

Blame as a Volitional Activity

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Note to the reader: this is a paper I wrote in the summer of 2011. I shopped it around to a few journals, but without success. Eventually the literature on blame moved on, and I came to realize I would need to start completely from scratch if I ever wanted to publish a version of this paper. I haven't had the heart to complete that project, but I still like the view articulated in this paper, so I thought I'd put it up on PhilPapers for safekeeping.

Blame is fascinating yet elusive, and it is both of these things because it is so complex. Often it engages all the capacities that make our moral lives so rich, but for this reason its essence is difficult to discern. It seems to have a cognitive aspect – the belief that someone has done something wrong, perhaps, together with the thought that the person has no excuse to offer – but it also seems to have an emotional aspect – anger or indignation at a display of disrespect, for example. And these two aspects are by no means unconnected: blameworthy behavior may well trigger beliefs about the appropriate emotional response, and perhaps only anger that is in some way tied to beliefs about wrongdoing will be relevant to an analysis of blame.

In addition to beliefs and emotions, though, blame also seems to be associated with desires, both backward- and forward-looking. After a colleague spreads vicious rumors about me, I might really wish he hadn't done that, but at the same time want him to recognize his wrong and apologize. And then of course there is the outside-of-the-head aspect of blame, which manifests itself in rebukes and reprimands, accusations and distrust, cold shoulders and estrangement. An extreme but not uncommon case might run as follows: you betray my trust and remain unapologetic after I confront you, I take it as confirmation that you really are a bastard after all, I feel hurt and angry, I give you a piece of my mind, things get ugly, I slam the door behind me and we never speak again, though I often think of you and wish we could somehow get back to the way things were. A more optimistic ending has us exchange apologies and begin the long process of rebuilding trust and intimacy – though that ending can quickly start to sound more like a sappy movie than like real life.

So, garden-variety instances of blame will involve a complex *mélange* of beliefs, desires, emotions, and actions. But which of these various aspects of the blaming scenario actually constitutes the blame? I'm not altogether sure that this question has an answer, but each element has its proponents in the philosophical literature. R. Jay Wallace (1994, 2011), for instance, argues that the reactive emotions of resentment, indignation, and guilt form the essential core of blame. George Sher (2006) takes blame to include both a judgment of wrongdoing and a backward-looking desire that the wrong not have been done. Pamela Hieronymi (2004) contends that the judgment that a person has shown ill-will can by itself carry the force of blame. T. M. Scanlon (2008) maintains that blame is

an adjustment in one's intentions, expectations, and behavior toward someone who has done something to impair his relationship with you.

These accounts are all subtle and insightful, and I'm inclined to think they all articulate some important aspect of the situations in which it is natural to use the word 'blame'. But there is one other aspect of these situations that tends to be overlooked, and which I would like to focus on here. In addition to beliefs, desires, emotions, and actions, blame often involves changes in the structure of the will. In what follows, I will sketch (though I will not insist upon) an account of blame that gives pride of place to these volitional changes.

1.

Any account of blame has to try to accommodate a number of intuitions about cases that apparently involve blame, and this proves an exceedingly difficult task because these cases often appear to elicit conflicting intuitions. It may of course turn out that any theoretically fruitful analysis of blame will have to jettison certain intuitions for the sake of other virtues, but before that question even arises we should take a moment to see what the data are.

To begin, if it is to be morally interesting, blame will have to be distinct from certain sorts of "at fault" or "to blame" judgments. Both of those phrases are often used merely to assign causal responsibility for an unwelcome event, and in that sense we can blame just about anything, even inanimate objects. The rock is to blame for the crack in my windshield, and it's the rainstorm's fault that there are so many rocks on the road in the first place. We do assign causal responsibility to people, of course – it's still your fault my platter broke, even if it was an accident – but this sort of blame is not what's at issue, or at least not *all* of what's at issue, in debates about free will and moral responsibility.

But while blame is surely more than a judgment of causal responsibility, there are a number of other reactions to wrongdoing that deserve to be distinguished and that may or may not be correctly describable as blame. I've mentioned several already, but let's take a bit of time now to go through them more slowly. For each, I'll try to say a bit both about why it might, but also might not, make sense to call it *blame*.

Let's begin in the head, so to speak. One of the most natural and immediate reactions we might have to an instance of wrongdoing, at least if we are aware of it, is simply to form the belief that it occurred. (To talk of a *reaction* in this case sounds a bit odd, in fact, since *believing that it occurred* does not seem to be a way of reacting to the occurrence of an event. Perhaps the more general word 'response' would be better.) But again, if it is to be morally interesting, such a belief will have to tie the wrongdoing to the person who did wrong: it will be a belief, not just that some wrongdoing entered the world, but that *she* did wrong. This is a more robust way of understanding "at fault" judgments than mere causal responsibility: you may be at fault (in the causal responsibility sense) for the fact that my platter broke if its breaking is traceable to the movement of your body, but if you intentionally threw it onto the floor, then its breaking may be your fault (in this more robust sense) because it is traceable to *you*. What exactly is meant by the emphasis on the word 'you' here is a matter of controversy, but the implication is that some of your morally significant psychological capacities were involved

in the breaking of the platter, capacities that may even make you the sort of agent that you are.¹

The content of the belief in question might be specified in a number of different ways, and in fact may not involve a thought about *wrongdoing* at all, at least if that's taken to be a matter of violating the principles that tell us what we owe to each other. Gary Watson, for example, points out that we often make judgments about the quality of each other's conduct even if that conduct violates no norms of interpersonal relations, and even if the conduct doesn't call for any sort of sanction. Such appraisals, according to Watson's terminology, are made from the *aretaic* perspective, and they are an important part of our practices of moral responsibility.² At their core, they are judgments that some vice or shoddy bit of behavior is attributable to someone in a sense robust enough to implicate their practical identity, their evaluative commitments. (Though David Shoemaker has recently argued that aretaic appraisals can be made even of aspects of an agent that are not responsive to or chosen in light of reasons, so the notion of 'commitment' here needs to be handled with a light touch.³

Pamela Hieronymi (2004), on the other hand, focuses on a different sort of belief that nevertheless seems central to our practices of moral responsibility, namely a belief about the wrongdoer's quality of will. Often what we are reacting to is the fact that someone has showed ill-will, either toward us or toward someone we care about. If you think that showing ill-will is a form of disrespect, and you think that the basic demand of morality is to show respect, then perhaps it will be morally wrong to act with ill-will, but it may still be true that what we are reacting to isn't the fact of wrongness itself, but instead the quality of will. In any case, when someone does display ill-will toward us or those we love, a first response will be simply to believe that it has happened.

So, one way we respond to the conduct of others is by coming to believe certain propositions: that the conduct is rooted in a vicious character, that someone has shown ill-will, that someone has done wrong. Do such beliefs constitute blame? Well, they certainly seem to bear some of its hallmarks. For one thing, it's uncomfortable to be blamed, and similarly uncomfortable when someone thinks you've done wrong. In the process of defending the view that a judgment of ill-will can carry the sort of force typically associated with blame, Hieronymi makes this point forcefully:

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...a change in what you or another person thinks about the quality of your will, in itself, changes your relations with them. Insofar as it is important to stand in relations in which goodwill is

¹ George Sher gives a compelling account of what the emphasis on *you* amounts to in his 2006, ch. 3.

² See Watson 1996, reprinted in Watson 2004. In this article, Watson distinguishes between two "faces" of moral responsibility -- an aretaic face and an accountability face -- and argues that they are different but equally valid parts of our moral responsibility practices.

³ See Shoemaker 2011. Shoemaker argues that appraisals made from the aretaic perspective -- what he calls judgments of *attributability*, following Watson -- are distinct from appraisals that essentially imply the agent's ability to reason. In Shoemaker's terminology, these latter appraisals are judgments of *answerability*.

recognized, the judgment that you have shown ill will itself carries a certain force (Hieronymi 2004, p. 124).⁴

For another thing, figuring out whom to blame for some untoward event seems to be a search that is guided by looking for a wrongdoer, and once the wrongdoer is found, the search is over. If we find out that Jones has been stealing from the till for selfish reasons, then it's not clear that there's anything else we need to do or feel in order to blame him. We've discovered that it's his fault, and to believe this just is to blame him (it may seem).

2.

But there are also reasons to think that mere judgments are insufficiently robust to count as blame. You might think, for instance, that it is one thing to judge someone blameworthy and quite another to actually blame him. The account we are currently considering, however, threatens to conflate these two.⁵ Moreover, even if Hieronymi is right about how much we care about standing in relations of mutual regard (and surely she is right about this), it's not clear that a mere judgment of ill-will or wrongdoing would impair such a relation. You and I might jointly commit armed robbery, and I might truly believe that your behavior displayed ill-will, and that you did something wrong, but this might nevertheless not alter my relationship with you at all, and it certainly seems possible that I not blame you for it. This is a worry that a judgment of wrongdoing is not sufficient for blame, but there is also a worry about the other direction, as well. Can't I find myself in the position of unwillingly blaming someone while at the same time acknowledging that he has done no wrong? It seems intelligible to say, "I know it's not his fault, but I blame him anyway", even if the appropriate response to it is to recommend therapy.

Finally, as many theorists have pointed out, blame seems to be an activity that one can appropriately engage in only if one has the *standing* to do so.⁶ In order to blame appropriately, one has to be *in a position to do so*, and often we are not in the right position if, say, we have performed similar actions in the past, or if we don't stand in the right relationship to the wrongdoer. But if blame is just a judgment of wrongdoing, how could it require standing? Why would anyone need to be in any special position in order to appropriately believe what's true?

So, while we do clearly form beliefs about quality of will and make appraisals about bad or wrong actions, there is some reason to worry that these beliefs and appraisals alone can provide an adequate account of the nature of blame. Let's consider, then,

⁴ It's unclear whether Hieronymi is arguing that blame *just is* a judgment that ill-will has been shown, or whether she is merely arguing that such a judgment can carry the *force* of blame, even if blame itself is something more.

⁵ Perhaps this is not a bad thing. Elizabeth Beardsley makes the intriguing suggestion (discussed a bit further by Angela Smith (2008)) that the word 'blameworthy' misleadingly suggests that there is something wrongdoers are "worthy of", namely blame. She instead suggests the word 'culpable', since, as she points out, it will tempt no one to speculate about what precisely it means to "culp" someone! See Beardsley 1969, p. 34. T. M. Scanlon also makes some remarks that seem to imply that one way of blaming someone *is* simply to judge that he is blameworthy. (See Scanlon 2008, p. 130.) But Scanlon is slippery on this point.

⁶ For a particularly clear discussion of how issues of standing might affect the appropriateness of blame, see Smith 2007.

another way that we naturally respond to the actions of others. Often when what you've done concerns me or someone I care about, I'll respond not just by coming to certain conclusions about your behavior, but also by acting on those conclusions. I might demand that you explain yourself, or tell you to knock it off, or slam a door in your face, or any number of other actions that match the gravity of the situation.

There are some fruitful distinctions to be drawn between these various overt responses – for example, demanding an explanation seems in some sense “prior” to issuing a rebuke; the former seems more akin to an accusation, the latter to a punishment⁷ – but the important question for our purposes is whether they can form the core of an account of blame. It can be tempting to think of blame as a mild and unofficial form of punishment, as a mechanism for making people feel guilty and encouraging them to apologize and make amends.⁸ Moreover, conceptualizing blame in terms of actions taken against a wrongdoer avoids the problems that we raised for the belief account discussed above. If to blame someone is to respond with certain actions, then we get a nice distinction between blaming and judging blameworthy. It's one thing to judge that you deserve to be treated in a certain way, another to treat you in that way. I can make the appropriate judgment without acting on it, and the other direction works, too – I can perform blaming actions without the corresponding judgment. Finally, whereas it seemed mysterious to suppose that someone might need standing in order to believe the truth, it seems less mysterious to suppose that an overt response might be rendered inappropriate by things like hypocrisy and unfamiliarity. In particular, it might be *unfair* for me to rebuke you, even if my judgment that you have done wrong is perfectly warranted.⁹

3.

But while judgments of wrongdoing seemed insufficient for blame, actions in response to wrongdoing seem unnecessary. As many theorists have pointed out, we blame many people who are, for various reasons, inaccessible to us. Long dead historical figures are the objects of our blame no less than our contemporaries, and miscreants in countries we will never visit and whose deeds are known to us only through the media get blamed no less than our next-door neighbor whose trashy house is making the neighborhood look bad.¹⁰ Moreover, just as it seems we can judge blameworthy without actually blaming, so it seems that we can blame without *expressing* blame. In fact, the interpersonal significance of actions like rebukes and demands seems to come from the fact that they are outward expressions of something that we think or feel. Without those thoughts and feelings to give it significance, a rebuke may still be uncomfortable in the way a loud noise is uncomfortable to hear, but it wouldn't make us feel bad in the way we do when

⁷ Cf. Duff 2010: “Blame begins, logically, as an accusation...failing an exculpatory explanation, what began as an accusation to be answered turns into a conclusory condemnation” (p. 123).

⁸ Antony Duff (1991, ch. 2) does a particularly nice job of articulating this aim of expressing disapproval, and he calls it ‘blame’, though he qualifies his account by saying that it is an account of what it is to blame someone “to her face”. The qualification seems to indicate his recognition that there is more to blame (or another sense, at least) than the expression of disapproval.

⁹ R. Jay Wallace (2010) spells out one compelling explanation for the origin of such unfairness.

¹⁰ Many have noted this point, including J. E. R. Squires (1968).

we are the object of blame.¹¹ Expressions of blame are no doubt morally important for various reasons – they may even form the essential core of the concept of *holding responsible* or *holding accountable* – but for blame itself, it looks like we need to head back into the head, or perhaps the heart.

In response to wrongdoing, we not only believe things and do things, but we also feel things. We feel hurt, perhaps, if we have been disrespected by someone we considered a friend. We feel indignant about the wrongs that others endure. We feel angry, annoyed, frustrated, resentful, disappointed, sad, and many other things too nuanced to be summed up by one word. As with beliefs and actions, there are important distinctions to be made among the ways we respond emotionally to wrongdoing. Some of these feelings, for example, will come with rather robust propositional content, whereas others won't. Someone who feels sad may not be sad *about* anything in particular – they just generally feel sad – but someone who feels resentful is typically resentful *of* someone *for* some particular injury done. Resentment is *directed*, we might say, in a way that sadness need not be.¹² Perhaps relatedly, some of these feelings may be, to borrow a phrase from Gary Watson, “incipiently forms of communication” (Watson 1987, reprinted in Watson 2004, p. 230). In particular, resentment and indignation may, in the words of P. F. Strawson, “reflect an expectation of, and demand for, the manifestation of a certain degree of goodwill or regard on the part of other human beings toward ourselves” (Strawson 1962, reprinted in Watson 2003, p. 84). Again, frustration is probably not communicative in the same way.

So, perhaps if we focus on the subset of emotions that seems to embody a response to injury and a demand for regard – that is to say, Strawson's reactive attitudes – we will find an adequate account of blame. To blame, on this account, is simply to feel one of these emotions, the central examples of which are resentment, indignation, and guilt.

Strawson himself seems to have held something like this view -- though he also somewhat implausibly tied the reactive attitudes to “the preparedness to acquiesce in [the] infliction of suffering on the offender” (Strawson 1962, as reprinted in Watson 2003, p. 90-91)¹³ – but the most influential statement of it comes from R. Jay Wallace. According to what he calls the reactive account of responsibility, “holding people responsible involves a susceptibility to a range of reactive emotions, so that to blame a person is to be subject to one of these reactive emotions, because of what the person is done” (Wallace 1994, p. 75).¹⁴

This view has a number of virtues. Unlike the belief account, construing blame in terms of the reactive emotions allows us to draw a clear line between judging that someone is blameworthy and actually blaming them. In fact, this account allows us to say

¹¹ See also Sher 2008, chapter 5.

¹² R. Jay Wallace (1994) defends in detail a particularly compelling view of which propositions in particular are involved in emotions like resentment.

¹³ Lawrence Stern (1974) takes issue with this part of Strawson's discussion using the examples of King and Gandhi as people who likely held negative sentiments toward wrongdoers but did not want wrongdoers to suffer.

¹⁴ What Wallace means by ‘holding people responsible’ here is more naturally expressed by the phrase ‘regarding people as responsible agents’. It is a stance, not an activity.

– as it seems we should – that judging blameworthy and blaming can vary independently of one another. I might resent you without thinking you’ve done anything wrong (and so sign up for therapy) or I might think you’ve done something wrong without resenting you (and so congratulate you on a robbery well executed). Unlike the action account, the emotion account can accommodate unexpressed blame; even if the reactive attitudes are “incipiently forms of communication”, one can, at least sometimes, prevent them from escaping their incipience. And this in turn allows us to make sense of blaming the dead and the distant. The trick in constructing an adequate account of blame, Wallace tells us, is “to find space between two extremes...between, on the one hand, factual avowal, and on the other sanctioning behavior” (Wallace 2011, p. 348). The emotion account seems like a promising middle ground.

4.

Of course, it is not without its own difficulties. For one thing, although it is clearly possible to resent the dead and the distant, it’s not clear that we need be so emotionally exercised by their misdeeds in order to count as blaming them. Nomy Arpaly (who is something akin to a belief theorist about blame – see below), for example, maintains that “one can blame Julius Caesar for some of his actions without ever feeling anger, resentment, or indignation toward him” (Arpaly 2006, p. 12), and there does seem to be something right about this. King Henry VIII was kind of a bastard, and I blame him for - - well, lots of things, I suppose, but I’m not going to get all worked up about it. George Sher raises a similar worry. He says:

Blaming is something that we can do regretfully or dispassionately and that need not be accompanied by any rancor or withdrawal of good will...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 (Sher 2006, p. 89).

Perhaps the proponent of the emotion account could respond by maintaining that we are not actually blaming in these cases, but instead merely just judging blameworthy. It does seem a bit odd, though, to say that although I think Henry VIII was a bastard, I don’t blame him for what he did.

But if a judgment of blameworthiness is insufficient to count as blame, and actions and emotions are unnecessary, what sorts of reaction are left to help us construct an account of blame? Here we come to a number of hybrid accounts – that is, accounts that attempt to supplement the judgment of blameworthiness with some other element (which is neither action nor emotion) so that the combination is just robust enough, but not too robust, to count as blame. I won’t examine these accounts in detail, and I won’t subject them to serious critique, but it may be useful to see how they are similar to one another. I’ll mention three such accounts.

I said above that Nomy Arpaly is a sort of belief theorist, but in fact she thinks that something needs to be added to a judgment of ill-will in order for it to count as blame. In addition, she says, the blamer needs to be “ ‘in favor’ of morality at some

level...He needs to be ‘for’ morality – that is, have a certain amount of moral concern himself” (Arpaly 2006, pp. 25-26). This extra element deals with the co-conspirators worry from above (and Arpaly’s own worry about whether it makes sense to say that the Devil blames Hitler), but it also ties blame closely with the reactive emotions, since a genuine concern for morality will leave one vulnerable to resentment and indignation when injury has been done. This seems a plausible addition to the unadorned belief account.¹⁵

George Sher (2006) also makes an intriguing addition to mere belief that someone has done wrong. In particular, he suggests that when we blame someone, we also have a backward-oriented desire that the person not have done wrong. When someone has done wrong, our desire that they not have done so has been frustrated, and this frustration can lead us to feel and act in the ways that are characteristic of blame. So Sher also gets around the co-conspirators worry, while at the same time explaining why the reactive emotions often accompany (but need not accompany) blame. This also seems a plausible addition to the unadorned belief account.¹⁶

Finally, T. M. Scanlon adds a bit more to the belief account than both Arpaly and Sher. The relevant belief, on Scanlon’s proposal, is that “[the action] shows something about the agent’s attitudes toward others that impairs the relations that others can have with him or her”, and the additional element is that one must actually make the modifications in “the expectations, intentions, and other attitudes that constitute [human] relationships” that such a belief deems appropriate (Scanlon 2008, p. 128). The appropriate modifications will vary depending on the particular relationship and the nature of the impairment, but the basic idea is that when I blame you, I recognize that you and I can’t just go on as before; things have changed between us. Like Arpaly’s and Sher’s, this account deals with the co-conspirators worry, and explains the connection to the reactive emotions without making them essential.

I mention these three theorists together because they share the view that blame is going to have to involve some extra mental element that is neither as “hot” as an emotion nor as “cool” as a belief. Desires, commitments, intentions, and expectations are, perhaps, “just right”. I think each of these three accounts is open to potentially worrisome objections, but I think they are on the right track. In what follows I explore another aspect of our mental life that I think may serve even better as the centerpiece of an account of blame: the structure of the will.

5.

The central idea is this: to blame someone is to take a stand against his action and the motives and attitudes with which it was performed, where “taking a stand” here is to be understood as importantly analogous to – and perhaps even identical with – the process,

¹⁵ Pamela Hieronymi (2008) also suggests, in a critique of Sher’s account of blame, that a commitment to morality may be what’s needed to get from judging blameworthy to blaming. This seems to represent a slight departure from her earlier view (if indeed she was offering a view of blame in her 2004), though I’m inclined to think that this is what she meant all along.

¹⁶ Though as Angela Smith has pointed out to me in personal correspondence, Sher will have to say something about cases in which we seem to blame our political opponents even though we are glad about their downfall.

articulated by Harry Frankfurt, by which we alienate ourselves from or identify ourselves with our own motivations and attitudes and thus play a role in the construction of our wills.¹⁷ It is in virtue of this volitional activity, Frankfurt says, that we “create a self out of the raw materials of inner life” (Frankfurt 1987, reprinted in Frankfurt 1988, p. 170). To exclude or externalize a particular motivation is, in some sense, to come to the conclusion: “That’s not who I am; that’s not what I do.” I want to say something similar of blame. When we blame someone, we are concluding, in part: “That’s not who I am”. But we are also concluding: “That’s not who *we* are; that’s not what *we* do”. Blaming, then, is an important part of the process of self-creation, but it’s also one of the ways by which we create and sustain the moral community itself.

That’s the sketch of the account I am proposing, anyway. Now let me see if I can articulate it a bit more clearly, and say a few things in its favor. A good way to begin is by reviewing our Frankfurt.

Frankfurt’s views have evolved over time, but his main concern has been to articulate the role that psychological reflexivity plays in the lives of human agents. The fact that we can step back from our desires and endorse some (but not others) as the desires that we want to move us is, for Frankfurt, a very big deal. (I suppose it’s a big deal for all of us.) It provides the foundation from which Frankfurt endeavors to explain various aspects of our lives as agents: freedom of the will, moral responsibility, autonomy, rationality, caring, loving, the self – even the meaning of life and the origins of normativity. There’s no need for an exhaustive examination of these topics here, but let me at least say a few words about how the overall picture is meant to go.

The basic building blocks of Frankfurt’s picture of the will are desires. To have a desire is, as Frankfurt puts it, to have a problem, the problem of deciding “whether to identify with the desire and thus validate it as eligible for satisfaction, or whether to dissociate [oneself] from it, treat it as categorically unacceptable, and try to suppress it or rid [oneself] of it entirely” (Frankfurt 2006, p. 11). It is difficult to articulate the mechanism by which identification or dissociation takes place – Frankfurt seems to think that it involves a *decision* of some sort, or at least a *commitment* that can be described as decisive – but the result of the process reveals “where (if anywhere) the person himself stands” (Frankfurt 1987, reprinted in Frankfurt 1988, p. 166). To act freely, then, is to act on motivations that represent your stance on the matter. Freedom is to be understood as a sort of synchronic coherence in the will (Frankfurt 2006, p. 19) – the agent does not “get in his own way”, so to speak (Frankfurt 1992, reprinted in Frankfurt 1999, p. 99).

But there is a more robust sort of coherence that Frankfurt thinks is even more central to our lives: the coherence of the self over time that comes from the fact that we care about things – and, in particular, we care about them in a way that amounts to love. To care about something is, at least in part, to be “willingly committed to one’s desire” for that thing, where such a commitment is itself to be understood in terms of desire: one who cares about something “wants the desire [for that thing] to be sustained” (Frankfurt 2004, p. 16). To love something is to care about it in a certain way – in a disinterested, personal way – and for it to be something about which one cannot help caring. That love

¹⁷ Frankfurt has developed this line of thought in several articles and books over the past thirty years, starting with Frankfurt 1971.

comes with a sort of necessity means that it specifies the limits and boundaries of one's will, and thus, according to Frankfurt, "define[s] [one's] shape as a person" (Frankfurt 1993, reprinted in Frankfurt 1999, p. 114). There are certain things that we do, as a matter of contingent fact, care about in this way, and it is those things that determine who we are and what we should do. An essential element of living well, then, is "to understand what it is that we ourselves really care about, and to be decisively and robustly confident in caring about it" (Frankfurt 2004, p. 28).

There is much more to be said about Frankfurt's views, of course, but let's return now to the issue of blame. The account that I am proposing takes blame to be an activity of the will, and with this brief exposition of Frankfurt on the table, I can be a bit more specific about what sort of activity it is. When we blame someone for something he has done, I suggest that what we are doing is making (or, perhaps, reaffirming) a decisive commitment against the motives and attitudes with which the performed the action. The situations that tend to elicit our blame are those in which someone has disregarded something that we care about – perhaps our family members, or ourselves, or our moral ideals – and blaming is our way of registering, at least to ourselves, our protest. We can say to ourselves, "*That* is not who I am." And insofar as you and I care about the same things and thus have isomorphic wills, we can lodge our protest in the first-person plural: "That's not who *we* are." In addition to registering our protest, then, blaming is a way of deciding (or perhaps discovering) how to live, both with ourselves and with each other.¹⁸

6.

To help flesh out and defend the view, it may be helpful to contrast it with the alternative views we considered above. The most promising views seemed to be those that took blame to be a certain belief – that one has done wrong or shown ill-will or impaired a relationship -- plus some extra non-affective element – a commitment to morality, a backward-looking desire, a shift in one's expectations and intentions. I have also suggested a non-affective element, but I'm not sure that it needs to come along with a belief in order to give us a satisfactory account of blame. In his book-length study of blame, George Sher guides his inquiry with this question: "What does blame add to the belief that someone has acted badly?" (Sher 2006, p. 6). But now I'm wondering: why think that blame needs to attach to any particular cognitive state at all, let alone one about bad or wrong action?

To see what I'm getting at, consider the fact (mentioned briefly above) that inappropriate or unjustified blame may be something for which we seek professional help. Someone seeking such help might say, "I know it's not his fault, but I blame him anyway", and although there is certainly some sort of confusion going on here, it doesn't seem like a conceptual confusion. Now perhaps what's really going on in these sorts of cases is that the blamer "knows" on some superficial level that the man hasn't done anything wrong, but on some deeper level the blamer still believes that he has. Perhaps.

¹⁸ In his commentary on Frankfurt's Tanner Lectures, Meir Dan-Cohen (2006) suggests that through blaming and holding each other responsible, the moral community plays an important role in drawing the boundaries of each person's self. This is perhaps the converse of what I am suggesting (though they seem complementary and mutually supporting).

But it seems equally natural, I suggest, to suppose that blame is something that, on occasion, can float free of any beliefs about wrongdoing whatsoever. There will likely still be *some* beliefs, I suppose, but they will be minimal: a belief that some action was performed, perhaps. I think it is an advantage of the volitional account of blame is that it can allow for these sorts of cases. We may find that our wills are set against certain people and their behavior even though we acknowledge that nothing about the behavior calls for such a stance. Even more common, perhaps, are cases in which we blame ourselves even while acknowledging that we have done nothing wrong.¹⁹

What about emotions of the sort that Strawson and Wallace appeal to? On the volitional account, the reactive emotions are not essential to blame, but they are certainly a natural outgrowth of it. In the typical case, blame will be a response to someone who has injured or disregarded something we care about, and such disregard is apt to make us feel resentment and indignation. As Frankfurt himself puts it: “What makes moral anger understandable and appropriate is that the transgression of an immoral agent consists in his willfully rejecting and impeding the realization of our moral ideal. In other words, he deliberately injures something that we love. That is enough to make anyone angry” (Frankfurt 2006, pp. 47-48).²⁰ Importantly, though, we need not say that the anger itself is what constitutes the blame, even if it is an almost universal accoutrement. *Almost* universal, because thinking back to Henry VIII might not get us emotional, though it will give us an occasion to reaffirm the things that we care about. In his defense of the reactive account of blame, Wallace says, “To count as blaming a person, you have to be exercised by what they have done, and to be exercised in the relevant way just is to be subject to one of the reactive sentiments” (Wallace 2011, p. 358). As should be clear, I think the first part is exactly right, though I’d want to give a volitional account of what it is to be exercised in the right way.

We also considered accounts according to which blame is an overt action of some sort, such as a rebuke or a demand for explanation. Again, on the volitional account, these actions are not essential to blame, but they are concomitants of it. One of the things that we care about is living in a community of like-minded (or, perhaps, like-willed) people, and finding out that we have done something that the others would want to dissociate themselves from can be a painful experience, painful enough to motivate us to change our attitudes and our behavior. Expressing our blame, then, will often be a good and natural thing to do.

¹⁹ Perhaps T. M. Scanlon (2008) can also allow for cases of blame without the belief that the person has impaired a relationship, though it’s unclear how important it is to Scanlon the modifications that constitute blame occur in response to a belief about impairment. Susan Wolf (2011), however, brings up a case (about how her OUP editor may modify his intentions and expectations toward Wolf without blaming her) that is meant to cast doubt on Scanlon’s account, but I think Scanlon could respond by pointing out that the modifications that constitute blame must occur in response to a belief about impairment. In that case, though, Scanlon would no longer be able to accommodate the sort of case I discussed in the text.

²⁰ In this passage Frankfurt seems to adopt an affective account of blame, equating it with moral anger. He says, “Attributing moral blame is distinctively a way of being angry at the wrongdoer. The anger is itself a kind of punishment.” Frankfurt makes similar remarks in his 2002, p. 30.

7.

So, we've seen how the volitional account can draw the two important distinctions that caused trouble for belief accounts and for action accounts: the distinction between judging blameworthy and blaming, on the one hand, and the distinction between blaming and expressing blame, on the other. We've also seen how it can accommodate the fact that we blame the dead and the distant without getting angry, something that the affective account has trouble with. In closing, let me mention a couple other advantages of the account.

One is that it has a rather easy time explaining why understanding and sympathy tend to undermine blame. Often it happens that the more we find out about the context of someone's behavior, the more we begin to think: "Well, I guess I can't blame him for what he did. After all, if I were in his place, I would have done the same." Sometimes what gives rise to this thought is the discovery that the person in question really hasn't done anything wrong, but not always. Sometimes we recognize that the person has done wrong, but that, if faced with his circumstances, we would have done wrong too.²¹ Recognition of this fact can lead us away from blame, and on the volitional account, this is because we come to find out that we do not, after all, wish to lodge the relevant sort of protest. We can't sincerely say, "That's not who I am".²²

Another advantage is that the volitional account seems to connect naturally to an attractive view of forgiveness. Pamela Hieronymi (2001) has recently outlined a challenge for any account of forgiveness: it must articulate the way in which the person who forgives changes their view without giving up the judgments that (1) the act is wrong, (2) the wrongdoer is responsible, and (3) one has a claim against being wronged in this way. Hieronymi defends a view according to which resentment is a form of protest grounded on the judgment that the wrong behavior makes a threatening claim to one's moral standing. When the wrongdoer apologizes, the behavior is no longer threatening (though it was still wrong), and resentment thus tends to disappear. On this view, the disappearance of resentment is what constitutes forgiveness.

The volitional account of blame can offer an alternative view, however. What a sincere apology does, on this view, is indicate to the victim of wrongdoing that the offender has repudiated and dissociated himself from his behavior, so that he can now stand with the victim in lodging a protest against his former self. To forgive such a person, then, is to acknowledge that his past behavior is no longer to be attributed to the person that he has become through the change of heart that led to his apology. We can still acknowledge the wrong, but we can *move on* by recognizing that person for who they are now, as someone who has at least begun the process of pushing away from his former self, a process that constitutes self-blame and the first step in the complicated task of figuring out how to forgive oneself.

²¹ Gary Watson (1987) points out that in extreme cases, such a thought can induce an "ontological shudder" at the recognition that "one's moral self is such a fragile thing" (p. 245).

²² I feel like there is some connection here to issues of when and how one's standing to blame has been undermined (as it can be in cases of hypocrisy and complicity), but it's unclear to me how best to spell it out.

There is more to be said in favor of – and, no doubt, against – the volitional view that I have sketched here, but I’ll stop here for now. At the very least, it seems to me a promising alternative to the other views on offer, and I must admit I find something strangely attractive in the admittedly obscure thought that the opposite of blame may not be praise, but love.

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