interpersonal blame. With this in mind, the notion of causal focus can start to seem relatively unimportant, with the real issue of the distinctive *kind* of focus left behind.

Nevertheless, the notion of causal focus offers two important insights about interpersonal blame. The first is that many of the phenomena of interpersonal blame are phenomena of attention. The second is that interpersonal blame often attends specifically to a person's causal role. By themselves, these thoughts do not yet tell us what kind of attention to causation is characteristic of interpersonal blame. But their importance should not be underestimated.

To begin with, the notion of causal focus is especially well positioned to accommodate several commonly recognized basic features of blame. First, it is now widely thought that, as Scanlon (2008, p. 122) puts it, "blame normally involves more than an evaluation but is not a kind of sanction." Attending to someone's causal role is more than simply having a judgment or belief about it; but it is not a sanction or punishment, though it can lead to one. Second, like blame, focus can be stronger or weaker, and it can be divided, equally or unequally, among various people. Third, the appropriateness of this attention can vary depending on its source, as the appropriateness of blame is often thought to vary; it can be invasive or hypocritical for one person to focus on something that someone else can rightly attend to. Fourth, idiomatic usage, such as talk of "placing" the blame, "taking" the blame, or "shifting" the blame, can be understood partly in terms of affecting a person or group's attention, emphasizing one causal role rather than another. Much of this talk of placing, taking, and shifting blame suggests a kind of spotlight of attention. And a

"blame game," like the one about the broken teapot, often proceeds via the players' attempts to portray each other's actions as the most salient cause.

These are basic characteristics of interpersonal blame that its causal focus helps to accommodate. I think we can also see how the causal focus of interpersonal blame helps explain several other phenomena that can otherwise seem mysterious.

First, people who are prone to blame are also noticeably prone to overestimate the causal role of the people they blame. That one off comment, the strange look she had when she walked in the door, or the one promise she forgot to fulfill can look to her blamer like the source of all the world's problems. Blamers are often exaggerators, underestimating the causal role of contextual factors and, in many cases, of their own actions.[8] Why should this be? Causal focus suggests an answer. Attention to someone's causal role can easily lead to a troubling confirmation bias, leading us to miss or ignore other significant causal factors that would mitigate blame. The person's causal role looms large, and other factors—including, in many cases, one's own role—are often less than fully taken into account. As Watson (2013, p. 291) puts it: "Fault-finders are those who are inordinately preoccupied with the putative misdeeds of others. They are fault-finders because they are fault-trackers."

Second, and on the other hand, it is clear that attention to someone's personal history, or to thoughts of determinism, can temper, weaken, or even dispel blame. A's blame for her broken teapot might weaken, or disappear, if her fight with B deepens into a conversation about the distant past or the larger causal structure of the universe—whether or not they accept determinism or come to any particular conclusions. In some cases, as Björnsson and Persson (2013, p. 630) put it, "the effect of introducing the deterministic scenario is…to strongly invite use of the more abstract explanatory frame in which agents' motivational structures are not seen as significant explanations

of their actions." As Björnsson and Persson (2012, 332) emphasize, attention can affect our causal explanations, since those explanations often aim to "identify conditions that are especially interesting or relevant," or worthy of attention. By undermining the sense that B's actions or motivations are the primary or most salient cause of her teapot's breaking, thoughts about determinism or B's personal history might lead A to change her judgment about B's responsibility, culpability, or blameworthiness. But I think there is more to the story. In many cases, attention to personal history or to determinism can weaken or dispel blame without undermining attributions of causation or responsibility. A can find herself blaming B less, or not at all, while still believing B's actions are the main cause of her teapot's destruction. She can do this by releasing her focus on the central causal role she attributes to B. In these cases, A might come to blame B only causally, and no longer interpersonally. Attention to personal history or to determinism can leave causal blame in place, but weaken or dispel interpersonal blame, by shifting our attention.[9]

Third, it is often said that interpersonal blame has a particular "force" or "sting."[10] These images are a little vague, and the people who invoke them might have various things in mind. But I think they have a point. At least for most of us, being blamed has a certain import; or, to take the "sting" metaphor, being blamed hurts in a particular way. What can we say about this "force" or "sting"? Here again, blame's causal focus can have a significant role to play. The force or sting of blame lies, I think, partly in being seen primarily as a source of badness. It is not just someone's belief in my wrongdoing, or her emotion about it, but also her focus on it that stings. It is a peculiar sting, in which one often feels both unseen and threatened. One's better efforts are ignored, and one feels oneself salient to others as a disaster or an enemy. As we sometimes put it: "So this is how you see me." What hurts is not just the blamer's belief, but the way her conception of us

foregrounds what we are blamed for. Whatever else blame involves, I think we will reach a better understanding of its sting when we keep its causal focus in mind.

It is a familiar thought that blame often crucially depends on recognition of causal connections between a blamed person and an event or state of affairs she is blamed for. If A saw no causal link at all between B and her broken teapot, her blame would not make sense. Nevertheless, as we saw, causal blame, or attribution of causation of an unfortunate event or state of affairs, is not enough for the distinctively interpersonal kind of blame in which most of us are interested when we think about blame. And it is causal focus, not merely recognition or attribution of causation, that plays a central role in accounting for many of the phenomena of blame. Unlike causal blame, causal focus can serve as "more than an evaluation," become invasive or hypocritical, explain exaggeration in judgment, more fully explain why shifts in attention can weaken or dispel blame, and strike its target as particularly painful, as interpersonal blame tends to do. A consideration of causal blame can help clear up confusions between causal and interpersonal blame. But it can also lead to a better understanding of the distinctive features of interpersonal blame.

V. Ethical Implications

I have suggested that a central component of interpersonal blame is its causal focus: its attention to, rather than mere attribution of, causation of an unfortunate event or state of affairs. I want to close by considering one ethical implication of understanding typical cases of blame as a kind of causal focus.

It is sometimes thought that it is unfair to blame someone, even when she has done something blameworthy. This thought can seem confused: if someone has done something wrong, and nothing excuses or exempts her from blame, there may not seem to be a further question about the fairness of blaming her.[11] The thought that blaming is "not useful" can sound even worse. Only the crudest consequentialist, it seems, would invoke usefulness in discouraging an attitude that is otherwise appropriate to its object. We might as well try to believe only what it is useful to believe. Friends, therapists, or activists who decry blame as unfair or harmful might mean well; but they seem to be appealing to considerations of the wrong kind.[12]

When interpersonal blame has a causal focus, there is a more charitable way to understand these invocations of unfairness and disutility. Suppose a friend shows up to lunch late, without an excuse. Our blame can be unfair if it is excessive—if we harp on his lateness for too long, or overemphasize it in our interactions with him or in describing him to others.[13] It can also be unfair if, for example, he is a kind and generous friend, who interprets our actions charitably and tends to avoid blaming us for our own faults. It might be only fair to "cut him some slack," even when he is in the wrong, by putting our attention elsewhere.

Even when blaming is fair, it can be true that we should not blame, because blaming is not useful. To sharpen the example, suppose our friend is late, for the third time, for a search-and-rescue effort, which we now begin late. Attending to his role in delaying the rescue is not unfair to him; but it can be distracting. Our attention should be on the rescue, and, to a lesser extent, on maintaining solidarity among the search party. The conditions under which blame can be unfair or harmful will depend on what sort of causal focus interpersonal blame consists in. But charges of unfairness or disutility are not confused or inappropriate in principle.

Charges of unfairness and especially disutility seem confused, partly because they tend to treat blame as if it were an action. It is mainly actions that we evaluate, and decide for or against, based on their usefulness. But if the phenomena of blame are largely phenomena of attention, there is a grain of truth in the thought that blame is an action. Attention is not always straightforwardly under our voluntary control, the way tying our shoes is. But we do have some degree of voluntary control over it, both directly and through indirect means. This, I think, is an insight that has often been clearer to activists and therapists than to philosophers. It is a further way in which the notion of causal focus is important for a conception of blame, rather than an idle wheel that leaves the real interest in whatever makes blame's focus distinctive. And it makes the ethics of blame more interesting, since we can often direct our attention more readily than we can direct our anger or resentment. Causal focus is partly up to us to create, give up, intensify, reduce, re-locate, or adapt when someone's actions are heinous, excusable, misunderstood, or simply none of our business. Here, I think, thinking about causal blame helps us notice interpersonal blame's attention to causation; noticing this helps us see how blame can be partly voluntary; and this in turn helps us see why its harm or usefulness is relevant for criticisms of blame.

Our understanding of blame is impoverished when we distinguish two kinds of blame, only to consider one kind and ignore the other. This is a relatively modest conclusion. But if I am right, discussions of blame will already be quite different if we accept it. I have also argued for a less modest conclusion: whatever its more particular qualities of anger, condemnation, or indignation, interpersonal blame is often a reaction of causal focus, attending to precisely the causal role that causal blame attributes. Its natural image is a person with her eyes squinted and her finger pointed, saying: "*You* did this."

Blame remains central in our emotional, moral, and political lives, largely through its attention to a person's causal role. We can ask many of the pressing ethical questions about blame by asking when, how, how much, and whether to attend to a person's role in bringing about an undesirable outcome. And we can better understand this attention by considering its relation to merely causal blame. This, I think, only cements the importance of a kind of blame that at first seemed so uninteresting. Blame of a car's brakes is in many ways continuous with—and holds a key to a better understanding of—our blame of ourselves and each other.

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Notes

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[1] See Sher (2006) and Scanlon (2008); I discuss Scanlon's view in Chislenko (forthcoming). Emotion-centered views, influenced especially by Strawson (1962), include Wallace (1994, 2011), Wolf (2011), Bell (2013), and Tognazzini (2013). Protest-centered theories include Hieronymi (2001), Talbert (2012), Smith (2013), and Pereboom (2017); for discussion, see Chislenko (2019).

[2] See, respectively, http://edition.cnn.com/2016/08/09/sport/rio-olympics-green-pool/, and http://www.emergencymgmt.com/disaster/When-Hurricane-Katrina-roared-across-the-Gulf-Coast-and-left-water-everywhere.html. These particular examples are especially useful for anyone tempted to think that this sort of blame is concerned with the improper functioning of brakes or other functionally organized entities. In the cases of the hurricane and the algae, it is their good functioning, not bad functioning, that leads to the undesirable outcome.

[3] This kind of blame is usually called either "interpersonal" or "moral". I avoid the term "moral blame," to avoid assuming that this kind of blame is limited to actions that violate the demands of morality. I am sometimes inclined to the simpler phrase "personal" blame, to more clearly include self-blame. But the possibility of self-blame is not one we are likely to simply forget, and I will continue to follow standard usage in using the term "interpersonal."

[4] Some articles have initially promising titles, such as "Blame and Causality" (Hertzberg 1975) or "Moral Blame and Causal Explanation" (Lane 2000). But these articles still leave causal blame aside to focus on the relevance of determinism or scientific explanation for interpersonal blame. There is a certain irony in attempts to consider the relevance of causal determinism or causal explanation to interpersonal blame without investigating causal blame and its relation to interpersonal blame. But this irony does bring out the extent to which philosophers see causal blame as uninteresting or irrelevant.

[5] This is clear enough from the context, since no one thinks indignation is necessary for merely causal blame.

[6] Smith (2013, p. 35) considers reactions of "deep sadness, despair, or pity," and writes, resisting Sher (2006), that "I would not be inclined to say that these are reactions of blame." But I suspect Smith might herself allow that they are examples of *causal* blame. Although intuitively compelling counterexamples can be useful, it can be more effective and less confusing to insist that, even if these reactions are reactions of blame, Sher has not offered an argument for identifying them as interpersonal, rather than merely causal, blame.

[7] For recent discussions of attention and its role in reactions such as blame, see Allais (2013), Chislenko (forthcoming), Hurley and Macnamara (2010), Zimmerman (2001), and especially Watzl (2017). For a discussion of directed attention in a different but related context, see Scanlon (1996, Chapter 1). McKenna (2008, p. 144) suggests that we "fix attention on salient agential and moral properties" as part of a response to skeptical arguments about responsibility; but this suggestion seems consistent with such attention leading us to general conclusions about responsibility, rather than being central to reactions such as blame in particular cases.

[8] Illuminating empirical work on such exaggerations has been done by Mark Alicke and his colleagues; see especially Alicke (1992, esp., Study 1, and 2000). For discussion, see Pereboom (2013, pp. 205-6).

[9] For a classic discussion of attention to personal history and its impact on blame, see Watson (1987). Björnsson and Persson (2012, 2013) and Björnsson (2017, esp. § 4), offer a more detailed discussion of the role of thoughts about determinism in judgments about responsibility, with helpful references to other recent

literature. They also offer helpful parallel treatments of cases of luck, manipulation, and regress arguments about responsibility, though without considering most of the other phenomena I discuss in the body text.

[10] See, for example, Hieronymi (2004), Scanlon (2008, Chap. 4), Pickard (2011, 2013), and Potter (2013).

[11] For a detailed discussion of the fairness of blame, and of competing conceptions of this fairness as desert and as reasonableness, see Wallace (1994, esp. pp. 103-8). For a defense of the view that questions about the fairness of blame tend to be confused, see Hieronymi (2004).

[12] For more general discussion of appealing to considerations of the wrong kind, see the work of Pamela Hieronymi, and especially Hieronymi (2005 and 2006).

[13] Concerns about the fairness of blame are thus distinct from, though they partly overlap with, concerns about who has standing to blame a blameworthy person. Influential discussions of standing include Cohen (2006, 2012), Wallace (2010), Radzik (2011), Bell (2013), and Friedman (2013).

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