

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Self-Righteous Sentiment: On Blame and Its Norms

Blame seems to be an integral fixture of moral life and yet it is also one that arouses suspicion. On the one hand, blame is a primary means by which we hold people morally responsible and thus, one might think, a way of standing up for our rights and for the rights of others to be treated in accordance with moral norms. On the other hand, there is a viciousness to blame that can make us wonder whether we wouldn't be better off holding people accountable in some alternative way. One thing that makes it difficult to know whether we should eschew blame is that it is hard to get a handle on what blame *is*. What we call "blame" comprises a multifarious set, ranging from unexpressed affective responses to criminal prosecution. Yet I believe that blame's diverse manifestations possess a unifying feature: they all involve a subject's taking her present response to be fitting on the basis of a particular set of reasons. In my dissertation, I use this insight to build an account of blame and then demonstrate how that account can help to answer questions about blame's value.

I develop my account in Chapter 1 by first focusing not directly on blame itself but rather on what makes someone worthy of it. I start with the intuitive thought that voluntary wrongdoing is a necessary ground of being blameworthy, defending this principle against those who would deny it. Some "non-voluntarist" philosophers think that people can be blameworthy for things not under their control: in particular, for their defective non-voluntary attitudes. I argue that non-voluntarists overlook a way in which we can control some of our attitudes by making choices about what to do that constitute those attitudes. Once we recognize this type of control, the cases non-voluntarists take to be counterexamples to voluntarism turn out not to be counterexamples after all.

Armed with the principle that voluntary wrongdoing is required for blameworthiness, I turn to blame itself in Chapter 2. I argue that, even though people blame in extremely diverse ways, all blame essentially involves what I call "reflexive endorsement": blame involves the blamer's taking the way she is presently reacting to be fitting on the basis of the blamee's having (voluntarily) done something wrong. I argue that taking blame to have this feature best accounts for both blame's directedness (how blame always seems to be *for* someone's wrongdoing) and its phenomenology (how blame can feel particularly self-righteous). I clarify that, because reflexive endorsement can occur via automatic mental processes, taking blame to involve reflexive endorsement is *not* incompatible with the existence of recalcitrant blame (i.e. cases in which people blame in spite of judging that the targets of their blame aren't blameworthy).

While reflexive endorsement is a *necessary* component of blaming, saying that a subject is taking her present way of reacting to be fitting on the basis of someone's having done something wrong is not restrictive enough so as to delineate *only* blame. So, in Chapter 3, I complete my account of blame by adding further stipulations so as to render it sufficiently restrictive. I argue that the best way to do this involves indexing a blamer's understanding of her present response to our own communal conception of the fitting response to wrongdoing. On my complete account, a person blames when she takes her present way of reacting to be fitting on the bases (i) that the person being blamed has done something wrong and (ii) that her present way of reacting is an instance of the type of reaction that is the fitting way of responding to wrongdoers in our community.

The fourth and final chapter is about what blame is good for. I rely on my account of blame to explain how blaming achieves two important ends: (i) expressing recognition of a wrongdoing and (ii) inducing a culpable wrongdoer to more deeply understand her wrongdoing. The uniting thread of this discussion is the question of what we might lose if our accountability practices took on a less vicious form. In particular, I attempt to determine the extent to which the *painfulness* of blame itself plays a role in promoting the valuable ends that blaming can achieve. My conclusions on this count are ambivalent. I argue that, although some of what blaming achieves could have been realized through more measured means, the entrenchment of viciousness in our current accountability practices has created a situation in which attempting to reform now would (and sometimes does) require significant sacrifice.