

# The Contours of Blame

D. Justin Coates & Neal A. Tognazzini

## 1. Introduction

Whether or not P. F. Strawson was right about the precise attitudes and emotional reactions that constitute interpersonal relationships, he was surely right to think that our commitment to such relationships is “thoroughgoing and deeply rooted” (p. 81).<sup>1</sup> These relations vary widely—we relate “as sharers of common interest; as members of the same family; as colleagues; as friends; as lovers; as chance parties to an enormous range of transactions and encounters” (p. 76)—but they “form an essential part of the moral life as we know it” (p. 91). That much of Strawson’s picture, at least, should be uncontroversial. Also uncontroversial is the fact that *blame* is, for better or worse, a central part of human relationships. The essays in this volume, then, attempt to deepen our understanding of our own moral lives.

When we say that blame is central to human relationships, we don’t mean that it *belongs* at the center. We are merely making the undeniable point that we are (in fact) beings who evaluate, react, and respond to each other (and ourselves) along various normative dimensions. How we should feel about the role that blame plays in our lives is itself one of the interesting philosophical questions about blame. But there are also the questions of what precisely blame is, who its appropriate subjects and objects are, when it is (and is not) called for, and what functions (if any) it serves. Each of these questions is addressed, at least to some extent, by one or more of the essays collected here, which together represent the current state of the philosophical conversation about the nature and ethics of blame. Our primary aim in this chapter is to situate those essays within the broader context of recent work on blame.<sup>2</sup>

---

For helpful comments on earlier versions of the material in this chapter, thanks to John Martin Fischer, Samantha Matherne, Ben Mitchell-Yellin, and Matt Talbert.

<sup>1</sup> All quotations from Strawson are from his 1962, as reprinted in Watson (2003).

<sup>2</sup> It’s important to note, however, that work on blame is still in its infancy, so there is no generally accepted way of framing these issues. The way we frame things in this chapter does not always map

### 1.1. PRELIMINARY APOLOGIES

We begin, however, with two apologies (in the Socratic sense). First, you will not find much talk about free will in this volume. It is perhaps surprising that although the founding document of contemporary work on blame (Strawson 1962) is an essay on the problem of free will and determinism, the work inspired by Strawson's essay does not much concern itself with free will. But this is less surprising once we recall that while Strawson's particular suggestion for "reconciling" the libertarian and the compatibilist has been widely rejected,<sup>3</sup> his exhortation "to keep before our minds . . . what it is actually like to be involved in ordinary interpersonal relationships" (p. 77) has been heeded with vigor.<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that recent work on blame is wholly divorced from concerns about free will, but the emphasis is now much more on moral psychology and the significance of blame in moral life. The essays collected here reflect this emphasis.

As for the second apology: you will have noticed that our topic is simply *blame* rather than *praise and blame*. Why the exclusively negative focus? Several responses come to mind. For starters, we would endorse what Gary Watson has to say on this point:

We seem to have a richer vocabulary of blame than of praise. This slant is not due solely to mean-spiritedness. At least part of the explanation is that blaming tends to be a much more serious affair; reputation, liberty, and even life can be at stake, and understandably we are more concerned with the conditions of adverse treatment than with those of favorable treatment. (Watson 1996, as reprinted in Watson 2004, p. 283)<sup>5</sup>

But we would also be inclined to challenge the two presuppositions behind the question. First, it's not at all clear that praise and blame are, upon reflection, a usefully opposed pair after all.<sup>6</sup> As we will note below, the idea of *private* blame

---

neatly onto the way the other authors frame things, and there's certainly nothing hallowed about the taxonomy we suggest. For a truncated and less detailed version of what follows, see Coates and Tognazzini (2012).

<sup>3</sup> And, in our view, almost as widely misunderstood.

<sup>4</sup> At least one of the things that Strawson was exhorting us to do was to pay more attention to the moral emotions. When Strawson was writing in 1962, he was able to say, "It is a pity that talk of the moral sentiments has fallen out of favour. The phrase would be quite a good name for [the reactive attitudes]" (p. 92). In large part due to Strawson's essay, talk of the moral sentiments is now decidedly "in favor."

<sup>5</sup> This is not to deny, of course, that *part* of the explanation is the human tendency toward mean-spiritedness, as Watson slyly acknowledges with the word 'solely'.

<sup>6</sup> Strawson says of resentment and gratitude that they are "a usefully opposed pair" (p. 77), and that may well be true. But we note that it seems much more natural to say that feeling resentment is a way of blaming than it does to say that feeling gratitude is a way of praising. Perhaps another explanation for the tendency of philosophers to focus on blame, then, is that many of them follow Strawson in thinking that blame is to be understood in terms of the moral emotions (see section 2.3 below).

seems coherent in a way that private praise does not. You might discover to your horror that your spouse continues to blame you for something you did several years ago, but it seems at best awkward to say that you might discover that your spouse has been praising you for several years without anyone's knowing about it. The fit between being praised and having one's praises *sung* seems quite tight indeed.<sup>7</sup> Second, it's not clear, upon reflection, that to focus on blame *is* to focus on something negative. Perhaps on some conceptions of blame, a blameless world would be a better place. But on many of the conceptions endorsed by the philosophers in this volume, blame is actually required for, or even partly constitutive of, goods that we would prefer not to do without. This is not to say that a world with blame may be an acceptable compromise; rather it may be the only sort of world humanly possible.

But here we've already stepped into controversial territory, so let's take some time to orient ourselves.

### 1.2. STRAWSON AND THE PRIMACY OF BLAME

We've said that "Freedom and Resentment" is the founding document of contemporary work on blame, so we begin with a brief discussion of it. It provides both the inspiration for one of the most influential contemporary accounts of blame and the conceptual framework for understanding just how important an inquiry into blame is.<sup>8</sup>

Strawson's essay is an attempt to carve out a middle ground between two equally implausible proposals for how to justify blame, both of which are guilty of "over-intellectualizing the facts" (p. 92). On the one hand, there is the "one-eyed" utilitarian (best exemplified, perhaps, by Smart 1961), who tries to justify blame by "[pointing] to the efficacy of the practices of [blame] in regulating behaviour in socially desirable ways" (Strawson 1962, p. 73) and in the process "loses sight (perhaps wishes to lose sight) of the human attitudes of which these practices are, in part, the expression" (p. 92). On the other hand, there are those who think blame cannot be justified without "recourse to the obscure and panicky metaphysics of libertarianism" (p. 93), arguing that blameworthy

---

<sup>7</sup> A point noted long ago by Richard Brandt (1958, p. 8 n. 5). In fact, Brandt's essay is strikingly prescient on a number of issues surrounding blame, including the reactive attitudes (pp. 24–27), the question of standing (p. 27), and the problem of moral luck (p. 30 n. 31).

<sup>8</sup> Strawson's essay may be the start of *contemporary* work on blame, but it clearly has important historical antecedents, especially in the eighteenth century in Scotland. David Hume is perhaps the clearest example: "The mind of man is so formed by nature, that, upon the appearance of certain characters, dispositions, and actions, it immediately feels the sentiment of approbation or blame; nor are there any emotions more essential to its frame and constitution. . . . [T]hese sentiments are not to be controlled or altered by any philosophical theory or speculation whatsoever" ([1748] 1977, p. 68). Strawson is not only often read as a sort of Humean naturalist, but he also alludes to this period in the history of philosophy when he laments the fact that "talk of the moral sentiments has fallen out of favor" (see note 4 above).

agents need to possess “contra-causal freedom or something of the kind” (p. 92) in order to truly *deserve* blame. If these are our options for dealing with the free will problem, then, given the practical inconceivability of skepticism, we are forced to choose between inadequacy and inanity (to borrow Strawson’s words [p. 92]).

The details of Strawson’s proposed alternative are controversial, but here’s the basic idea. Instead of viewing blameworthiness as an independent meta-physical fact about an agent (or based on such a fact), as the libertarian does, the utilitarian is right to view it as somehow essentially tied to our blaming practices. But the libertarian is right to insist that our blaming practices are more than just instruments for the regulation of behavior. As Strawson puts it, “Our practices do not merely exploit our natures, they express them” (p. 93). And the relevant aspect of human nature is “that complicated web of attitudes and feelings which form an essential part of the moral life as we know it” (p. 91), namely the *reactive attitudes* of resentment, indignation, and guilt (among others). These attitudes are precisely what is left out of the utilitarian picture of blame, but, according to Strawson, “it is just these attitudes themselves which fill the gap” (p. 92) and not some mysterious appeal to meta-physical freedom. To be morally responsible, on this account, just is to be a member of the moral community, to be someone toward whom others feel the reactive attitudes. And these attitudes are “something we are given with the fact of human society” (p. 91), not something it is in our nature to be able to give up.

For our purposes we need not evaluate the details of Strawson’s proposal.<sup>9</sup> We only wish to point out two ways in which its influence continues to be felt by philosophers working on blame and moral responsibility. First, although Strawson himself never identifies the reactive attitudes with blame, it is an extremely natural and plausible extension of his essay, and accordingly many contemporary philosophers favor such an account (including many in this volume). Second, perhaps the most common way of conceiving of moral responsibility these days is along broadly Strawsonian lines, emphasizing the importance and explanatory priority of our practices of blaming and holding one another responsible. These practices (together with their associated norms) are not (taken to be) constrained by any independent “moral responsibility facts” about the agent in question; rather they are what partly determine which facts about an agent even *count* as the moral responsibility facts in the first place.<sup>10</sup>

Taken together, these Strawson-inspired views suggest another way in which blame is central to our moral lives. If the picture painted here is right,

---

<sup>9</sup> See McKenna and Russell (2008) for discussion of Strawson’s essay.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Wallace (1994, ch. 4). This is not to say that our practices are not constrained by any facts about the agent whatsoever. The reactive attitudes may still be inappropriate if the agent lacks certain crucial capacities. The Strawsonian point is simply that those particular capacities count as relevant to moral responsibility only *in the context of* and *in light of* our practices.

then blame is not only the natural human response to actions that display a kind of interpersonally significant ill will or disregard, but it is also the lens through which we can even know what counts as a free action in the first place. In this sense, the free will problem is, perhaps paradoxically, just one of the many problems that can be categorized as part of *the ethics of blame* (see section 3 below). If free will is, as many contemporary theorists think, the control required for moral responsibility (whatever it turns out to be), and moral responsibility is to be understood in terms of the propriety of blame, then an implication of the Strawsonian picture is that any philosophical examination of free will must begin with an inquiry into the nature of blame. We can add freedom, then, to the host of puzzling philosophical issues—including hypocrisy, forgiveness, mercy, and apology—that revolve around and ultimately depend upon a satisfactory account of blame.<sup>11</sup> All the more reason to get started as soon as possible.

## 2. The Nature of Blame

So what is it to blame someone? What mental states or activities are involved, and how can they help us understand the broader blaming context?<sup>12</sup> One relatively straightforward way to tackle these questions is to imagine a robust blaming context—one that seems clearly to involve blame *somewhere*, even if we aren't yet sure where—and then take each candidate mental state or activity one by one to see whether it can perform the tasks that blame performs. In a standard sort of blaming context, candidate mental states and activities abound: beliefs, desires, emotions, dispositions, overt behaviors, and speech acts all can seem, from certain perspectives, like plausible candidates for what's essential to blame. Accordingly, accounts of the nature of blame vary widely.

To help focus the inquiry, let's start by briefly mentioning two ways in which the term 'blame' gets used that are philosophically interesting but are at best only part of the story. The first is what Elizabeth Lane Beardsley (1969) calls the "whodunit" (or "whatdunit") sense of blame (see also Hart 1968, ch. 9; Kenner 1967). If your car won't start in the morning, some simple diagnostics may reveal that the culprit is a dead battery. In a causal sense, then, your dead battery may be *to blame* for your being late to the office. This sort of blame is

---

<sup>11</sup> And let's not forget those theorists whose substantive moral theories depend on the notions of blame and blameworthiness (e.g., Gibbard 1990).

<sup>12</sup> As a first approximation, this broader context seems to involve a back-and-forth exchange: someone who is regarded as a fellow member of the moral community transgresses in some way, leading to blame, which (ideally) encourages apology and in turn forgiveness. On moral responsibility as a conversation, see Watson (1987b), McKenna (2012), and Shoemaker (2007).

no doubt philosophically interesting, but it doesn't amount to the sort of *moral* blame with which the essays in this volume are primarily concerned.<sup>13</sup>

At the other extreme is the idea that blaming is some sort of overt action, perhaps telling someone that his behavior is substandard, or perhaps scolding him, in an attempt to get him to change his behavior in the future.<sup>14</sup> These actions certainly do seem to be ways of blaming—or, perhaps better, expressing blame—but again they are at best only part of the story that moral philosophers are interested in telling.<sup>15</sup> At its core, blaming seems like something one can do in the privacy of one's own study (for example), and its proper objects do not seem limited to those who are in the here and now.<sup>16</sup>

Still, a wide spectrum lies between judgments of causal responsibility and overt expressions of blame: Where will we find the essence of blame?

## 2.1. COGNITIVE ACCOUNTS

Taking seriously the distinction between blame and expressed blame may naturally lead us to think that blame must be located somewhere inside the blamer's head.<sup>17</sup> Judgments of causal responsibility are clearly not enough, but perhaps other sorts of judgments will do the job. There is a rather wide array of judgments one could appeal to here, but we can borrow a phrase from Gary Watson and categorize them all as judgments about “the quality of the other's moral self as exemplified in action and attitude” (1987b, as reprinted in his 2004, p. 226).

Jonathan Glover (1970), Ishtiyaque Haji (1998), and Michael Zimmerman (1988), for example, all seem to view blame as though it is a type of “moral accounting” (Glover 1970, p. 64). When we blame someone, we judge “that there is a ‘discredit’ or ‘debit’ in his ledger, a ‘negative mark’ in his ‘report card,’ or a ‘blemish’ or ‘stain’ on his ‘record’; that his ‘record’ has been ‘tarnished’; that his ‘moral standing’ has been ‘diminished’” (Zimmerman 1988, p. 38).<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Recent work in experimental philosophy, however, provides some reason to think that even judgments of causal responsibility are not wholly divorced from moral concerns. See, e.g., Knobe and Fraser (2008).

<sup>14</sup> Writers who focus on blame's outward manifestations include Altham (1973), Beardsley (1969), Duff (1986), French (1976), and Talbert (2012).

<sup>15</sup> But they are a part of the story. It's not for nothing that the word ‘blame’ has the same etymological root as the word ‘blaspheme’ (both come from the Greek for *evil-speaking*).

<sup>16</sup> “[I]t is surely possible to blame someone—say, a persuasive salesman for your financial difficulties—without ever telling anyone. Blame is more like holding an opinion than expressing it” (Squires 1968, p. 56). See also Sher (2006, p. 74); Wallace (1994, p. 56).

<sup>17</sup> Again we stress that the taxonomy we construct here is not to be taken as the obviously correct way of characterizing the literature but merely as one helpful way to get a grip on things. The accounts discussed in this section, for example, are probably best described as *tending to emphasize cognitive elements*. Similar remarks apply to our categories below.

<sup>18</sup> It seems likely that this is the sort of view that Smart thought of as exemplifying “a rather pharisaical attitude to sinners” (1961, p. 305) and that pushed him to defend the utilitarian view, which he saw as the only alternative once the metaphysics of libertarianism was rejected as incoherent.

Gary Watson outlines an account of blame according to which it involves a negative *aretaic* judgment, a judgment that the person blamed has displayed some sort of vice or fault. To blame, in this sense, is “to see [the conduct] as ‘inferior goods,’ as a poor exercise of human evaluative capacities, as characteristic of someone who cares little about standards of excellence in human affairs” (1996, as reprinted in his 2004, p. 265).<sup>19</sup>

Nomy Arpaly (2006) and Pamela Hieronymi (2004) emphasize the sort of judgment that Strawson takes to occasion the reactive attitudes, namely a judgment that someone displayed ill will.<sup>20</sup> T. M. Scanlon (1988, 1998) and Angela Smith (2008a) focus on related judgments, such as the judgment that the wrongdoer’s action “violated a norm of mutually respectful relations with others” (Smith 2008a, p. 36).<sup>21</sup>

These accounts all capture something deep and important: blaming involves *evaluating*.<sup>22</sup> When we blame others, we see them as having dropped below some standard that we accept (or perhaps that we think they should accept), whether of excellence, morality, or respectful relationships. The judgments involved here are tinged with normativity, and because of this they carry a certain *force*: they are the sorts of judgments that we would rather not have made about us, even if the person doing the evaluating never says anything to us. It matters a great deal to us whether those we respect consider our own conduct subpar.<sup>23</sup> And blame certainly seems to have this characteristic too.

Nevertheless, just as overt action accounts appeared to conflate the distinction between blaming and expressing blame, cognitive accounts may appear to conflate the equally useful distinction between blaming and judging blameworthy.<sup>24</sup> To elide this distinction may seem to turn blame into what Watson

<sup>19</sup> Watson makes clear that he does not think this sort of judgment exhausts the nature of blame. Aretaic judgments are primarily associated with what he calls “responsibility as attributability” (1996, as reprinted in his 2004, p. 271), and other blaming responses are relevant to the *accountability* face of moral responsibility.

<sup>20</sup> We say that Arpaly and Hieronymi *emphasize* this judgment, but strictly speaking they do not identify blame solely with this judgment. Arpaly thinks that the blamer must also be “‘in favor’ of morality at some level” (2006, p. 25), and Hieronymi suggests that a “commitment to morality” is going to be central to an adequate account and defense of the propriety of blame (2008, p. 29), but she does think that judgments of this sort can account for the characteristic force of blame (see note 23 below).

<sup>21</sup> We note, however, that neither Scanlon nor Smith seems to endorse purely cognitive accounts of blame any longer (if they ever did). Scanlon’s most recent view is articulated in his 2008 (we discuss it below) and is further elaborated and defended in chapter 5 of this volume. Smith also develops a distinctive view in her contribution to this volume, chapter 2.

<sup>22</sup> Other authors who focus on the connection between blaming and judging include Beardsley (1970), Squires (1968), and Stern (1974).

<sup>23</sup> “It seems quite plausible to me that standing in relations of mutual regard is of considerable importance to creatures like us. Thus the content of a judgment of ill will can carry a certain amount of force—despite being descriptive. If it is true, then you no longer stand in such a relationship” (Hieronymi 2004, p. 124).

<sup>24</sup> Angela Smith suggests that perhaps this seeming infelicity ought to be tolerated, since it reflects “a deep ambiguity in our use of language, an ambiguity that shows up precisely when we ask whether

calls a “fault-finding appraisal.” Cognitive accounts may make it seem “as though in blaming we were mainly moral clerks, recording moral faults,” which is something that can be done “from a detached and austere ‘objective’ standpoint” (Watson 1987b, as reprinted in his 2004, pp. 226–27). But is genuine blame something that can be so detached? When we blame someone, we’re not simply *noting* the fact that she falls below some standard; rather, blame seems also to be about our own attitudes toward how the agent has negotiated (or failed to negotiate) that standard. Accordingly, we might accept a cognitive account about what it is to *judge blameworthy* while insisting that blame itself must be more robust.<sup>25</sup>

## 2.2. CONATIVE ACCOUNTS

One natural way to augment a cognitive account is by adding conative elements, such as desires, intentions, expectations, and dispositions, all of which might account for the way true blame seems to involve being *engaged* or *exercised* by the substandard action. We not only *evaluate* when we blame, but we also *respond*. There are two prominent contemporary accounts that take this route.

The first of these accounts is articulated and defended by George Sher (2006). According to Sher, what we need to add to a judgment of blameworthiness in order to get blame is a backward-looking desire “that the person in question not have performed his past bad act or not have his current bad character,” which, when added to the relevant belief, anchors “a set of affective and behavioral dispositions,” such as dispositions to anger and reproach, that are traditionally associated with blame (p. 112). The backward-looking desire is the crucial motivational element that, in Sher’s view, ties the (potentially) detached judgment of blameworthiness to the robustly non-detached ways in which we tend to react to blameworthy action. Moreover, the very same

---

blame necessarily involves an emotional or behavioral element” (2008a, p. 38). For another defense of the conflation, but in the opposite direction, see Hertzberg (1975), who says, “Actually, wanting to provide a theory of blame involves a misconception. This notion presupposes that we can distinguish judgments of blameworthiness, and the reasons for them, from the emotional attitude of blame and the circumstances which produce it. But these are not two separate things, but two ways of viewing one side of human life. Only for someone who can feel resentment towards another for his conduct will anything count as a reason for judging him blameworthy” (p. 511).

<sup>25</sup> This seems a good place to mention an early writer on blame who produced a series of insightful and unduly neglected papers: Elizabeth Lane Beardsley (1957, 1960, 1969, 1970, 1979). Beardsley for the most part was concerned to bring speech act theory (as developed in Austin [1962]) to bear on issues of praise and blame (a project that has recently been taken up again by Coleen Macnamara [2011 and chapter 8 in this volume]), but she also made the intriguing claim that once the nature of blame is properly articulated, we will see that blameworthiness cannot be understood in terms of whether there is something that the blameworthy agent is *worthy* of. Beardsley’s claim seems to be that an attitude will count as a *blaming* attitude only if it already involves a judgment about blameworthiness. Hence the attempt to spell out blameworthiness in terms of an agent’s being worthy of certain blaming attitudes will be caught up in a vicious circularity. See Beardsley (1970, especially pp. 174–76).

backward-looking desire is implicated in our commitment to morality itself. Sher argues, then, that his account reveals a satisfying way in which blame is central to our moral lives: in the end, part of what it is even to accept moral principles at all is to have the desire that partly constitutes blame. The justification of blame and the justification of morality, therefore, go hand in hand (Sher 2006, ch. 7).

Sher's account is elegant and satisfying, but not surprisingly it has received much critical attention in the literature. Pamela Hieronymi (2008) and Angela Smith (2008a) both raise important worries for the account, and several of our authors discuss it. In her contribution to this volume, Smith (chapter 2) gives an extended critique of Sher's account, arguing that the belief-desire pair he appeals to cannot anchor the emotional and behavior responses that are characteristic of blame after all. Victoria McGeer (chapter 9) and Christopher Franklin (chapter 11) both accuse Sher's account of being too "sanitized" (McGeer's word), leaving out the emotional core, which is needed both for a psychologically realistic account of blame (McGeer) and a fully adequate vindication of blame against those who think it ought to be discarded (Franklin).<sup>26</sup> Even Derk Pereboom, a well-known skeptic about the existence of moral responsibility (if not about its possibility; see his 2001), argues in his contribution (chapter 10) that the sort of blame Sher has in mind can still exist in a world without moral responsibility. Pereboom paints this as a happy state of affairs, but we have reason to suspect that Sher will not think it so happy. After all, at the beginning of his book, Sher says that Pereboom "vividly, if unwittingly, illustrates just how strange—I am tempted to say 'inhuman'—a world without blame would be" (Sher 2006, p. 5).

Another conative account (broadly speaking) that has taken hold in the contemporary literature is T. M. Scanlon's (2008). Like Sher, Scanlon begins with a judgment of blameworthiness, though the precise content of the judgment that Scanlon has in mind emphasizes the importance of "the expectations, intentions, and other attitudes that constitute" our interpersonal relationships (p. 128). Scanlon sketches his proposal as follows:

Briefly put, my proposal is this: to claim that a person is *blameworthy* for an action is to claim that the action shows something about the agent's attitudes toward others that impairs the relations that others can have with him or her. To *blame* a person is to judge him or her to be blameworthy and to take your relationship with him or her to be modified in a way that this judgment of impaired relations holds to be appropriate. (pp. 128–29)<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> In fairness, Sher expresses his own doubts about the alleged emotional core of blame: "That we would be better off if we were to weaken the connection between blame and rancor may be the kernel of truth in the anti-blame ideology" (2006, p. 138).

<sup>27</sup> We should be wary of taking Scanlon's italics too seriously here; on the next page (2008, p. 130) he indicates that in some contexts, to judge blameworthy may itself be a way of blaming.

We need not go into the details here—and in any case Scanlon elaborates on and more fully defends his account in chapter 5—but the basic idea is simply that to blame someone is to recognize, and make modifications that express that one recognizes, that things cannot go on as before with that person. The relationship has been impaired, and blame is a way of marking that fact (where ‘marking’ of course goes beyond merely judging *that it is a fact*).

How exactly the blamer marks the impairment will depend on any number of particular details of the context and the relationship in question, but Scanlon gives the following examples:

I might, for example, cease to value spending time with him in the way one does with a friend, and I might revise my intentions to confide in him and to encourage him to confide in me. Third, I might complain to [him] about his conduct, demand an explanation or justification, or indicate in some other way that I no longer see him as a friend. (2008, pp. 129–30)

It is an advantage of Scanlon’s account (and of Sher’s) that “it accounts for what seems to be the evident variability of blame, and its clear dependence on particular relationships” (Scanlon 2008, p. 212). Sometimes blame will involve speech acts, sometimes cold shoulders, sometimes more subtle responses, all depending on the particular relationship that is taken to be impaired.<sup>28</sup>

Scanlon’s account is also elegant and satisfying and has been the target of much criticism. Perhaps the most common objection has been expressed pithily by R. Jay Wallace (2011, p. 349), namely that it “leaves the blame out of blame.” Wallace goes on:

Blame has a quality of opprobrium that is not captured by the considerations about the normative significance of impaired relationships that are at the center of Scanlon’s approach. I believe that this important dimension of blame can be made sense of only in terms of the reactive sentiments. (p. 349)<sup>29</sup>

Several of the authors in this volume critically discuss Scanlon’s account, though the charge that it is too mild is not the only objection raised (but McGeer does touch on it, and Pereboom once again shows how even the moral responsibility skeptic can countenance blame in Scanlon’s sense). In her contribution, Smith worries that Scanlon’s account, somewhat surprisingly, fails to take relationships as seriously as an adequate account of blame should. Sher (chapter 3) argues that Scanlon’s account has difficulty accounting for cases in

---

<sup>28</sup> Another underappreciated virtue of Scanlon’s account is that it can explain our blaming judgments in cases of “moral outcome luck” (see Nagel 1979, ch. 3). Scanlon himself takes this to be one of the desiderata any adequate account of blame must satisfy (2008, p. 126).

<sup>29</sup> This sort of criticism has also been pressed by Mason (2011) and Wolf (2011).

which we blame strangers, people with whom it is a stretch (at best) to say that we have anything resembling a *relationship*. Christopher Bennett (chapter 4) also raises this concern and adds worries about how Scanlon can make sense of desert and proportionality, among other issues. (Bennett then goes on to construct his own broadly conative account, according to which blame consists in a symbolic withdrawal of goodwill.)

Scanlon addresses some of these issues in his own essay and elaborates his account in illuminating ways (chapter 5). He also admits (as he did in his 2008, p. 212) that his account is revisionary in certain respects. This is something we do well to keep in mind, especially if Scanlon is right that “the things we are inclined to believe about blame form an inconsistent set” (chapter 5). Perhaps the most any account of blame can inspire to be is an “interpretation.”

David Shoemaker, in his contribution to this volume (chapter 6), discusses whether it is possible to extend Scanlon’s interpretation of blame in a way that can account for institutional blame. And although Shoemaker argues that it cannot, this is not meant as an *objection* to Scanlon’s view; rather, Shoemaker concludes that perhaps moral blame and criminal blame are just two different beasts.

### 2.3. THE STRAWSONIAN ACCOUNT

If cognitive and conative elements together still don’t seem enough to explain the precise way we are exercised by wrongdoing when we blame, then you may want to follow R. Jay Wallace (who follows Strawson) and include the reactive emotions as well:

To blame someone is a way of caring about the fact that they have treated others with contempt or disregard; when you experience indignation, resentment, or guilt, you are not merely left cold by the immoral attitudes that form the object of blame, but find that those attitudes engage your interest and attention. (2011, pp. 367–68)

We began this chapter by drawing attention to two of Strawson’s insights—that the realities of interpersonal relationships ought to be front and center in any attempt to understand moral responsibility and that the moral sentiments are a crucial component of such relationships—and we have now worked our way back up to an account of blame that features these two insights. Given how thoroughly his essay has influenced contemporary work on blame, perhaps it is not surprising that the Strawsonian account of blame is widely accepted. On this view, to blame someone is to target her with one of the reactive emotions.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Variants of this account are endorsed by Cohen (1977), Fingarette (1957), Wertheimer (1998), and Wolf (2011), and it is often taken for granted in many other discussions. See, e.g., Darwall (2006); Talbert (2012).

Wallace (1994, 2011) has done the most to articulate and defend this view, and he puts it to work in a broader theory of moral responsibility, according to which our susceptibility to blame someone is what constitutes the stance of holding that person responsible, the appropriateness of which is in turn crucial to determining whether someone is a morally responsible agent.<sup>31</sup> But one need not accept the details of Wallace's broader theory in order to agree with him when he says:

[Blame] includes an attitudinal aspect, where the attitudes in question have a distinctive content and focus. It is this attitudinal aspect of blame that is accounted for by the reactive emotions. Those emotions are essentially backward-looking, being responses to particular violations of moral obligation, and in this respect they capture exactly the attitude characteristic of blame. Thus, I think it would indeed be strange to suppose that one might blame another person without feeling an attitude of indignation or resentment toward the person, or that one might blame oneself without feeling guilt; attempts to communicate blame generally do function, at least in part, to give expression to such attitudes. (1994, p. 75)

The reactive emotions that Strawson was at pains to emphasize, it seems, can easily perform the tasks that we ask blame to perform. They can be kept private, but they can also be expressed. They are responses triggered by judgments about another person's "moral self," and they may even include propositional components, but they are not experienced from an austere and detached perspective. Moreover, they can easily explain why being blamed tends to be unwelcome and why concerns about fairness might arise when we think about the possibility of determinism. Perhaps we have finally discovered the nature of blame.

As always, however, things are not so simple. George Sher (2006, ch. 5) raises several worries for the Strawsonian account, including that it may be *too* robust. Is it really the case, Sher asks, that blame is always so emotional? On the contrary, he says:

We may, for example, feel no hostility toward the loved one whom we blame for failing to tell a sensitive acquaintance a hard truth, the criminal whom we blame for a burglary we read about in the newspaper, or the historical figure whom we blame for the misdeeds he performed long ago. As [these] examples suggest, blaming is something that we can do regretfully or dispassionately. . . . 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. (pp. 88–89)

---

<sup>31</sup> John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza (1998) have also developed an influential Strawsonian theory of moral responsibility, though they don't seek to give an explicit account of blame (in contrast to Wallace).

The Strawsonian could simply insist, of course, that there is no blaming going on in these examples, but that can easily seem like an ad hoc response in this context.<sup>32</sup> A more promising response will involve giving a theory of the reactive emotions according to which resentment need not involve “a twinge of hostility.” But that is a large (albeit worthwhile) undertaking (cf. Hurley and Macnamara 2010).<sup>33</sup>

Several of our authors explore accounts that are broadly Strawsonian. Michael McKenna (chapter 7), for example, argues that the best account of blame will include an emotional component, and he situates such a view in his broader *conversational theory* of moral responsibility, according to which “the actions of a morally responsible agent are potential bearers of a species of meaning, *agent-meaning*,” to which the blamer then responds, opening up a conversation of sorts. In his essay McKenna elaborates on this account (which he has articulated and defended in his 2012), and he considers its connection with the notion of desert.

Coleen Macnamara, in her contribution (chapter 8), starts by assuming the Strawsonian account for the sake of argument and explores how we ought to think about what’s going on when we *express* our blame by giving voice to the reactive emotions. Many contemporary theorists, including Wallace (1994), Stephen Darwall (2006), and Margaret Urban Walker (2006), argue that the expressed reactive attitudes are best understood as *demands*, but Macnamara questions this assumption. Along the way she touches on the relationship between blame and holding responsible, as well as the sense in which the reactive attitudes may (*pace* Wallace 1994, pp. 63–64) be responses to *bad* actions as well as *wrong* actions.

And while Wallace (chapter 12) does not further defend a Strawsonian account of blame here (he has done that admirably in previous work), his essay demonstrates how well such an account fits with other aspects of morality and moral motivation.

#### 2.4. FUNCTIONAL ACCOUNTS

If you remain skeptical about the adequacy of any overt action, cognitive, conative, or affective account of blame, then it’s hard to know what other mental states or activities might do the job.<sup>34</sup> Then again, perhaps what dissatisfies you

---

<sup>32</sup> Wallace tries to make this response seem a bit more plausible by explaining that we might still be taking up the stance of holding those miscreants responsible (which one can do simply by believing that a reactive emotion would be fitting). See Wallace (1994, pp. 76–77).

<sup>33</sup> Another objection to the Strawsonian account is that it seems to shield blaming responses themselves from moral criticism, since reactive emotions are not typically thought of as under our control. But sometimes it does seem like one ought not to blame, so how can the Strawsonian account for this? Hieronymi (2004) raises this sort of objection, as does McKenna (chapter 7 in this volume).

<sup>34</sup> Perhaps a *volitional* account holds some promise. For an attempt to spell out such an account, drawing inspiration from the work of Harry Frankfurt, see Tognazzini (2012).

is that each of these accounts seems right in certain cases but wrong in other cases. Can't we construct a hybrid account of some sort?

Two of our authors, McGeer and Smith, argue that we can. Or rather, they argue that instead of asking which mental state or activity can perform the tasks that blame performs, we should simply identify blame with its tasks. That is, we should figure out what *function* blame serves and then allow the particular context to determine which mental state or activity best serves that function, and so let context determine which way of responding counts as blame.

Smith identifies blame, in all of its manifestations, with *protest*.<sup>35</sup> She builds on Scanlon's account but argues that it fails to capture the sense in which blame is communicative. Merely marking an impaired relationship does not count as blaming someone, Smith argues, unless it is done "as a way of *protesting* (i.e., registering and challenging) the moral claim implicit in her conduct, where such protest implicitly seeks some kind of moral acknowledgment on the part of the blameworthy agent and/or on the part of others in the moral community." And once we bring the idea of protest into the picture, we can allow blame to be the sort of variable phenomenon that we ordinarily take it to be.<sup>36</sup> (To be sure, both Sher and Scanlon can allow for the variability of blame, but Smith argues forcefully that an adequate account of blame needs to include explicit reference to its *aim* in order to get the right extension.)

McGeer is explicit that she understands blame in functionalist terms: "[Blame] is a state that is apt for being caused by perceived wrongdoing and apt for producing certain behavioral effects." She agrees with the Strawsonian that "the state that typically plays the causal role of blame in human beings is an affective state," though she is careful to point out that on a functionalist understanding of blame, affective states need not *always* be involved. In fact, McGeer presents a challenge to the standard methodology here, so it's worth elaborating on this point a bit.

Inquiry into the nature of blame typically proceeds by considering a candidate mental state or activity to see how well it fits with our considered judgments about the sort of work that blame is supposed to do. If it seems possible for blame to do its work without that particular mental state or activity, then we conclude that it cannot be part of the essence of blame. Each failed proposal will yield some data that we can add to a growing list of desiderata that any adequate account of blame must meet.

McGeer argues, however, that certain mental states or activities may well figure into an adequate account of blame even if they are not *always* or *necessarily* present in cases of blame. She distinguishes between "features whose

---

<sup>35</sup> Talbert (2012) also attempts to articulate a sense in which blame is a form of protest (though he focuses on blame's outward manifestations). Both Smith and Talbert draw on Boxill (1976) to make their case.

<sup>36</sup> See also Hieronymi (2001), which explains how the reactive attitude of resentment can be seen as a kind of protest.

contingent association with the phenomenon in question is of no criterial significance,” on the one hand, and “features that . . . account for our interest in identifying a kind as such, even though things belonging to the kind do not invariably manifest the feature in question,” on the other hand, and she argues that features of the latter sort may, despite being inessential, be included in an adequate account of blame. Respecting this point, she argues, will help us to construct an account of blame more psychologically realistic than many currently on the market.

In accordance with this distinction, McGeer maintains that “exceptional cases” (cases of emotionless blame) need not tell against an account of blame that puts the emotions front and center. She then goes on to explore the role that anger plays in human psychology, ultimately suggesting that our best bet for dealing with the emotionally unsavory side of blame is to admit that some of our practices and institutions need to be reshaped.

Other functionalist accounts of blame are possible, of course, depending on what one takes to be the aim of blame. Franklin (chapter 11), for example, argues that experiencing and expressing the reactive attitudes should be seen as a way of valuing morality. He presupposes a Strawsonian account of blame, but his claims about the aim and value of blame can stand alone and might serve as the foundation for alternative functionalist accounts. (We return to Franklin’s approach below.)

### 3. The Ethics of Blame

However, it’s not enough simply to give an analysis or interpretation of blame. Nor can we rest content with an explanation of its role or its significance in moral practice. We must ask a further question: When is it appropriate to blame?<sup>37</sup>

Following Scanlon (2008, p. 123), we use ‘the ethics of blame’ as a capacious (and apt) characterization of the diverse set of norms that govern our practices of blame. When we are sensitive to these norms, our blame will be appropriate; when we fail to blame in accord with these norms, our blame will be inappropriate. A satisfactory ethics of blame, then, will provide a systematic account of the norms that identify the *propriety* conditions on blame (i.e., the conditions that, when satisfied, render blame appropriate, all things considered). And there are at least three interdependent sets of propriety conditions governing blame. Specifically, there are conditions that (1) the transgressor,<sup>38</sup> (2) the would-be

---

<sup>37</sup> We use the word ‘appropriate’ at this juncture to cover a wide range of normative terms, since we may ask when blame is good, or permissible, or fair, and so on, each of which may raise distinct issues.

<sup>38</sup> A note on terminology: we use the unwieldy ‘transgressor’ in place of the more common ‘wrongdoer’ to leave open the possibility that sometimes blame is legitimately targeted at individuals who have merely acted badly (but not wrongly). On blame for bad actions, see Macnamara’s essay (chapter 8).

blamer, and (3) the blaming interaction must satisfy in order for blame to be appropriate. We'll (somewhat hesitantly) call these the conditions of blameworthiness, the conditions of jurisdiction, and the conditions of procedure.<sup>39</sup>

### 3.1. CONDITIONS OF BLAMEWORTHINESS

The first set of propriety conditions governing blame are those conditions under which transgressors are *blameworthy* or are *deserving* of blame.<sup>40</sup> Admittedly it might seem odd to characterize blameworthiness as falling within the purview of the ethics of blame since blameworthiness has been more traditionally associated with metaphysical questions concerning free will and moral responsibility. But as we suggested in section 1.2, blame is, in some important sense, prior to blameworthiness.<sup>41</sup> So understood, the free will debate is an aspect of an overall account of the ethics of blame. An agent will presumably be *unworthy* of blame—that is, he will be *excused* or *exempted* from blame—if he lacks certain capacities, but which capacities are relevant here will depend on the *nature* of blame itself and the *norms* of our blaming practices. As Smith points out (chapter 2):

If we interpret blame as mere negative moral evaluation, for example, then it would seem that the conditions of moral responsibility may be quite weak. . . . If, on the other hand, we interpret blame as a kind of explicit moral sanction involving harsh treatment, then it would seem that the conditions of moral responsibility may be more stringent.

Presumably the reason that the conditions on being morally responsible would be weaker if we interpreted blame primarily as a form of negative moral evaluation than they would be if we interpreted blame primarily as an explicit moral sanction is that negative moral evaluations aren't rendered *unfair* in cases in which the agent lacks certain relevant agential capacities, but plausibly, explicit moral sanction would be.

Of course, these issues naturally lead us to questions of free will, since it's plausible that some form of agential control is one of the relevant capacities.

---

<sup>39</sup> The conditions are distinguished roughly as follows. When the conditions of blameworthiness are satisfied, it will be appropriate for would-be blamers to blame *transgressors*. When the conditions of jurisdiction are satisfied, it will be appropriate for *would-be blamers* to blame transgressors. And when the conditions of procedure are satisfied, it will be appropriate for would-be blamers to *blame* transgressors. Obviously this is not perfect, and as Kelly's, Bell's, and Watson's contributions to the volume make clear (chapters 13, 14, and 15), these conditions are importantly related and interdependent. But for now we think they provide a useful way of carving up the conceptual landscape.

<sup>40</sup> For more on what it may mean for an agent to deserve blame, see McKenna's contribution to this volume (chapter 7).

<sup>41</sup> In addition to Strawson (1962), here we also follow, among others, Watson (1987b), Wallace (1994), and Fischer and Ravizza (1998), who all accept some version of this claim.

Since we have little to contribute to these debates here, we'll now turn to the other two sets of propriety conditions governing blame.

### 3.2. CONDITIONS OF JURISDICTION

The conditions of jurisdiction pick out those conditions that would-be blamers (or “blamers,” for short) must satisfy if their blame is to be appropriate. Thus when blamers meet the conditions of jurisdiction,<sup>42</sup> it is appropriate for *them* (i.e., *those particular blamers*) to blame transgressors for their actions (or character, beliefs, emotions, etc.). After all, an instance of blame can be inappropriate if the transgression that triggers the blame is not within the blamer's *jurisdiction*. And as we understand it, a blamer's jurisdiction refers to her moral and relational standing, her authority, and her normative powers: the “place” from which she blames. Thus threats to a blamer's moral and relational standing, authority, and normative powers are plausibly seen as threats to the propriety of her blame.

To illustrate the need for this set of propriety conditions, consider the following case (well-known from ninth-grade English classes) in which we cannot explain the impropriety of blame in terms of agents not being blame-worthy:

“Wait a minute,” snapped Tom, “I want to ask Mr. Gatsby one more question.”

“Go on,” Gatsby said politely.

“What kind of row are you trying to cause in my house anyhow?”

They were out in the open at last and Gatsby was content.

“He wasn't causing a row.” Daisy looked desperately from one to the other. “You're causing a row. Please have a little self control.”

“Self control!” repeated Tom incredulously. “I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife. Well, if that's the idea you can count me out. . . . Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions and next they'll throw everything overboard.” (Fitzgerald 1995, pp. 136–37)

In this tense scene, it's natural to interpret Tom as blaming Daisy and (especially) Gatsby for their affair. After all, it's plausible to think that his incredulity reveals a deep resentment for how he has been treated—how Daisy and Gatsby have failed to regard his standing as her husband. And taken in isolation, such blame seems to be appropriate. If *anyone* has the standing to blame another for an affair, certainly it is the aggrieved spouse.

---

<sup>42</sup> “Conditions of jurisdiction” is a bit misleading. However, because the more accurate “conditions related to the jurisdiction of a would-be blamer” is unwieldy, we'll stick with it.

The problem here, though, is that Tom himself is involved in a tawdry affair. So if you're like us, you probably think that Tom's blame in this scene is hypocritical, and hence in some sense objectionable. And if we're right in thinking that Tom's blame is inappropriate, then this alone shows that the blameworthiness of the transgressors is not sufficient for the propriety of blame. After all, surely Gatsby and Daisy are blameworthy for their affair. Yet something still seems inappropriate about Tom's blame. This (and a wide range of similar cases) suggests that there is a set of propriety conditions that must obtain if particular blamers are to be justified in their blame. And plausibly, if the above case is any indication, hypocrisy undermines the propriety of a blamer's blame. But while a great number of theorists agree on this point, there's often disagreement about why hypocrisy undermines Tom's standing (disagreement that reflects broader disagreements about what blame is).

To explain the impropriety of blame like Tom's, T. M. Scanlon (2008) has suggested that hypocrisy undermines a blamer's standing to blame because in cases of hypocritical blame, it is the blamer rather than the transgressor who has impaired the relationship. And since, on Scanlon's account, blame *marks* an impairment in a relationship, the hypocritical blamer fails to mark any impairment at all, since her relationship has already been impaired in the relevant way by her own transgressions. Her blame is therefore inaccurate. In the above case, Scanlon would explain the impropriety of Tom's blame simply by pointing out that it wasn't appropriate for him to adjust his intentions toward Daisy since his own affair was responsible for undermining the fabric of fidelity that underwrites marriages.

But Scanlon's account is not without its detractors. In contrast to Scanlon, Wallace (2010) argues that hypocrisy undermines a blamer's standing to blame because hypocritical blame essentially involves a denial of the equal moral standing of persons. Wallace claims that when we submit others to the burdensome sanctions associated with blame while shielding ourselves from such affects (say, by not feeling guilty enough to refrain from continued wrongdoing, by not regarding ourselves as owing others apologies, etc.), we attach "differential significance to the interests of the persons whom [we] blame and to [ourselves]" (p. 333). But to attach a differential significance in this way is to violate the standard of equal consideration for all persons—that is, the very standard that underwrites the possibility of moral community. On Wallace's view, an agent's moral standing to blame cannot outstrip her commitment to the equal standing of persons. Thus some transgressions and transgressors do not fall within the jurisdiction of the hypocrite. And this certainly seems to be the case for Tom. While he affords himself leniency, he refuses to extend the same freedom to his wife and her lover. Accordingly, his blame is objectionable.

But despite widespread agreement that hypocrisy is a threat to the propriety of blame, Macalester Bell (chapter 14) forcefully and provocatively argues that it is not. Rather than seeing hypocritical blame as something a transgressor

should be protected from, she emphasizes our role as *targets* of blame. According to Bell, when it satisfies at least one of its five aims, blame helps to shield moral communities from the serious moral damage done by transgressions. So when we are targeted with blame—even hypocritical blame—we shouldn't rely on deflecting defenses that dismiss the content of the blame (e.g., "Who are *you* to criticize me?"); instead we should take seriously the content of the blame and respond to it accordingly.

But even if Bell is right to think that hypocrisy doesn't threaten the propriety of blame, there are other potential threats to a blamer's jurisdiction. For example, the nature of the relationship between transgressor and blamer is also relevant. Whereas Jennifer's parents can blame her for flunking out of school, we can't.<sup>43</sup> Because of their close relationship, Jennifer's failure has a significant impact on her parents' lives; she has (perhaps) wasted thousands of dollars of their money. By contrast, her failure has little or no impact on our lives.<sup>44</sup> Accordingly, blame doesn't seem appropriate; it's simply none of our business.<sup>45</sup> Of course, even strangers have some relationship grounded in their equal standing as persons in the moral community. And this explains why some of Jennifer's actions, even when we don't know her, plausibly fall within our jurisdiction. Though it may be inappropriate to blame Jennifer for her failure at school, it would certainly be appropriate to blame her if we discovered that she was responsible for a murder.

In her contribution to this volume (chapter 13), Erin Kelly discusses what can be thought of as a further propriety condition on jurisdiction. Kelly considers the nature and significance of excusing conditions—conditions under which we should excuse transgressors from blame. According to Kelly, "[E]xcuses represent a threshold of reasonable expectations formed by reference to norms about the burdens we morally expect persons, generally speaking, to bear in order to do the right thing." Thus in seeing a transgressor as excused, we are regarding her in ways that invite compassion. Accordingly, we regard her as having acted wrongly (or badly, as the case may be) but as nevertheless an inappropriate target of our blame. Of course, we regard her in these ways not simply because we recognize something deficient in the transgressor, but also because we recognize that *we* cannot have reasonably expected better from her.<sup>46</sup> This suggests that whether we have the jurisdiction to blame will

---

<sup>43</sup> We could presumably judge Jennifer blameworthy, but, as we suggested above, there is a distinction between judging blameworthy and blaming.

<sup>44</sup> Of course, the impact of their attitudes and actions on our lives isn't what grounds our relationships with others, but the degree to which others' attitudes and actions impact our lives often reflects the depth of the relationships.

<sup>45</sup> "If the harm isn't gross or the injustice egregious (no crime against humanity), if our concern, though earnest, is idle, then high-minded indignation has odors of moral self-indulgence" (Wertheimer 1998, p. 499).

<sup>46</sup> For a similar set of cases, see Fischer and Tognazzini (2011).

ultimately depend on what we can reasonably expect of others. It likewise suggests that the propriety of our blame will depend on whether reasons of compassion, which arise when we are sufficiently reflective about the potentially excusing conditions transgressors find themselves in, are especially weighty.

Of course, these are not the only considerations that go into determining whether the blamer has jurisdiction in a particular case. (G. A. Cohen [2006] and Angela Smith [2007], for example, have more to say about these particular issues.)<sup>47</sup> But rather than focus on these specific norms, we turn now from issues related specifically to would-be blamers to issues tied to the propriety of specific blaming interactions.

### 3.3. CONDITIONS ON PROCEDURE

The final class of propriety conditions that we'll consider are those conditions that must obtain if particular blaming interactions are to be appropriate. Although it's hard to say exactly where conditions of blameworthiness and conditions of jurisdiction end and where conditions of procedure begin, these conditions are usefully distinguished, since it's possible that even if the conditions of blameworthiness and the conditions of jurisdiction are satisfied, particular instances of blame are nevertheless inappropriate. For example, one way that particular instances of blame might be inappropriate is if the transgression that triggers the blame is relatively minor but the blame manifests itself in extremely severe and burdensome ways. While it might be appropriate to chide a friend for being fifteen minutes late, surely it's inappropriate to end the relationship over the same slight. Just as the punishment must fit the crime, so too must the blaming interaction fit the transgression.

There is also an epistemic condition that blaming interactions must satisfy. Just as we think criminal courts shouldn't convict if there is a reasonable doubt as to the defendant's guilt, it's plausible to think that we shouldn't blame others if there are good reasons to doubt that the potential target of blame is blameworthy for her actions.<sup>48</sup> It's plausible that the epistemic standards on criminal punishment should be higher than the epistemic standards on blame in informal interpersonal contexts, in part because there's a great deal more at stake in the case of criminal punishment. This would suggest that we had better be sure of what we're doing to a much greater degree when we threaten a transgressor with coercive detainment or execution than in cases of interpersonal blame (which threatens transgressors with comparatively light sanctions, if any). But

---

<sup>47</sup> For insightful discussions of a blamer's jurisdiction, as applied to a legal context, see Duff (2010); Tadros (2009).

<sup>48</sup> In chapter 6 of this volume, David Shoemaker argues that criminal punishment and informal blame are importantly dissimilar. However, as you'll see there, the dissimilarities that Shoemaker points to do not impugn our invocation of legal contexts on this point.

notice that although blamers must be epistemically responsible in their blame, this is not an issue of jurisdiction. A jury that convicts a defendant even though there are good reasons to doubt her guilt has done something inappropriate, but this impropriety doesn't arise from issues of jurisdiction. Rather, something about how they have deliberated and issued a verdict has gone wrong—that is, it's a procedural issue. And the same is true in cases of epistemically irresponsible blame.

In his contribution to the volume (chapter 15), Gary Watson considers two procedural issues relating to the vice of judgmentalism, which he understands as an overwillingness to criticize and blame others for their faults. Specifically, Watson considers and analyzes two forms of judgmentalism, the first of which involves a failure of interpretive generosity and the second of which involves a lack of acceptance of others' faults. His penetrating discussion connects the ethics of blame to the ethics of interpersonal relationships more generally, while weaving together issues related to jurisdiction and procedure.

Of course, there is much more to say about the ethics of blame (e.g., see chapters 12–15), and we haven't even touched on the ethics of the broader blaming context, including the norms governing apology, mercy, and forgiveness. It's undeniable that reasons for compassion, mercy, and forgiveness sometimes outweigh the reasons for blame, and a full ethics of blame will appreciate and reflect this fact.<sup>49</sup> Hence, given the richness of these topics, as well as their significance for meaningful relationships of the sort that we regularly enjoy, we simply note that this is an area especially ripe for future research.

#### 4. Skepticism about Blame

We want to conclude by considering whether blame is valuable, something worth preserving. If blame turns out to have little or no value, then shouldn't we try to excise it, and its associated pain and suffering, from our moral lives?

Watson raises this challenge forcefully for Strawson's account of blame in his "Responsibility and the Limits of Evil" (1987b). Pointing to Strawson's (1962) discussion of resentment, Watson notes that for Strawson, blaming others is typically a retributive act, one that involves a withdrawal of goodwill toward transgressors and a willingness to participate in or otherwise sanction the suffering of the transgressor. But Watson notes that this seems to tell against an ideal of human relationships that regards such retributive responses as poisonous. The ideal in question is "an ideal of human fellowship

---

<sup>49</sup> A full ethics of blame may also need to appreciate the point made forcefully by Cheshire Calhoun (1989, p. 405) that "it may be reasonable to reproach moral failings even when individuals are not blameworthy."

or love which embodies values that are . . . important to our civilization” (Watson 1987b, p. 257). When we laud revolutionaries like Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr., we are celebrating this ideal—one that takes seriously the wrongs perpetrated against oppressed groups without acquiescing to the desire to inflict suffering on transgressors. The success of Gandhi and King in bringing about significant social change without succumbing to unhealthy drives aimed at causing suffering provides us with a reason to doubt the value of blame, at least on some interpretations of blame. Even if there are some *pro tanto* reasons for blaming, it doesn’t follow that blaming is a valuable activity that should be, all things considered, endorsed and pursued. If we are to make room for blame as an activity to be engaged in, we need an account of the value and significance of blame that either sidesteps the issue by showing why blame doesn’t involve the dispositions to inflict suffering that Watson points to, or justifies the worrisome infliction of suffering that seems internal to many extant accounts of blame.<sup>50</sup>

In our view, this is a significant challenge.<sup>51</sup> Pereboom (chapter 10) reiterates this challenge when he argues that several extant conceptions of blame are consistent with thinking that retributive blaming responses to transgressions are never justified, since such conceptions are divorced from the retributive reactive attitudes.<sup>52</sup> Specifically, Pereboom argues that both Sher’s and Scanlon’s accounts of blame are consistent with the human ideal that Watson points to, since neither of these accounts involves essential reference to the retributive sentiments. After all, blame (as understood by Sher and Scanlon) is an activity that facilitates and maintains meaningful human relationships. Here we see a central value of blame—namely its role in underwriting interpersonal relationships. But it’s important for Pereboom that blame play this role without presupposing the legitimacy of or otherwise involving retributive responses. In this sense, Pereboom shows us a way we can sidestep Watson’s challenge.

Of course, since Watson’s challenge is really only a challenge for reactive attitude theorists (i.e., those who identify blame with the reactive attitudes of resentment, indignation, and guilt), Pereboom’s reply isn’t so much an answer to Watson’s challenge as it is a concession (one that Pereboom is all too happy to make!) that the retributive features of (some conceptions of) blame are not only poisonous but unimportant. But what of those who take the reactive attitudes to be essential to blame? Do they have a leg to stand on?

---

<sup>50</sup> In her contribution (chapter 9), McGeer calls the first project that of “domesticating blame,” and she thinks that at best it produces a psychologically distorted view of blame. She prefers to engage in the project of (merely) “civilizing blame,” accepting its potentially troubling emotional core but urging a revision in some of our blaming practices.

<sup>51</sup> For some other potential pitfalls of blaming that might make one worried about its value, all things considered, see Williams (2003).

<sup>52</sup> For Pereboom, such responses are never justified because we are never morally responsible (and so never blameworthy) for our actions.

In his contribution to this volume (chapter 11), Franklin argues that the reactive attitude account of blame does have the resources to answer Watson's challenge. According to Franklin, when we blame others for their transgressions, we are valuing moral values. And because the reactive attitudes are internal to blame on Franklin's account, they are directly implicated in the activity of committing ourselves to moral values. Franklin argues for this claim by considering what our commitment to moral values would look like if we were to abandon blame as a sensible response to transgressions. He argues that if we failed to respond emotionally in the ways characteristic of blame to morally significant transgressions, then we would have good reason to doubt our commitment to moral values in the first place. Thus for Franklin, the value of blame is itself tied to its role in cementing our commitment to moral values.<sup>53</sup>

But this isn't to deny that in certain circumstances our emotional responses can lead to the unhealthy or poisonous acquiescence to the suffering of transgressors. This is certainly true (and not something, we think, that Franklin would want to deny).<sup>54</sup> But to take seriously Watson's challenge or Pereboom's restatement of Watson's challenge would be, on Franklin's view, to make an equally extreme mistake. Though we shouldn't celebrate the unhealthy aspects of retributive blaming responses, to fail to engage with transgressors via the reactive attitudes is ultimately to fail to take seriously the significance of the offense in question. This suggests a further value in blame, one articulated by Bell (chapter 14). According to Bell, blame is valuable because it "helps to shield and protect [the moral community] from the moral damage wrought by wrongdoing." So not only is blame a way in which we value moral values, but it also plays this role in part because it protects the moral community from the damage done to our values by transgressions.

While Franklin and Bell seem to point to genuine values associated with blame, we wonder whether they provide an adequate response to Watson's challenge. In particular we wonder why blame pruned of its essential connection to the reactive attitudes cannot play the roles that Franklin and Bell point to. (Franklin himself addresses this in his objection to Sher's view.) Indeed, this is Pereboom's view. After all, suppose that an agent responds to an instance of wrongdoing by blaming the wrongdoer in those ways characterized by Scanlon. Though she is not essentially emotionally exercised, it's plausible to think that her marking of an impairment in her relationship with the wrongdoer in a way that affects her standing intentions toward the wrongdoer itself constitutes a form of valuing moral values. Moreover, such a response to wrongdoing plausibly can, in certain circumstances, serve to shield and protect the moral community from the moral damage of moral transgression.

---

<sup>53</sup> Wallace (2011) also seems to accept something like this view.

<sup>54</sup> Of course, if McGeer is correct, then even these potentially unhealthy or poisonous responses to blame can be normatively and interpersonally significant.

Thus ultimately, whether the reactive attitudes are required for blame to have the sort of value Franklin and Bell point to will depend on whether the reactive attitudes are really required for the activities of valuing and protecting respectively. And if so, then plausibly Franklin and Bell are on to something important concerning the value of blame. But if not, more needs to be said. Thus this too points to important directions for future research concerning both the nature of the reactive emotions and their role in our valuation of moral values.

## 5. Conclusion

We hope we have made clear that blame is an extraordinarily rich topic, and we are grateful to each of the authors in this volume for helping to advance our understanding of it. Yet there is still much work to be done. By way of conclusion, we'll mention a few issues that seem especially ripe for future research.

The first is the nature of the reactive emotions. It doesn't take a very detailed understanding of resentment to see the plausibility of the Strawsonian account of blame, but we suspect that coming to a deeper understanding will help to further clarify the account and will likely shield it from some of the objections raised above.

Another issue is the nature of praise. We raised some doubts at the beginning of this chapter about whether praise is truly analogous to blame in any morally interesting sense, and similar suspicions have cropped up here and there in the contemporary literature (see, e.g., Wolf 1990; Watson 1996). Recent work by Coleen Macnamara (2011) also explores some interesting disanalogies between praise and blame. This suggests that a full understanding of praise will require an independent inquiry, which is something very few philosophers have undertaken.

Finally, given the rise of accounts of blame that emphasize relationships, it would be good to try to get a better understanding of what exactly they involve. Wallace suggests in his essay (chapter 12) that relationships will lie at the very heart of morality itself, and that certainly seems like an attractive view. But what sorts of relationships are involved, and what actions and attitudes ground those relationships?

One of the difficulties of working on a topic like blame—though perhaps any philosophical topic is like this—is that, as Robert Frost put it, “way leads on to way,” and soon you feel the need to have a theory about everything in order to write about anything. At those times we do well to take Strawson's advice to remember “what it is actually like to be involved in ordinary interpersonal relationships” and resist the urge to “over-intellectualize the facts.” For a philosopher, that's an exceedingly difficult task. But at least we have an example to follow.