

FITTING BLAME WITHOUT BLAMEWORTHINESS

Minji Jang

A dissertation submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Philosophy.

Chapel Hill
2023

Approved by:

Susan Wolf

Sarah Stroud

Alex Worsnip

Luc Bovens

Carla Merino-Rajme

© 2023
Minji Jang
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

ABSTRACT

Minji Jang: Fitting Blame without Blameworthiness
(Under the direction of Susan Wolf)

Fitting blame is commonly thought to require a blameworthy actor who is in some robust sense ‘at fault’ for their objectionable behavior. When we cannot be warranted in making this judgment of fault about a person, we cannot be warranted in blaming them. When we cannot be warranted in blaming a person, we also cannot make room for genuinely forgiving them—at best, we can make sense of how we may excuse them or simply let go of our blame.

However, in life, we often find ourselves blaming, striving to forgive, and sometimes succeeding in forgiving a person both (i) when we *cannot* reasonably judge *whether* they are blameworthy and (ii) when we *can* reasonably judge that they are *not* blameworthy. I argue that we should not dismiss our phenomenology of blaming and forgiving people in these types of cases, despite it being rendered incoherent or unwarranted in a conventional framework. By introducing a pluralistic picture of blame and a species of *blame without fault*, in which warranted blame does not require a warranted judgment of fault within an actor, I provide the resources to illuminate and support our experiences that play a vital role in our individual, interpersonal, and social lives.

To my family and my mentors.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I want to thank my advisor, Susan Wolf, who has been an indispensable source of inspiration and wisdom in every step of my academic career. I learned from Susan how to do philosophy and what it can do—how philosophy can demystify and tell our stories and stories of others that need to be heard. This project would not have reached its current level of progress without Susan’s dedicated support and guidance—hours and hours of productive conversations, fierce debates, piercing questions, and warm encouragements, not to mention her unparalleled expertise on the topic of moral responsibility and profound understanding of the intricacies of human experiences. It has been a privilege to work under the supervision of my philosophical hero.

Next, I want to express my sincere gratitude to my advisory committee members, Sarah Stroud and Alex Worsnip, for reading multiple different versions of this project and giving me extensive feedback. I am constantly amazed at Sarah’s magical ability to snatch the essence out of a pond of scattered thoughts and come up with an eloquent way of framing a debate and structuring an argument. I am indebted to Alex for his remarkably keen insights and unmatched skills to meticulously analyze and evaluate an argument and fine-tuning it. I had the fortune of having the most supportive, caring, and patient committee who helped me in each step of completing this milestone.

I also extend my heartfelt thanks to my readers, Luc Bovens and Carla Merino-Rajme, for their valuable feedback on my project; their insightful and encouraging comments made this project noticeably better. I especially thank Luc for his boundless positivity and for his rare talent of making academic philosophy fun, and Carla for her vocal advocacy for my research in times of need and for her unwavering support and mentorship throughout the years. I truly had a dream team.

This project is significantly shaped and improved by the help of brilliant philosophers at—or once at—UNC Chapel Hill. I thank Ram Neta, Jim Pryor, Geoff Sayre-McCord, Rosalind Chaplin, Tom Dougherty, Markus Kohl, Daniel Muñoz, and Tom Hill Jr. for reading and discussing with me different parts of this project and giving me helpful feedback. I also thank fellow graduate students for their invaluable feedback and support through seminars, email exchanges, conversations in hallways, and over coffee and beer. While I cannot list them all here, I especially thank Aliosha Barranco Lopez, Dominik Berger, Karl Adam, and Chris Blake-Turner for reading multiple drafts and having repeated conversations with me, and Ada Lin and Daniel Kokotajlo for helping me craft an overall better version of my writing. I also thank Audra Jenson, Si-Hua Chang, Alyse Spiehler, Gabriella Hulsey, DeeAnn Spicer, Nevin Johnson, and Pavel Nitchovski, among many others, for helping me push through the last year of completing this thesis. Lastly, I thank my students, especially those in my seminar on blame and forgiveness, for their fresh insights and valuable inputs.

A special thanks is owed to Mariska Leunissen, who has been a steadfast mentor, friend, and ally for me and for all other young academics in the department. I also thank Alan Nelson for being a trustworthy and caring DGS, who stood by my side and helped me navigate through the logistical and personal troubles on multiple occasions, and Rebecca Farris for going above and beyond to promptly help me in times of need, especially as I returned to the program after a leave.

I am thankful for my friends in Chapel Hill, Pittsburgh, Seoul, and scattered around the world for their enduring friendship and moral support. Last but certainly not least, I am wholeheartedly grateful to my family—my parents, my sister, my brother-in-law, and my parents-in-law for their endless love and support. Thank you for always telling me that I can do this but also telling me that it is okay if I don't. A special acknowledgment goes to our family cat Jeje for staying perfectly haughty, furry, and warm. Most importantly, I thank my husband and my best friend, YJ, who has been a constant source of strength and encouragement throughout this journey as he

completed his own doctorate. Thank you for standing by my side, celebrating small wins with me, and offering reassurance during moments of doubt. I could not have come this far without you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

1. “New Problem in Moral Responsibility”	1
1.1. Jamieson’s “New Problem”	1
1.2. Tomato Shopping and A Game that We Cannot Win.....	2
1.3. Structural Injustice	3
2. Ameliorative Inquiry.....	4

CHAPTER 1: MICROAGGRESSIONS AND THE LIMITS OF FAULT-TRACING BLAME

1. Introduction.....	7
2. Microaggressions and the Arguments Against Blame.....	8
2.1. Microaggression: What It Is and Why It Matters	8
2.2. The Rise of Modern Injustice.....	11
2.3. The Arguments Against Blame	13
3. The Epistemic Challenge of Microaggressions	16
3.1. Fitting and Warranted Blaming Attitudes	16
3.2. Fault-tracing Blame and the Conditions of Blameworthiness	18
3.3. The Epistemic Challenge	21
4. The Cost of Limiting Blame.....	23
4.1. Harms of Individual Microaggressions.....	24
4.2. Demands for Civility.....	29

5. Ameliorating Blame	30
6. Two Senses of Blameworthiness	31
7. Conclusion	36

CHAPTER 2: PROTESTING BLAME

1. Introduction.....	37
2. Toward a Pluralistic Picture of Blame	38
2.1. The Limits of Fault-tracing Blame	38
2.2. Fault-tracing Blame and Blame without Fault	39
3. Blame as a Response to an Action's Meaning.....	40
4. Blame as Moral Protest.....	43
4.1. Blaming as Protesting	43
4.2. Fault-tracing Protesting Blame.....	47
4.3. Protesting Blame without Fault	49
5. Filling the Lacuna.....	52
5.1. Meaning of Microaggressions.....	52
5.2. Resolving the Epistemic Challenge	53
5.3. Fighting Hermeneutical Injustice.....	54
6. Objections and Replies	56
6.1. Private Blame	56
6.2. Blame as Non-voluntary Reaction.....	61
7. Conclusion	65

CHAPTER 3: FORGIVING THE UNBLAMEWORTHY

1. Introduction.....	67
2. Blame, Forgiveness, and Unblameworthy Agents	68

2.1.	The Standard View of Blame	68
2.2.	The Standard View of Forgiveness	70
2.3.	Unblameworthy Agents.....	73
3.	Forgiving, Excusing, and Letting Go	75
3.1.	Excusing, Not Forgiving.....	75
3.2.	Letting Go, Not Forgiving.....	77
4.	Reasons to Forgive	81
5.	Forgiving the Unblameworthy.....	83
5.1.	Protesting Blame, Revisited	83
5.2.	Amending the Result	85
6.	Forgiveness: Its Point and Significance	87
7.	Objections and Replies	95
7.1.	Disrespecting the Victim.....	96
7.2.	Disrespecting the Offender	99
8.	Conclusion	101
REFERENCES		103

INTRODUCTION

1. “New Problem” in Moral Responsibility

1.1. Jamieson’s “New Problem”

Roughly three decades ago, Dale Jamieson (1992) warned that our existing value system—at least one dominant in the West—can no longer adequately guide our behaviors. What worried Jamieson was the presumed simplicity in our conception of moral and legal responsibility. Jamieson wrote: “Our current value system presupposes that harms and their causes are individual, that they can readily be identified, and that they are local in space and time” (Jamieson, 1992, p. 148).

Suppose Jones breaks into Smith’s house and steals Smith’s property with the clear intent of stealing it; Jones and only Jones is morally responsible for the harm that they caused to Smith. This simple paradigm collapses, however, when we apply it to cases where “[a]pparently innocent acts can have devastating consequences, causes and harms may diffuse, and causes and harms may be remote in space and time” (Ibid., p. 149). Take global climate change as an example. Every day, millions of people are making imperceptible contributions to expediting the speed of global warming (e.g., driving, keeping a carnivore diet, or wasting electricity), which has already resulted in disasters, destruction, and numerous casualties. In these types of cases, the significance of the event and the ascription of moral responsibility would no longer solely depend on the relevant facts about individuals involved in the event. “This is a new problem,” said Jamieson (Ibid.). Tangible harm is done to people, but no one will be responsible, at least according to our dominantly accepted theories.

1.2. Tomato Shopping and A Game that We Cannot Win

Fast-forwarding to seven years ago, NBC released another hit series *The Good Place*. The show is premised on the idea that humans, upon death, are sent to either the Good Place or the Bad Place. Those sent to the Good Place are said to enjoy eternal happiness whereas those in the Bad Place are to forever suffer from torture. What determines their whereabouts in the afterlife is a certain points system. Humans, without their knowing, earn or lose points throughout their lives—when one acts morally, one gets points; when one acts immorally, one gets points deducted. How much is earned or lost depends on the significance of the consequences of one's behaviors as calculated by the points system.

In Season 3, Michael, one of the characters in the show, finds that no one has entered the Good Place in the past 500+ years. Suspecting that the architects of the Bad Place had hacked into the system to bring in more residents, Michael steals a book that contains the past records of the system and learns the following:

In 1534, Douglas Wynegar of Hawkhurst, England, gave his grandma roses for her birthday. He picked them himself, walked them over to her, she was happy—boom, 145 points! [...]
In 2009, Doug Ewing of Scaggsville, Maryland also gave his grandmother a dozen roses, but he lost four points. Why? Because he ordered roses using a cell phone that was made in a sweatshop. The flowers were grown with toxic pesticides, picked by exploited migrant workers, delivered from thousands of miles away, which created a massive carbon footprint, and his money went to a billionaire racist CEO, who sends his female employees pictures of his genitals! (*The Good Place*, S3E10)

The architects of the Bad Place did not hack into the system. The real cause of this shocking phenomenon was that the system failed to update itself to incorporate the fact that “every day, the world gets a little more complicated, and being a good person gets a little harder” (Ibid.).

When Michael shares his discovery with the all-mighty judge Gen with the hope that they will fix the system, they are not at all impressed. Michael pleads: “These days, just buying a tomato at the grocery store means that you are unwittingly supporting toxic pesticides, exploiting labor, contributing to global warming. Humans think that they are making one choice, but they are actually making dozens of choices they don’t know they’re making” (Ibid., S3E11). To this, the all-mighty judge Gen replies: “You don’t want the consequences? Do the research, buy another tomato!” (Ibid.)

Gen later learns by experiencing life on Earth that it is actually not that simple. As another character in the show Tahani says: “There are so many unintended consequences to well-intentioned actions. It feels like a game you can’t win!” (Ibid., S3E10).

1.3. Structural Injustice

Like Jamieson, Iris Marion Young (2011) observes that our current practice of assigning moral and legal responsibility will soon face its limits in societies with deeply entrenched structural inequalities and injustices. Young writes:

[S]tructural injustice is produced and reproduced by thousands or millions of persons usually acting within institutional rules and according to practices that most people regard as morally acceptable. [...] It is not difficult to identify persons who contribute to structural processes. On the whole, however, it is not possible to identify how the actions of one particular individual, or even one particular collective agent, such as a firm, have directly produced harm to other specific individuals. (Young, 2011, pp. 95-96)

As I will show in the following chapters, this problem is exacerbated by a recent trend in which more overt (“old-fashioned”) forms of discrimination against oppressed groups are replaced with covert (“modern”) forms. While overt bigotry and hate crimes still exist in our community, much discrimination and harm is a consequence of much subtler manifestations of injustice that are harder

to identify and regulate. This newly emerging subtle species of structural injustice has created an added challenge. Not only is it difficult to identify individual participants of injustice, but it is now harder to accuse them of their participation. What increasingly and tenaciously attacks victims of oppression are no longer overtly discriminatory behaviors of malicious people but are seemingly benign behaviors of well-meaning individuals.

2. Ameliorative Inquiry

In our conventional framework, blame has typically been understood as a *fault-tracing* response. It is a distinct category of normatively significant reactions that traces the wrongness or badness of an action back to some fault within a person and negatively appraises those faulty bits of a person manifested by their action—for instance, their problematic states of mind, faulty moral self or character, or the deficient quality of will toward others. With this conception of blame as a fault-tracing response, a person is deemed a right target of blame, or is deemed ‘blameworthy,’ when the person is ‘at fault’ for having behaved objectionably, in the sense that their behavior manifests some identifiable fault within the person, located in their mind, self, or will. This way of understanding what it is for someone to be blameworthy has given rise to extensive discussions of when or under what conditions an action in question can be said to manifest an agent’s faultiness. These so-called conditions of blameworthiness are said to secure a tight connection between a person and their action, which would allow us to trace and negatively appraise a fault within a person based on their action. A person is deemed a right target of blame, in this view, when they meet or are acceptably judged to meet these conditions.

However, given the rapidly increasing moral complexity of the world that we live in, it is becoming more and more challenging to secure a tight connection between a person and the harm caused by their actions. Our behaviors have sprawling impacts far beyond the scope of our

intentions or foreseeable outcomes, and some of these unintended and unforeseen consequences of our behaviors cause tangible harm to others. It is hard to trace the impacts of these actions back to individual actors and much harder—if not often impossible—to trace them back to some identifiable fault within those actors, such as their problematic or faulty mind, self, or will. A daily driver, a tomato shopper, or an individual participant in structural injustice is hardly ‘blameworthy’ in a conventional sense; while they might have done something wrong and harmful, they do not seem to be ‘at fault’ for having done what they did. Especially in the last case, there are direct victims, people who are continuously directly harmed, and yet, it appears that on this model of blame and blameworthiness, no one is to be blamed.

This alerts us that our existing value system, especially our conception and role of interpersonal blame, is in need of some major updates. In other words, the situation that we are facing—the “new problem” in the era of a complicated modern society—calls for what Sally Haslanger (2012) describes as an *ameliorative* inquiry or what David Chalmers (2020) calls *conceptual engineering* in philosophy. Instead of providing satisfactory explanations of our existing (or dominantly accepted) concepts and practices, it urges us to take on the task of engineering ways of improving these concepts and practices to better meet our needs. The project that I develop in my dissertation is an instance of this type of philosophical task. In the following chapters, I suggest that we reexamine the role and significance of blame, question the core assumptions that guide our discourse on blame, and modify the boundaries of an acceptable practice to accommodate our experiences that have been overlooked in the dominant narratives.

Instead of refuting our standard conception of blame as a *fault-tracing* response, I introduce a pluralistic picture of blame, in which blame serves multiple different functions, some of which do not involve tracing and negatively appraising a person’s fault manifested by their action. In particular, I develop a species of *protesting blame*, in which blaming constitutes an act of protest,

which can respond to and be warranted by the protest-warranting meaning of an action, which does not depend on our judgment of fault about its actor. I argue that including my account of blame in our broadened moral landscape will allow us to expand the scope of warranted blame and genuine forgiveness to support our experiences that are rendered incoherent or unwarranted in a conventional framework—for instance, blame and forgiveness directed toward people whom we do not judge to be blameworthy or to be ‘at fault’ for their objectionable behaviors.

CHAPTER 1.

MICROAGGRESSIONS AND THE LIMITS OF FAULT-TRACING BLAME

1. Introduction

Consider the following interaction in which a white American A asks, “Where are you from?” and an Asian American B responds, “Boston.” A asks B again, “Where are you *originally* from?” As I will soon explain, this interaction between A and B qualifies as an instance of a microaggression—(i) a subtle degradation or put-down, (ii) whether intentionally committed or not, (iii) experienced by members of socially marginalized and subordinated groups based on their perceived group membership (e.g., race, ethnicity, national origin, gender identity, sexual orientation, class, disability status, etc.).

Recently, there have been many studies across the disciplines on the subject of microaggressions, including what they are, why they are potentially harmful to their recipients, and how to best address them on a collective or an institutional level.¹ However, there has been less discussion on the question of how we may appropriately respond to *individual* incidents of microaggressions that we may encounter in our everyday lives. This chapter will address this question. What kind of reactions are we entitled to have toward individual actors of microaggressions? In particular, are we entitled to *blame* them?

¹ Philosophy is a latecomer to this debate. Freeman and Schroer (2020) is the first edited volume on philosophers’ contributions to this debate; as they note in the introduction, only a handful of philosophy articles dedicated to this topic have been published in peer-reviewed journals.

I will argue that in the standard framework in which blame is understood as a *fault-tracing* response, we are not and can almost never be warranted in blaming individual actors of microaggressions (Section 2 and 3). The distinct nature of microaggressions poses an epistemic challenge that renders it almost impossible for their recipients to be warranted in forming a judgment that the acts in question manifest some kind of fault or defect within the actors, such as their objectionable states of mind, faulty moral character, or the deficient quality of their will toward others. Instead of siding with earlier scholars in disavowing blame as an appropriate response to individual incidents of microaggressions (e.g., Brennan, 2016; Friedlaender, 2018; Zheng, 2016; Rini, 2018), I will argue that understanding the full scope of this challenge gives us good reason to reexamine the role of blame and whether our standard conception of blame is fit to adequately serve this role (Section 4). Eventually, I will propose that we modify our understanding of blame to accommodate a broader range of our experiences neglected in the dominant narratives (Section 5). I will close this chapter by noting a possible significant implication of my discussion on our discourse on blame (Section 6).

2. Microaggressions and the Arguments Against Blame

2.1. Microaggression: What It Is and Why It Matters

Let's return to the interaction between \mathcal{A} and B . A white American \mathcal{A} asks, "Where are you from?" and an Asian American B responds, "Boston." \mathcal{A} then asks, "Where are you *originally* from?"² \mathcal{A} 's behavior, viewed as an isolated incident, may seem like a friendly gesture that expresses interest in B . Perhaps it is exactly what \mathcal{A} has intended to communicate. However, it would be a mistake to

² While it can be directed to any ethnically or racially marginalized groups, Sue et al (2010) report that this particular example of a microaggression is more frequently faced by Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans.

view this interaction as an isolated incident. What \mathcal{A} may or may not know is that B repeatedly hears this question and is frequently exposed to other questions, ‘compliments,’ or ‘friendly gestures’ of a similar kind. These include such comments as: “Your English is very good,” or “Wow, you speak almost without an accent,” or compliments on articulateness while peers are getting feedback on the content of their presentation. These also include someone initiating a conversation with you in a random Asian language (e.g., saying “Ni-hao” to a Korean American³) or bowing their head to you or putting their hands flat together in front of you while shaking hands with others at a formal occasion.⁴

This interaction between \mathcal{A} and B qualifies as an incident of a microaggression. Pending disputes over how exactly to define this term⁵, I understand microaggressions as (i) subtle degradations and put-downs, (ii) whether intentionally committed or not, (iii) experienced by members of socially marginalized groups based on their perceived group membership (e.g., race, ethnicity, national origin, gender identity, sexual orientation, class, disability status, etc.). This distinct species of subtle injustice functions to solidify the marginalization of these groups by (iv) normalizing exclusionary or unequal treatments of these groups (e.g., by reinforcing the negative stereotypes associated with their group identities).

³ It is also problematic to say “Ni-hao” to a Chinese American whom you have just met. Many n^{th} -generation Asian Americans identify English as their native language and are not fluent in the language of their national origin. This behavior may carry the meaning that they are ‘foreigners’ in this country. (Using the Chinese language to greet a non-Chinese Asian American may carry an additional problematic meaning that “All Asians look alike” or that “All Asian cultures are the same.”)

⁴ Vowing and putting hands together are part of social customs in some Asian countries and not in others and are used in different forms in different contexts, even in the countries that still have these customs. More importantly, again, many n^{th} -generation Asian Americans are not familiar with the cultural and social customs of their countries of origin. Assuming their familiarity with these customs may carry the meaning that they are not ‘real’ Americans.

⁵ See e.g., McClure and Rini (2020) for the summary of different accounts of what microaggressions are and why they are problematic.

After repeated exposures to a pattern of these behaviors, each of these behaviors comes to carry a particular, sometimes unmistakably clear meaning to its recipient, *regardless of* what the individual actor intended to communicate. In the interaction above, *A*'s behavior carries a meaning that *B* is not a 'real' American. That *B* is different from other Americans; that they are not fluent in English and are more comfortable with the language, culture, dominant religion, or social customs of their ancestral origin; that they are a 'foreigner' or an 'outsider' in this country. Unlike what critics of microaggressions often presume, it is not an individual recipient's "distorted thinking" or "own subjective feelings" of being offended that determines what these behaviors mean (Lukianoff and Haidt, 2015). What determines their meaning is the existing patterns of behaviors and treatments repeatedly appearing in one's life (e.g., in a family or with friends, at school or a workplace, while grocery shopping or on transportation, etc.) and persistently affirming and reaffirming the same message (e.g., "that one does not belong to this country"), until it becomes too familiar to miss or ignore. As Saba Fatima, a woman philosopher of color, says, "it is precisely because it has happened so many times that I can recognize it from a mile away" (Fatima, 2017, p. 152).

When imparted with this meaning, *A*'s behavior fits into broader arrangements of discriminatory and unequal treatments in different (e.g., social, economic, political, educational, professional, as well as personal) spheres of *B*'s life, which function in unison to sustain the marginalized status of *B*'s group(s). Thus, it is a mistake to see an instance of a microaggression as a one-off incident where an individual recipient of the given speech or the behavior *happens to* get their feelings hurt. It is a constituent of a pattern of behaviors, each of which functions to reinforce the diminished status of socially marginalized groups. Because of their distinctly subtle nature, microaggressions carry out this function in a way that normalizes the scene, such that the repeated degradation of members of these groups blends into the background of our everyday lives.

In this way, microaggressions are part of structural and systematic oppression. As Young (1990), echoing Frye (1983)⁶, explains:

Oppression in this sense is structural, rather than the result of a few people's choices or policies. Its causes are embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules. ... In this extended structural sense oppression refers to the vast and deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions ... in short, *the normal processes of everyday life*. (p. 56, *my italics*)

In sum, microaggressions, as a species of subtly discriminatory behaviors and treatments, are a constituent of “an enclosing structure of forces and barriers” that functions to sustain unjust power relations and social orders (Frye, 1983, p. 10).

2.2. The Rise of Modern Injustice

Microaggressions are a representative example of what scholars across disciplines have started to describe as a “modern” type of injustice⁷, characterized by (i) its subtle and covert nature and (ii) a possible lack of a participant's intention to and awareness of participating in injustice. For

⁶ Frye (1983)'s discussion on the systematic nature of oppression has importantly influenced later thinkers. Frye wrote: “The experience of oppressed people is that the living of one's life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction” (Ibid., p. 4).

⁷ With the term “modern injustice,” I refer to a *broader* category of actions than the term “modern discrimination,” which commonly refers to discriminatory behaviors motivated by an individual actor's subconsciously held stereotypes and prejudices about socially marginalized groups. My stance on the typology is that a behavior could qualify as a microaggression even in the absence of an individual actor's beliefs and attitudes, subconsciously held or otherwise, so long as it fits into certain patterns of behaviors functioning in a similar way to sustain oppressive structures.

For a defense of a functional account of microaggressions, see e.g., Friedlaender (2018) and McTernan (2018). For a related discussion, see Manne (2018)'s defense of a functional account of misogyny.

simplicity, I will use these terms—microaggressions and “modern” injustice—to refer to a distinct species of discriminatory behaviors and treatments defined by their apparent subtlety and presumed innocence.

What are “modern” types of injustice? Recent studies in psychology and sociology have reported that more blatant (now called “old-fashioned” or conventional) types of discriminatory behaviors and treatments against socially marginalized groups have been replaced over time with more covert (now called “modern”) types of injustice.⁸ While overt bigotry and hate crimes still appear in our society, their frequency has declined over time due to the development of “anti-discrimination laws and organization policies, education, and greater societal intolerance for explicit bigotry.” (Marchiondo et al, 2018, p. 2). This does not mean, however, that socially marginalized groups now face fewer hindrances. What affects their lives, even more, are subtly discriminatory behaviors and treatments that are much harder to identify and regulate. Studies have further found that unlike the practitioners of “old-fashioned” types of injustice who tend to express “unconcealed contempt, endorsement of offensive stereotypes, and support for blatant discrimination,” individual participants in “modern” types of injustice “consciously endorse values of egalitarianism and justice, publicly condemn sexism and racism, and strongly identify [themselves] as nonprejudiced” (Cortina et al, 2013, pp. 1581-2).⁹ In other words, these individuals often do not intend to participate and are often not aware of participating in injustice.

To be clear, these so-called “modern” types of injustice are not newly emerged products of the recent era of our history; they have long co-existed with now-called “old-fashioned” types of

⁸ See e.g., McConahay (1986) for the initial discussion of “modern racism”; Sue et al (2010), Chapter 4, for the discussion of a contemporary shift from overt to covert forms of racism; Cortina et al (2013) and Marchiondo et al (2018) for a continuing discussion of “modern discrimination” in organizations and workplaces.

⁹ See the same article for the summary of research done on this subject.

injustice. Yet, they have only been recently acknowledged as constituents of oppressive structures — partly because of their increasing abundance in replacement of conventional types of injustice and partly because of the continuing progress in social movements aimed at spreading public knowledge of the systematic nature of oppression.¹⁰ Perhaps because they have only been recently attended to, there aren't firmly established legal policies or widely shared social norms to effectively identify and regulate these behaviors. Not to mention, their subtle nature delays the process of establishing communal agreements on how to either identify or respond to this newly proliferating species of injustice.

2.3. The Arguments Against Blame

Many (at least more) people nowadays accept the claim that microaggressions are a problematic social phenomenon.¹¹ They seem to understand that they are part of a bigger problem of structural oppression and that a lifelong accumulation of experiencing microaggressions can cause harm to socially marginalized groups. Despite our enhanced understanding of what microaggressions are and their potentially problematic nature, it is still unclear how we may appropriately respond to individual incidents of microaggressions.

¹⁰ For instance, both #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter movements have effectively alerted our community that individual reports of sexist and racist treatments are constituents of broader patterns of systematic and structural injustice toward socially marginalized groups, not localized incidents.

¹¹ There are still strong opponents to this claim. For instance, Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) warn that focusing on microaggressions curtails free speech and bars productive discussions among well-meaning speakers. Campbell and Manning (2015) also argue that an increasing tendency in our community to call out minor insults is creating “a culture of victimhood,” where “people are intolerant of insults, even if unintentional, and react by bringing them to the attention of authorities or to the public at large” (p. 715).

Yet, as several academics have responded, these claims seem to be grounded in a mistaken belief (or willful ignorance) that a microaggression is a localized instance of a well-meant speech or a behavior that happens to hurt the feelings of an (intolerant or overly sensitive) individual. These claims may lose force once we understand that microaggressions are a constituent of structural and systematic oppression, which functions in unison with other forms of injustice to impair the status of socially marginalized groups.

In *Responsibility for Justice* (2011), Iris Marion Young observes that our current practice of moral and legal responsibility will face its limits in a society with deeply entrenched structural inequalities and injustices. Young writes:

[S]tructural injustice is produced and reproduced by thousands or millions of persons usually acting within institutional rules and according to practices that most people regard as morally acceptable. ... It is not difficult to identify persons who contribute to structural processes. On the whole, however, it is not possible to identify how the actions of one particular individual, or even one particular collective agent, such as a firm, have directly produced harm to other specific individuals.¹² (Young 2011, pp. 95-96)

As Young notes, it is difficult to assign moral responsibility to individual contributors in the case of larger-scale structural inequalities, especially when their contributions appear to be subtle and innocuous. This difficulty has supported the argument that we should move away from addressing this problem at the level of individuals and focus on promoting institutional reforms. Brennan (2016), for instance, argues that focusing on the wrongness of individual contributions may distract us from developing more practical, group-based solutions.¹³ Scholars like Zheng (2016), Friedlaender (2018), and Rini (2018, 2021), on the other hand, discuss how we may respond to microaggressions on a personal level. However, even those who acknowledge the need to address this problem at the level of individuals tend to express clear reservations about *blaming* individual actors.¹⁴

Following Zheng (2016), let me distinguish two arguments for viewing blame as an inappropriate response to individual incidents of microaggressions: the *productivity* argument and the

¹² Young (2011), p. 95-6.

¹³ See e.g., Sinnott-Armstrong (2005) for a defense of a similar claim in the context of global warming.

¹⁴ This includes Zheng (2016), Friedlaender (2018), and Rini (2018). Rini (2021) recently argues that we can issue a forward-looking, proleptic sense of blame to individual actors of microaggressions with the aim of offering them assistance in obtaining elevated moral esteem from other people.

aptness argument.¹⁵ The *productivity* argument claims that blaming these individuals is a *counterproductive* way of ameliorating structural injustice and promoting necessary social change.¹⁶ The *aptness* argument claims that it is *inappropriate* to blame these agents because they are likely not blameworthy for their individual contributions.¹⁷

I will not engage with the *productivity* argument in this chapter other than noting that the claim about the alleged ineffectiveness of using blame as a tool for fighting institutional injustice is theoretically disputed among scholars across disciplines¹⁸ and cannot be empirically settled as of now. Instead, I will focus on examining the *aptness* argument. Here is the version of this argument that I reconstructed from Brennan (2016) and Friedlaender (2018).

The Aptness Argument: We cannot appropriately blame individual actors of microaggressions because (i) they are likely not blameworthy for their contributions to larger-scale inequalities, and (ii) even in rare cases in which these actors were blameworthy, they would be so only for small, unquantifiable harm, which would not warrant blame.

As I will argue in a later section, (ii) can be denied on both theoretical and empirical grounds. I argue that (i), on the other hand, calls for a more careful examination.

¹⁵ Zheng (2016) draws a distinction between the *pragmatic* argument and the *moral* argument. Zheng's *moral* argument has a different focus from what I have described as the *aptness* argument, for it posits that it would be "too harsh" to blame individual agents or subject them to deep moral criticism for acting on unwanted implicit biases (Ibid., p. 79).

¹⁶ See e.g., Brennan (2016), Friedlander (2018), Rini (2018) for a defense of a similar argument.

¹⁷ See e.g., Brennan (2016), Friedlander (2018), Zheng (2016) for a defense of a similar argument.

¹⁸ See e.g., Calhoun (1989) and Lorde (1997) for the claim that anger and reproach play an indispensable role in promoting social change, especially in the context of extensive systematic inequalities.

See e.g., Brennan (2016), Rini (2018), Friedlander (2018), Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) for the *opposing* claim that blaming individual actors of microaggressions (or micro-inequities) is a counterproductive and ineffective way of inducing social change, for doing so may generate defensive and hostile reactions, which bars a productive conversation and delays the progress in distributing moral knowledge to a wider community.

3. The Epistemic Challenge of Microaggressions

The first part of the *aptness* argument states that individual actors of microaggressions are likely not blameworthy for their contributions to larger-scale inequalities. I agree with Brennan (2016) and Friedlaender (2018) that the distinct nature of microaggressions poses a genuine challenge for our allocation of individual blame.¹⁹ However, contrary to their understanding of this argument, I find that the nature of this challenge is distinctly *epistemic*. Brennan and Friedlaender, along with others, have argued that the difficulty in warranting blame as an appropriate response arises because individual actors of microaggressions are *in fact* not blameworthy for their behaviors. I argue that we should instead focus on the problem that individual recipients of microaggressions cannot adequately judge *whether* individual actors of microaggressions are in fact blameworthy.

I further argue that the scope of this challenge is broader than what we might have suspected. The problem is not that a recipient of a microaggression *sometimes* fails to be in a position to adequately judge the actor. I argue that the very nature of microaggressions, which sets them apart from more familiar types of injustice, renders it *nearly impossible* for their recipients to adequately judge the actors' blameworthiness. As a result, certain groups in our community are collectively precluded from acceptably engaging in a blaming practice to address an entire species of injustice that tenaciously targets them and reinforces their marginalized group status.

3.1. Fitting and Warranted Blaming Attitudes

Let me first distinguish the two kinds of rational endorsement that we may have toward our blaming attitudes²⁰: (i) *fittingness* of our blaming attitudes in response to an identified offense and (2)

¹⁹ Also see e.g., Zheng (2016) and Rini (2018).

²⁰ Following Hieronymi (2001) and others, I understand angry blaming attitudes as *judgment-sensitive* attitudes. While I do not think that they need be occasioned by our conscious judgment (for we sometimes first issue these attitudes as immediate reactions to a perceived offense without consciously registering it as such), I think that they can be revised, undermined, or overcome through our judgments regarding the nature and significance of an identified offense.

their *warrantedness* (i.e., *justifiability*).²¹ I take it that when we are asking whether we can appropriately respond with blaming attitudes toward an agent of an offensive behavior, the relevant sense of propriety with which we are concerned is whether we are *warranted* in having these attitudes.

Consider our attitudes of fear. My fearful attitudes are *fitting* just in case the object toward which my attitudes are directed *in fact* possesses the particular properties represented by my attitudes. For instance, it is fitting for me to have fearful attitudes toward a shark because it in fact possesses the particular properties that make it fit to fear (i.e., make it dangerous). It is not fitting for me to have similar fearful attitudes toward a shark-shaped floating tube because a tube does not in fact have the properties that make it dangerous. However, I may still be *warranted* in having fearful attitudes toward this tube if I am warranted in believing or judging that the object in front of me in fact possesses the properties that make it dangerous—for instance, if I see this tube while swimming at night in an ocean known to be populated with sharks.

In short, we can posit the relationship between fittingness and warrantedness of our evaluative attitudes as follows. We are warranted in having certain evaluative attitudes if we are warranted in judging that these attitudes are fitting—that is, if we are warranted in judging that the object to whom or to which our attitudes are directed in fact possesses the particular properties that render our attitudes fit.

We can apply this distinction to our blaming attitudes. It is fitting for us to have blaming attitudes toward an agent if the agent in fact possesses the particular properties that render our attitudes fit. We are warranted in having our blaming attitudes toward an agent if we are warranted in judging that the agent in fact possesses the particular properties that render our attitudes fit.

²¹ See Scarantino and De Sousa (2021) for the discussion on the varieties of rational endorsement for emotions.

To be clear, I do not argue that blaming someone equates to or requires forming a judgment about its warrantedness.²² Due to the reactive nature of blaming attitudes, we can and do often find ourselves blaming someone before²³ or without²⁴ making any judgment about whether we are warranted in having or expressing these attitudes. The question at stake, however, is not whether we can blame²⁵, but whether we can be warranted in blaming individual actors of microaggressions.²⁶ Without settling this question, recipients of microaggressions who respond with blaming attitudes to instances of perceived injustice cannot dispel the charge of being “hypersensitive,” “thin-skinned” or “paranoid,” which they frequently face from both the offending party and third-party observers.²⁷

3.2. Fault-tracing Blame and The Conditions of Blameworthiness

Following earlier scholars (e.g., Strawson, 1962; Wolf, 2011; Wallace, 2011; Menges, 2017), I take blame to be primarily (though not exclusively) expressed by a range of negative attitudes, such as angry, resentment and guilt. When, then, are these blaming attitudes considered appropriate?

According to standard conceptions of blame, our blaming attitudes toward an agent are fitting when the agent is considered ‘blameworthy,’ in some robust sense of being ‘at fault’ for

²² For a defense of an opposing claim, see Tognazzini and Coates (2021) for a summary of cognitive accounts of blame.

²³ See e.g., Wolf (2011) for the claim that blame is conceptually prior to a judgment of blameworthiness; “Anger, resentment, and the like are the prior concepts. It is only when one steps back and reflects on one’s attitudes that the question of whether they are deserved or appropriate can be asked” (p. 344).

²⁴ See e.g., Pickard (2013) for a discussion of irrational blame.

²⁵ Sue and Spanierman (2020) report that we do often respond to incidents of microaggressions with angry blaming attitudes while being in doubt about whether such reactions are warranted.

²⁶ Same goes with fearing attitudes—we sometimes have fearing attitudes as an immediate response to a perceived danger before making a conscious judgment that it is in fact dangerous or even after making a subjective judgment that it is in fact not. In either case, we can make a separate judgment about whether we were *warranted* in having those attitudes.

²⁷ As Sue et al (2010) and Sue and Spanierman (2020) explain, an individual confronting a microaggression frequently faces this charge. In a later section, I will get back to the discussion of how this problem generates further epistemic harm, as well as psychological, physical, and material harm, to a recipient of a microaggression. On the other hand, see e.g., Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) or Thomas (2008) for making this charge.

having committed a wrong, bad, or otherwise objectionable behavior. This presumed relation between the fittingness of our blaming attitudes and the blameworthiness of an agent is implicitly rooted in a widely accepted understanding regarding the nature of blame—namely, that blame is a response that (i) traces the wrongness or badness of an action back to some fault within an agent and (ii) allows us to negatively appraise a person (e.g., their mind, character, or the quality of their will) based on their action.²⁸

In our blaming practice, we tend to separate our assessment of an agent's blameworthiness from our assessment of the wrongness of the action for which blame is being considered. For instance, we might say that although what agent *x* did is wrong, *x* is not blameworthy. What we seem to mean by this is that although *x* has acted wrongly (or badly, or otherwise objectionably), they are nevertheless not 'at fault' for having acted so, where being 'at fault' indicates some robust connection between an agent and their action. In the absence of this connection, the action, despite remaining objectionable, reflects no fault within the agent—no problematic motives, or morally objectionable state of mind (e.g., Adams, 1985), no faulty moral character (e.g., Sher, 2006), no deficient quality of their will (e.g., Strawson, 1962; Wallace, 1994; Hieronymi, 2004, 2014, 2019; Talbert, 2012; McKenna, 2012; Arpaly and Schroeder, 2013; Zheng, 2016), no relationship-impairing attitudes toward others (e.g., Scanlon, 2008; A. Smith, 2012), and so on. Instead of delineating what these different phrases exactly refer to, I understand our judgment of an agent's blameworthiness as the judgment that there is *some* kind of fault or defect located within the agent's mind, self, or will—or that the act in question authentically manifests such a fault.

²⁸ See e.g., Strawson (1962), Nagel (1976, p. 322), Wolf (1990, p. 40-1), Hieronymi (2008, p. 362; 2014, p. 28) for the view that when we blame a person or judge them to be worthy of blame, we are assessing the moral quality of a person themselves, not that of an action.

A standard conception of blame conceives blame as a *fault-tracing* response. Accordingly, it holds that it is fitting for us to have blaming attitudes toward an agent if an agent in fact possesses properties that render them ‘blameworthy’—that is, if an agent possesses properties that allows us to draw a tight or deep connection between the agent and their action and renders them ‘at fault’ for their action.

At least some of the properties that are relevant to the fittingness of blame, on this standard conception, are invoked in discussions of the so-called conditions of blameworthiness. These include:

- *The Quality of Will Condition.* An agent x is blameworthy for φ -ing only if x ’s φ -ing expresses x ’s objectionable quality of will toward others.
- *The Knowledge Condition.* An agent x is blameworthy for φ -ing only if x had or reasonably could have been expected to have relevant knowledge regarding the significance of φ -ing at the time of φ -ing.
- *The Control Condition.* An agent x is blameworthy for φ -ing only if x had or reasonably could have been expected to have sufficient control over φ -ing at the time of φ -ing.

The Quality of Will Condition straightforwardly assesses whether we can appropriately appraise some fault within an agent’s will. Why do we want to know whether an agent has had, or could reasonably be expected to have had, a relevant kind and degree of *knowledge* or *control* at the time of acting? A plausible answer is that these are the conditions allegedly needed to ensure a tight or deep connection between an agent and their action.²⁹ If an agent were to have lacked the relevant

²⁹ I do not mean that *all* those who believe that blame is a response to some fault within a person must support some or all of these conditions. Talbert (2022), for instance, argues that some versions of *the Knowledge Condition* and *the Control Condition* are not required for properly attributing an action to an agent. I also do not mean that *only* those who believe that blame is a response to some fault within a person support these conditions. Defenders of a sanctioning view of blame would also endorse a version of *the Control Condition*. See e.g., Watson (2004; original print in 1996) or Wolf (2019).

knowledge regarding the significance of their behavior and could not reasonably be expected to have this knowledge at the time of acting, and therefore, could not be reasonably expected to act differently, the problematic action in question would fail to authentically reveal some kind of fault within the agent's mind, self, or will. In other words, the absence of knowledge and control could be seen as obstacles to drawing a robust kind of connection between an agent and their action, which would allow us to assess some fault within the agent based on how they behaved.³⁰

3.3. The Epistemic Challenge

To recap, in a standard framework where blame is understood as a *fault-tracing* response, it would be fitting for us to have blaming attitudes toward an agent of a problematic behavior if the agent were to in fact possess a particular set of properties that allows us to draw a tight or deep connection between an agent and their action and renders them 'at fault' for their action, such as demonstrating an objectionable quality of their will toward others. We are warranted in having blaming attitudes toward an agent if we are warranted in believing that the agent in fact possesses these properties.

Here is the problem. By the very characteristic that defines microaggressions as a distinct species of injustice different from more familiar types of injustice, an individual recipient of a microaggression can rarely be warranted in forming this judgment about its actor. Recall the example of a microaggression, in which a white American *A* asks an Asian American *B*, "Where are you *originally* from?" In order for *B*'s blaming attitudes toward *A* to be fitting, *A* must possess the features that render *A* 'at fault'—e.g., they must have an objectionable quality of will toward *B*, or they must have, or be in a position to have relevant knowledge regarding the objectionable nature of

³⁰ For instance, Zheng (2016) argues that when an agent has acted "unknowingly, unintentionally, accidentally, under coercion, or in an altered state of mind," their actions cannot be properly attributed to them and will excuse them from appraising responses (p. 65).

their behavior so that they could reasonably have been expected to avoid committing this behavior. In order for *B*'s blaming attitudes toward *A* to be warranted, *B* must be warranted in judging that *A* in fact possesses these features. However, by the defining nature of microaggressions, *B* can rarely be warranted in forming this judgment about *A*—even when *B* can confidently tell (at least themselves) that *A*'s behavior qualifies as an instance of a microaggression by identifying it a constituent of an overly familiar pattern of oppressive behaviors and treatments.

In this case, for example, *B* is not warranted in forming a judgment that *A* in fact violated the demand of good will toward *B*. It is possible, if not more likely, that *A* was expressing genuine care and interest in getting to know *B* better. Likewise, *B* is not warranted in forming a judgment that *A* in fact knew, at the time of acting, that their behavior fits into a broader pattern of behaviors that reinforce the marginalized status of *B*'s group and, thus, in fact could have avoided committing their behavior based on this knowledge. That is, *B* is not warranted in judging that *A* in fact knew that their behavior, once placed in the relevant historical and sociocultural context, carries the meaning that *B* is not a 'real' American but an 'outsider' to this country. Nor is *B* warranted in forming a judgment that *A* in fact could have been expected to have this knowledge. Being warranted in forming this judgment would require, at minimum, an extensive knowledge of *A*'s life history, including how they were raised and educated and lived their lives until the point of their interaction with *B*.³¹

³¹ *B* might be warranted in forming a judgment about *A*'s blameworthiness if *B* were to have extensive knowledge of *A*'s psychological and historical background. I suspect that these cases would be *rare* even when *A* and *B* are in close personal relationships. As Sue and Spanierman (2020) report, anecdotes from marginalized groups suggest that "microaggression from a friend or family member is more distressing than a stranger" (p. 194)—e.g., there is a heightened demand for plausible deniability and an increased cost of getting it wrong. While it might be easier for some people to point out to their close friend that their behavior is problematic, it might be harder for them to judge, let alone to communicate their judgment, that they 'meant' to do wrong or that they 'knowingly' did so, which is required in judging their blameworthiness.

The problem is not that in *some* isolated instances of microaggressions, the recipients may not be warranted in forming judgments about the actors that would warrant blame. Rather, the problem is that members of socially marginalized and subordinated groups *almost inevitably* face this epistemic challenge as they are subject to this subtler, newly attended species of injustice. In other words, in a framework where the justifiability of our blaming attitudes toward an agent requires our warranted judgment of fault within the agent, members of socially marginalized and subordinated groups are collectively precluded from justifiably engaging in a blaming practice to address everyday manifestations of injustice targeting their groups.

4. The Cost of Limiting Blame

If I have successfully set up this epistemic challenge arising from the distinct nature of microaggressions, we have two options. One option is to continue our practice of embargoing blame as an appropriate response to instances of microaggressions and reserve our blaming practice for more conventional types of injustice, where a recipient of injustice *is* warranted in finding an actor blameworthy. Another option is to acknowledge that our existing conception and practice of blame could and perhaps should be refined to accommodate a wider range of normatively significant interactions in our moral community, including but not limited to instances of microaggressions.

My view is that we have good reason to support the second route. First, contrary to a popular understanding, each instance of a microaggression could generate tangible harm to its recipient, which could provoke normatively significant reactions from them, such as blame. Second, despite the difficulty in warranting our blaming attitudes, these attitudes are often our natural and immediate reactions to our encounters with microaggressions. Insofar as we regard these attitudes as wrong or mistaken, we implicitly demand certain groups in our community to suppress and internalize their natural reactions to these pervasive instances of injustice, which, despite their subtle

nature and innocuous appearance, often carry an unmistakably offensive meaning to their recipients. This demand for civility, disproportionately made to structurally marginalized groups, I argue, could generate further harm to these groups. While there are also relatively civil ways of blaming, I will primarily discuss blame expressed by one's angry reactive attitudes in this section, as these attitudes are often an immediate reaction to a perceived instance of a microaggression while simultaneously being ones that are forcefully resisted by the recipients of these attitudes and third-party observers.³²

Again, my aim in this section is not to defend the effectiveness of blaming individual actors to institutionally address this newly proliferating species of injustice.³³ As I have said earlier, in this chapter, I will set aside the *productivity* argument for and against blame as a response to microaggressions. My aim is, instead, to highlight how our standard conception of blame is unfit to address an entire species of injustice and, as a result, fails to provide resources to accommodate the experiences of its victims, who have already been neglected in dominant narratives due to their marginalized group status.

4.1. Harms of Individual Microaggressions

Recall the second part of the *aptness* argument: even in rare cases where individual actors of microaggressions were blameworthy, they would be so only for small, unquantifiable harm, which

³² It is worth noting that blaming attitudes expressed by members of certain social groups often appear to be or are often perceived as *more* aggressive and hostile than they are, due to the existing negative stereotypes attached to their group identities.

For instance, Sue et al (2010) report pervasive negative stereotypes attached to Black people, such as the characterization of being angry and violent (p. 78) and those against Black women, such as the characterization of being aggressive and hostile (p. 80). Sue et al further report that due to these existing stereotypes, members of these groups “generally viewed reacting angrily as an ineffective response, because it would only propagate the stereotype that Black people are angry and aggressive” (Ibid., p. 81). Jerald et al (2017) also share that “simply being aware that stereotypes about Black women exist and that others may consequently judge their behavior against them may be sufficient to generate stress” (p. 488).

These existing negative group stereotypes, especially combined with the groups' awareness of these stereotypes, may reinforce the demand to civilize (and, in turn, silence) one's reactions to microaggressions.

³³ See e.g., Lorde (1997) or Calhoun (1989) for the powerful defense of this claim.

would not warrant blame. I contend that there are theoretical and empirical grounds to dispute this claim.

Let me first note that even in our ordinary interactions with our peers, outside of the context of structural injustice, we are not expected to quantify the amount of harm caused by an event to identify it as an offensive act that warrants normatively significant reactions from us. The amount of harm caused by the event is not the only relevant criterion in determining the aptness of our responses to the event. For instance, I could be mad at my partner for secretly investing our entire assets without telling me, even when it turns out to be successful, or at my parents for controlling my life and every decision that I make in school, even when I get into a good college as a result.³⁴

That said, I find it crucial to respond to this concern, for the alleged “triviality” of harm caused by a single microaggression has been a central argument across disciplines against responding with blame.³⁵ While more people are willing to admit that an accumulated experience of discrimination can harm its recipients, it is still a common understanding that each instance of a microaggression can at best cause trivial harm. As Rini (2021) puts it, one may respond, “You can’t put the whole weight of oppression on my one little mistake!” (p. 74).

Microaggressions harm their recipients in part by contributing to the larger system of oppression. At the same time, it is a mistaken assumption that a single incident of this subtle species of injustice cannot cause substantial harm to its recipient.

There are different ways in which a single instance of a microaggression may cause nontrivial harm to its recipient. First, the same micro-aggressive behavior may cause varying levels of harm to

³⁴ One may argue that in these cases, the amount of harm generated by losing trust in a relationship or losing my freedom has exceeded the amount of benefit incurred by financial profits or college acceptance. However, not only are these amounts hard to quantify, the expected outcome of this equation would not explain why I may be mad.

³⁵ See e.g., Lukianoff and Haidt (2015), Thomas (2008), Brennan (2016), Friedlaender (2018).

its recipient, depending on the identity of the actor, their relationship with the recipient, and the context in which it occurs. Consider the micro-aggressive behavior of continuing to misuse one's gender pronoun (e.g., using "she" instead of "they" to a person identifying as non-binary). This behavior may cause greater harm when it is committed by one's close friend, one's colleague with whom one has to spend significant time together, or one's boss who has discretion over one's workplace life, compared to, for instance, one's neighbor who exchanges occasional greetings in a hallway.

Second, some microaggressions may cause extra harm to their recipients by triggering the accumulated effects of similar incidents. Borrowing Kagan (2011)'s terminology, Rini (2021) distinguishes the *triggering harm* of microaggressions from their *background oppressive harm*. All microaggressions likely cause background oppressive harm to their recipients, with or without them noticing, by contributing to the status quo in which their groups are marginalized and oppressed. However, some microaggressions may cause additional harm. For instance, after a repeated exposure to similar types of mistreatments (e.g., being misgendered at the workplace by one's co-workers, being called a birth name or a name that one used before transitioning by one's friends, encountering gender binary options on federal forms, etc.), a seemingly benign, passing comment from one's neighbor ("Good morning, *Miss*. How are you today?") that would have gone unnoticed just a few days ago could unexpectedly become a trigger. It could serve as a stark reminder of the constant and pervasive mistreatments that one experiences in one's life, resulting in "a release of accumulated dismay" (Rini, 2021, p. 92). It is debatable whether the neighbor is more 'at fault' now that their behavior unexpectedly caused additional triggering harm, or whether they deserve more blame than others who have also contributed to the cumulated effects. This question once again

brings forth the challenge of assigning individual moral responsibility for collective harm,³⁶ especially in the presence of moral luck.³⁷

A single instance of a microaggression can still cause nontrivial harm to its recipient, even when it occurs outside of a particular social or personal relationship and without necessarily triggering the cumulated effects of separate incidents. First, due to its distinctly subtle nature, each incident of a microaggression can generate distinct kinds of *epistemic* harm to its recipient. Fatima (2020) argues that a recipient of a microaggression experiences two kinds of epistemic harm, which “diminish[es] a person’s capacity as a knower to generate and participate in making knowledge claims” (p. 166).³⁸ The primary epistemic harm is “the inability to generate knowledge claims with epistemic certainty about the nature of one’s *own* uncomfortable experience” (Ibid., p. 167, *my italics*), and the secondary harm is “the [impeded] ability on the part of the microaggressed to make knowledge claims about their experience of microaggression *to others*” (Ibid., p. 169). In other words, in each of our encounters with a microaggression, we likely experience compromised epistemic agency through which we cannot explain and articulate our experience of being wronged to ourselves and to others.

Moreover, one’s inability to generate and assert knowledge claims about one’s own experience of facing a microaggression (e.g., that it *is* an offense that fits into larger oppressive structures) and one’s own perception of reality (e.g., that I *was* unjustly offended) can result in further psychological, physical, and material harm. Sue and Spanierman (2020) report that facing a potential microaggression places a demand on the recipient to spend considerable energy to “(a) discern the truth, (b) protect oneself from insults and invalidations, and (c) try to ascertain what

³⁶ See e.g., Parfit (1984) for an extended discussion.

³⁷ See e.g., Nagel (1976) for an extended discussion.

³⁸ See Fricker (2007) for the original discussion of epistemic injustice.

actions should be taken” in response (p. 74). Engaging in this process may cause material harm to the recipient, for “their work productivity, problem-solving abilities, and learning capabilities can suffer immensely” as a result (Ibid.). Their failure to properly respond to the incident that they have registered as unjust and offensive may also “cause major psychological and physical harm,” including “the loss of integrity, lowered self-esteem, experiencing pent-up anger and frustration, somaticizing problems, and so on” (Ibid., p. 78). These further damages are caused by the distinctly subtle nature of a microaggression, for an instance of a blatant offense would not require an additional process of trying to verify and validate one’s own perception of reality and repeatedly failing to do so.³⁹

These studies describe the potential impact of each incident of a microaggression, not the impact of a person’s accumulated exposures to similar insults and degradations over an extended period of time. Of course, a single incident of a microaggression could have such an impact on its recipient *only* in the context of the existing history and systems of oppression. If the same incident were to take place in a non-racist, non-sexist, non-homophobic, non-transphobic, non-ableist, non-classicist society, it likely would not have the same meaning that it carries in a society with deeply entrenched structural inequalities (e.g., *our* society). However, our behaviors, whether we like it or not, do not take place in a vacuum; they take place within a complex matrix of social structures and cultural histories. Our actions, situated in this matrix, carry a meaning that is at least in part, if not for a large part, imported from these factors comprising our social lives. What we impart to other people, then, is the meaning of our actions generated from the context in which they are situated, not what our actions would have meant in the absence of these causal arrangements.

³⁹ See Sue and Spanierman (2020) for the summary of research reporting that “it is *easier* for people of color, sexual minorities, and women to deal with overt and deliberate forms of bigotry than with subtle and unintentional forms, because no guesswork is involved” (p. 34, *my italics*).

In sum, we can dismiss the claim that individual instances of microaggressions can at best cause small, unquantifiable harm to their recipients. Each of our encounters with a microaggression not only can compromise our capacity to generate knowledge claims about our own experience but also can generate tangible psychological, physical, and material harm as a result.

4.2. Demands for Civility

Studies have further reported that our encounters with microaggressions often produce angry and resentful attitudes (along with frustration, irritation, pain, and anxiety) as a natural and immediate response⁴⁰, though these reactions tend to be pathologized and deemed irrational in our community.⁴¹ Holder et al (2015), for instance, report that several participants in their study talked about feeling angry and frustrated when encountering a microaggression; “Anger, being extremely frustrated with it because again it’s not so blatant. ... Then you become this paranoid person and you see race in everything” (p. 172). Given the dominant conception of blame, according to which blame as a response is considered unwarranted, recipients of microaggressions are often asked to suppress and internalize their natural reactions to instances of perceived injustice. They are asked to instead respond in a “civil” manner, for more intense reactions, such as blame, are reserved for the behaviors for which we are warranted in forming a judgment of some kind of fault within the agent.

This demand for a civil response has two problems. First, a demand to suppress and internalize their naturally arising reactions (e.g., angry feelings and attitudes) to microaggressions is shown to generate further negative health consequences for members of oppressed groups, such as added stress, more symptoms of depression and anxiety, along with having less energy for self-care

⁴⁰ See Sue and Spanierman (2020) for the summary of studies.

⁴¹ For instance, Thomas (2008) says: “[I]t seems ridiculous, if not a bit pathological, to experience emotional distress because someone has called you ‘articulate’ ... Such stereotypes may be inappropriate, but they hardly necessitate the hand-wringing reactions” (p. 274).

and avoiding unhealthy behaviors.⁴² Second, this demand for civility, disproportionately made to socially marginalized groups in their response to the distinct species of injustice that disproportionately targets their groups, reinforces existing power relations and unjust social orders. While a demand for civility plays a valuable role in maintaining social stability and promoting a productive dialogue among people with diverse moral views, it may also solidify marginalization and powerlessness of structurally marginalized groups. As Reiheld (2013) points out, it may sustain social stability “by seeing the status quo as harmless, and the complaints of those against it as uncivil and misguided” (p. 69). It thus serves “to reinforce existing power structures and to silence, marginalize, and strip the power to demand redress from those who contest the world as it is currently structured” (Ibid.).

5. Ameliorating Blame

My goal is again not to defend the sheer utility of blaming individual actors of microaggressions for the purpose of mitigating this supposedly problematic social phenomenon. It is instead to defend a claim that an individual instance of a microaggression, despite its subtle nature and innocuous appearance, *is* still an act of offense that causes harm to its recipient and can warrant blaming attitudes as a response. If we were to invalidate blame as an appropriate response, we would need to provide a convincing explanation of why these individuals are not warranted in responding to these incidents of offense in a manner consistent with how they would respond to other offensive behaviors and mistreatments.

We have seen an explanation. Members of socially marginalized groups are not warranted in issuing blame as a response to a microaggression because they are not (and if I am right, can rarely

⁴² See e.g., Jerald et al (2017) for the summary of studies.

be) warranted in judging that the act in question manifests some kind of fault within an agent's mind, self, or will. In the absence of this judgment, we cannot morally appraise a person based on how they behaved, which, according to our standard conception of blame, would make blame inappropriate.

At the same time, we have seen that this conception of blame as a *fault-tracing* response results in excluding certain groups in our community from acceptably engaging in a blaming practice to address a newly attended species of injustice that disproportionately targets them and hinders their lives. In light of this, we should ask ourselves whether we have good reason to maintain our ordinary conception of blame, or whether it might be usefully revised to better serve its purpose.⁴³

In the following chapter (Chapter 2), I will propose to modify our understanding of blame to accommodate a broader range of our experiences neglected in the dominant narratives. In particular, I will propose that we adopt a pluralistic picture of blame, in which blame serves multiple different points, some of which do not require tracing and appraising a person's fault expressed by their conduct.

6. Two Senses of Blameworthiness

Let me close this chapter by noting that my rejection of the *aptness* argument has an important implication on our discourse on blame. Recall that the first part of the *aptness* argument states that we cannot appropriately blame individual actors of microaggressions because they are likely not blameworthy for their contributions to larger-scale inequalities. Instead of showing how these agents may in fact be blameworthy in the sense of being 'at fault' for their conduct, I argued

⁴³ See e.g., Haslanger (2012)'s description of an "ameliorative" inquiry; or Chalmers (2020)'s description of "conceptual engineering" in philosophy.

that blame may be and perhaps should be a warranted response even when we cannot be warranted in judging that they are blameworthy in this sense.

In doing so, I have violated a common presumption in our blame discourse—namely, that blame directed toward a person is appropriate only when and in part because that person is at fault. We can tentatively call this the *hidden supposition* in blame discourse, for it appears so frequently in the heuristics guiding our conversations on blame. We can write this verdict as follows:

The Hidden Supposition: Blame directed toward A on account of A's *y*-ing is appropriate *only when* and in part *because* A is at fault for *y*-ing.⁴⁴

Pending variations, the key idea behind this verdict is that there is a particular grounding relation between an agent's faultiness and the appropriateness of blame issued toward the agent—namely, that an agent's possession of a fault grounds and in part accounts for the appropriateness of blame issued toward the agent. In other words, the appropriateness of blame toward an agent obtains in virtue of and is partly explained by the agent's faultiness.⁴⁵

My observation is that we—both blame theorists and everyday participants in this practice—almost unanimously take this supposition for granted without further questioning it. It becomes the basis of the claims that we frequently make in our daily practice (e.g., “Yeah, she really messed up this time. But you can’t blame her because it wasn’t her fault!”), as well as one of the common data points that we use to assess different accounts of blame.

Yet, this commonly presumed grounding relation between an agent's faultiness and appropriateness of blame assumes a particular and non-analytic *fault-tracing* view of blame—namely, that blame serves to trace the wrongness or the badness of an action back to some fault within an

⁴⁴ Or, put differently: Blame directed toward A on account of A's *y*-ing is inappropriate *when* and in part *because* A is not at fault.

⁴⁵ Shoemaker (2017), on the other hand, defends a response-dependent theory of blameworthiness.

agent and to morally appraise those faulty bits of an agent revealed by their action. Once we reject this view of blame, we no longer need to uphold this verdict about the grounding relation. Let me explain.

I first note that there are two potentially distinct senses in which we invoke the notion of a person's blameworthiness. On the one hand, we say that a blameworthy person is someone who is an appropriate target of a certain range of morally significant reactions, which we categorize as blame. Blameworthiness, in this sense, tracks the property of an agent's being a fitting target of blaming reactions on account of their objectionable behavior. We can call this an *analytic* sense of blameworthiness.

A claim about a person's blameworthiness, however, sometimes makes a far more intrusive claim about the person who committed the action. We say that a blameworthy person is someone who is properly attributed with particular faulty moral qualities, revealed by their problematic conduct. Blameworthiness, in this sense, tracks the property of a person's being 'at fault' for their objectionable behavior in some robust sense. Following Watson (2004)'s description of *aretaic* judgments as the ones that "bear directly on how we are to conduct ourselves, what ends to adopt, and on what kind of agents to be" (p. 10), we can call this a conventional or an *aretaic* sense of blameworthiness.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ To be clear, that one has committed an act that renders them aretaically blameworthy need not "indicate a robust or even general moral character flaw," (Wolf 2011, p. 338) or leave an irrecoverable "'debit' in [one's] 'ledger'" or "'blemish' or 'stain' in [one's moral] record." (Zimmerman 1988, p. 38). One may be a morally decent person in general with several admirable qualities while endorsing a few suspicious ends or showing objectionable lack of care for someone or some business for whom or for which one is expected to care more. For instance, one may be a children's right activist who, due to one's busy schedule, takes a cab everywhere and orders delivery food in plastic containers every day while fully comprehending that global warming is a serious problem and that one owes these children a better environment. One may regularly donate to animal welfare charities and yet, no matter how hard one tries, cannot stop eating meat while firmly believing that it is morally wrong to do so. One might have been in a dispute with one's friend and said hurtful things with a full awareness that it would serve the sole purpose of hurting them.

If one is judged to be aretaically blameworthy in these cases, what is assessed is not simply the moral quality of one's behavior, but that of one's mind, self, or will revealed by that behavior. For instance, one's

In a standard framework, in which blame is understood as a *fault-tracing* response, these two senses of blameworthiness do not come apart—one is *analytically* blameworthy only when and in part because one is *aretaically* blameworthy.⁴⁷ Recall that in this view, blame is a response that traces and negatively appraises faulty bits of a person revealed by their action. If so, it necessarily holds that a person is an appropriate target of this reaction only when and in part because they are judged to be ‘at fault’ for their conduct, or only when and in part because their conduct manifests some fault within their mind, self, or will. (The verdict about the grounding relation between the two properties, therefore, also necessarily holds.)

However, once we adopt a pluralistic picture of blame, in which blame can serve multiple different functions, some of which are not tied to tracing and appraising a person’s fault, these two senses of blameworthiness could potentially diverge. They could track two distinct properties of a person being blamed and, hence, could invoke distinct success conditions.

Recall our previous discussion about the three conventional conditions of blameworthiness. These are the conditions that track a person’s *aretaic* blameworthiness and assess whether they are ‘at fault’ for their problematic behavior. Again, in a standard, fault-tracing view of blame, these are simultaneously the conditions that track a person’s *analytic* blameworthiness and determine whether they are an appropriate target of blame as a fault-tracing response. However, once we reject a fault-tracing view of blame (or the claim that it is an exhaustive picture of blame), these conditions that track a person’s *aretaic* blameworthiness may not coincide with the conditions that track their *analytic* blameworthiness. In other words, the conditions needed for a deeper inspection and moral appraisal

knowingly saying hurtful comments to one’s friend may reveal one’s insufficient care or regard for their feelings at that moment; this need not mean, however, that one’s relationship with the friend is permanently wrecked or that one simply does not care for them.

⁴⁷ I cannot provide a genealogy, but my bold suspicion is that it is at least in part due to our long acceptance of the *fault-tracing* view of blame that we have not bothered to separate these two potentially distinct senses of blameworthiness, as it is natural to use them interchangeably in this view.

of a person may not align with the conditions needed to evaluate the appropriateness of blaming reactions toward a person. Instead, the conditions that would determine the fittingness of blaming reactions would and should depend on the distinctive nature of such reactions—what they are, and what they do.

For instance, if we were to understand blame primarily as a *punitive* or a *sanctioning* activity (e.g., public condemnation and shaming, ostracization, etc.)⁴⁸, we would have to appeal to a set of considerations that would render such a sanctioning activity appropriate (e.g., a consideration of fairness) to judge blame’s fittingness. We should look for the conditions that would ensure that *those* considerations are met (e.g., Could the blamee have had a reasonable chance to avoid acting so and being penalized? If not, it may be unfair to sanction them.). Alternatively, if we were to understand blame primarily as a *preaching* activity (e.g., one-sided delivering of a moral lesson)⁴⁹, we would have to appeal to a particular set of considerations that would render such a preaching activity appropriate (e.g., a consideration of effectiveness) to evaluate blame’s fittingness. Again, we should look for the conditions that would ensure that *those* particular considerations are met (e.g., Does the blamee reasonably stand a chance to improve themselves? If not, it may be useless to preach to them.). If we were to understand blame as a distinct kind of a *communicative* activity, we would have to appeal to different considerations and evoke different conditions of fittingness depending on what we think of as the *point* of such communicative activity—to morally criticize (e.g., Wolf, manuscript), to inspire remorse (e.g., Fricker, 2017), to promote a moral alignment (e.g., Fricker, 2017), to offer assistance (e.g., Rini, 2021), to protest (e.g., Hieronymi, 2001; Talbert, 2012; A. Smith, 2012), to initiate a

⁴⁸ See e.g., A. Smith (2007).

⁴⁹ See e.g., Calhoun (1989), specifically where the author says “[m]oral reproach reminds or perhaps teaches us what actions are morally unacceptable” (p. 405).

meaningful and valuable conversation (e.g., McKenna, 2012; Dover, 2019), to signal one's commitment to moral norms (e.g., Shoemaker and Vargas, 2019), and so on.

Put simply, our discussion about whether a person is an appropriate target of blame should be preceded by the following question: *What is the point of blame in this context?* Depending on our answer, a person may be a fitting target of blame while lacking particular faulty moral qualities tracked by the conventional conditions of blameworthiness.

7. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown that our standard conception of blame as a *fault-tracing* response may not be well-equipped to address the rapid changes in our social circumstances, such as blatant manifestations of injustice being replaced with subtler types of injustice. It may result in excluding certain groups in our community from properly engaging in a blaming practice to address this emerging species of injustice that does not fit into the existing mold of a blame-warranting offense. I have argued that this unfortunate result gives us good reason to reexamine our understanding of blame and what it does (or what it ought to do). Next, I will show that adopting a pluralistic picture of blame, in which blame serves multiple different functions, can amend this result. In particular, I will argue that blame as a *protesting* response can widen the scope of warranted blame and accommodate the cases that have been neglected in the dominant narratives.

CHAPTER 2.

PROTESTING BLAME

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that our standard conception of blame as a *fault-tracing* response, which traces and negatively appraises some kind of fault within a person manifested by their action, is unfit to address an emerging species of injustice proliferating in our society. This problem, I claimed, urges us to reexamine the role of blame and whether our existing conception of blame can best serve this role.

In this chapter, I make two positive suggestions to modify a fault-tracing conception of blame. First, I introduce a pluralistic picture of blame, in which blame serves multiple different points, some of which do not involve tracing and negatively appraising a person's fault manifested by their action. Second, I defend a strand of *protesting blame*, in which blame as moral protest can respond to and be warranted by the blame-warranting meaning of an action, which is not constituted or determined by our judgment of fault about its actor. I argue that adopting a pluralistic picture of blame and, specifically, including my proposed account of protesting blame in this picture allows us to properly expand the scope of warranted blame to accommodate the cases that have fallen through the cracks of our currently dominant theoretical framework.

Here is how I will proceed. I will start by recapping our previous discussion about the limitation of our standard conception of blame as a *fault-tracing* response and pressing the need for adopting a pluralistic picture of blame that better represents a diverse and disunified nature of our blaming practice (Section 2). I will then examine the role of blame, or what this distinct category of

normatively significant reactions purports to do in our lives (Section 3). Following T.M. Scanlon, I will propose to understand blame as a response to the “meaning” of our action, rather than a response to its permissibility, while disputing his claim that such meaning is necessarily determined by facts comprising an agent’s internal states of mind, character, or the quality of their will. Instead, I will argue that our action can carry the blame-warranting meaning, which is at least in part, if not primarily, constituted by facts about the causal, sociocultural, and historical context in which it takes place. I will then develop my account of protesting blame and explain how it differs from other existing accounts of blame that also emphasize its protesting element (Section 4). My next task will be to explain how including my proposed account of blame in a broadened moral landscape can resolve the epistemic challenge raised by microaggressions and provide much-needed resources to support the experiences of socially marginalized groups (Section 5). I will close by addressing two objections to my account of blame, each of which posits a distinct kind of disparity between blame and protest (Section 6).

2. Toward a Pluralistic Picture of Blame

2.1. The Limits of Fault-tracing Blame

In the previous chapter, I argued that microaggressions pose a distinct epistemic challenge to their recipients. By the very characteristics that define microaggressions as a distinct species of injustice (i.e., apparent subtlety and assumed innocence), an individual recipient of a microaggression can rarely be warranted in judging that the actor of a microaggression meets the conventional conditions of blameworthiness, which would allow us to render them ‘at fault’ for their behavior. Accordingly, in a standard framework where blame is understood as a fault-tracing response, an individual recipient of a microaggression can rarely be warranted in blaming its actor.

I claimed that this result is problematic, as it excludes certain groups in our community from acceptably engaging in a blaming practice to address an entire species of injustice that tenaciously targets them and causes tangible harm in their everyday lives. In light of this problem, I suggested that we reexamine the role of blame and whether our standard conception of blame is fit to adequately serve this role. I argued that the epistemic challenge posed by this newly emerging species of injustice exposes the limits of blame as a *fault-tracing* response and urges us to engage in an inquiry of ameliorating our conception of blame.⁵⁰

2.2. Fault-tracing Blame and Blame Without Fault

Following McKenna (2012) and Fricker (2017), I find that blame is an “internally diverse” and “significantly disunified” practice (Fricker, 2017, p. 155). Instead of trying to come up with one unified account that encompasses all instances of blame sharing the same set of common features, I propose that we endorse a pluralistic picture of blame, in which blame can have multiple different points. Some of these points would be essentially tied with tracing and negatively appraising a person’s fault manifested by their actions; other points, however, would not require this step.

For instance, blame as a sanctioning, didactic, or communicative activity need not necessarily require a negative moral appraisal of a person. In theory, we can sanction someone’s behavior without thinking that their behavior authentically reveals who they are as a moral agent. Likewise, we can preach to someone to act better, initiate a meaningful conversation with someone about their violation of moral norms, or criticize them for such violation, without thinking that their conduct manifests problematic bits of their mind, their moral self, or the quality of their will.

We can call different strands of blame that necessarily involve moral appraisal of a person *fault-tracing blame* and those that do not necessarily involve such appraisal *blame without fault*. To be

⁵⁰ Again, see e.g., Haslanger (2012)’s description of an “ameliorative” inquiry or Chalmers (2020)’s description of “conceptual engineering” in philosophy.

clear, not all strands of fault-tracing blame are committed to the claim that what it is to blame someone simply *is* to negatively appraise a person or to report our negative evaluation of that person (e.g., Zimmerman, 1988). Such accounts of blame would describe strands of fault-tracing blame but would not exhaust the list. Instead, any strand of blame that necessarily involves moral appraisal of a person and is only prompted and warranted by our judgment of fault about a person, located in their mind, self, or will, would amount to fault-tracing blame.

For instance, there can be an instance of *fault-tracing sanctioning blame*, in which blame takes the form of a sanctioning activity that responds to and is warranted by our judgment of fault about a person, and an instance of *sanctioning blame without fault*, in which such sanctioning can respond to and be warranted by some facts independent of what composes a person's mind, self, or will. Likewise, there may be instances of *fault-tracing didactic blame* and *didactic blame without fault*, or instances of *fault-tracing communicative blame* and *communicative blame without fault*, which can be further separated into instances of *criticizing blame*, *conversational blame*, *protesting blame*, and so on.

It would be misleading to understand them as competitive accounts of blame, each of which provides a competing answer to what the core unifying feature of all (at least all prototypical) instances of blame is or should be, or what activity all instances of blame primarily consist in or should consist in. My suggestion is that our standard framework in which blame is primarily understood as a fault-tracing response alone can no longer adequately guide our moral interactions in our current—rapidly changing—social circumstances. We need a broader picture in which blame can serve multiple different points, some of which do not require the task of fault-tracing.

3. Blame as a Response to an Action's Meaning

I argued that the limitation of blame as a fault-tracing response presses us to reexamine the role of blame and whether our existing conception of blame can adequately serve this role.

What, then, is the role of blame, and how can it best serve this role? One answer that I find plausible is developed by T.M. Scanlon. In *Moral Dimensions* (2008), Scanlon explains that the “meaning” of our action, understood as “the significance of this action for the agent and others,” comes apart from its moral permissibility (p. 52). While these two notions are closely related, the meaning of an action can vary independently of its moral permissibility (Ibid., p. 55). The same action can also have different meanings while holding fixed its permissibility. For instance, my action of calling a sick relative could have a different meaning for its recipient (i.e., the relative) and myself. According to Scanlon, what importantly determines the different meanings of the same action is an agent’s reasons for acting—or more precisely, an agent’s attitudes toward others reflected in their reasons for acting (Ibid., p. 52). Suppose I call my sick relative because I am interested in inheriting his wealth. My selfish reasons for acting, in this case, would reveal my objectionable attitudes toward the relative and would thus constitute a different meaning of my action than the same action of calling my relative would be if I call because I genuinely care for his well-being.

Having distinguished an action’s meaning from its moral permissibility, Scanlon proposes that we understand blame as a response (or a distinct category of responses) to the meaning of our action, as opposed to a response to its permissibility. Scanlon claims that we can appropriately blame a person on account of their action when we can appropriately judge that the person’s action has a meaning that indicates some kind of impairment in their relationship with others.⁵¹ A person’s action has such a meaning when a person’s reasons for acting reveal their attitudes toward others that render such an impairment justified, such as, for instance, their problematic lack of concern toward others or their indifference to relationship-constituting considerations that they are expected to

⁵¹ Following our discussion in Chapter 1, we can say that in Scanlon’s view, we can be warranted in blaming a person on account of their action when we are warranted in judging that their action reveals some fault in the person that renders some kind of an impairment in one’s relationship with the person appropriate.

attend to. For instance, calling a sick relative because I am interested in his inheritance reveals my objectionable attitudes toward my relative, which would render some kind of impairment in our relationship appropriate. My act of calling would then carry a relationship-impairing and, thus, blame-warranting meaning for my relative (and presumably for myself as well). Based on these claims, Scanlon argues that to blame a person on account of their action is to judge that their action reveals something about the person's attitudes toward others that impairs the relations that others can have with that person and to actually modify one's relationship with the person in a way that this judgment renders appropriate.⁵²

In sum, Scanlon (2008)'s claim can be split into the following two independent theses: (i) blame is a response to an action's meaning, not a response to its moral permissibility, and (ii) an action's meaning, to which blame responds, is constituted or determined by an agent's reasons for acting, or an agent's objectionable (i.e., relationship-impairing) attitudes toward others reflected in their reasons for acting.

I postulate that we can accept (i) without also accepting (ii). In other words, we can agree with the idea that blame is a response to the meaning of our action while disagreeing that its meaning is primarily determined by some fault found within the agent. What else, then, can constitute or determine an action's blame-warranting meaning?

I contend that the answer to this question again depends on the distinct nature and role of blame. Again, I find that blame can have multiple different points. Depending on what our blame purports to do, we would have different answers to when our action carries a blame-warranting meaning. In Scanlon's account, in which blame primarily consists in relationship-impairment, it makes sense that our action would warrant blame when it has a meaning that would warrant such

⁵² Wolf (2011) raises a powerful concern that Scanlon's relationship-impairing account of blame fails to account for the cases in which our robust relationships are not impaired by an instance of warranted blame.

impairment in our relationships with others. In a different account where blame is primarily understood as, for instance, an avenging activity, our action would warrant blame when it has a meaning that would warrant some act of vengeance on the part of its recipient.⁵³

In the following sections, I will develop an account of blame as a *protesting* activity. In my proposed account, our action would warrant blame when it has a meaning that warrants blame in the form of moral protest. I will argue that including my proposed account of blame in our moral landscape will helpfully expand the scope of warranted blame to accommodate the cases that are neglected in the dominant narratives. In particular, I will explain how it will resolve the epistemic challenge of microaggression and fill the lacuna in our shared resources to make sense of and support the everyday experiences of socially marginalized groups.

4. Blame as Moral Protest

4.1. Blaming as Protesting

Following a handful of earlier philosophers (e.g., Hieronymi, 2001, 2019; Talbert, 2012; A. Smith, 2012), I am interested in a strand of blame as moral protest. I do not mean to suggest that blame *always* has a point of protesting, or that what unifies (or ought to unify) *all* instances of blame is its function of protesting.⁵⁴ As I mentioned earlier, I endorse a picture in which blame can have multiple different points. I find that among the important points of blame is protesting, and that there is a lot more to be discussed about what blame as moral protest can do.

While the three philosophers that I just named all emphasize a protesting element of blame, their accounts differ in several aspects. Both Hieronymi (2001) and Talbert (2012) focus on negative

⁵³ For instance, you might think that whether the action has a vengeance-warranting meaning could vary independently of its moral permissibility. Perhaps an action that is *ceteris paribus* impermissible could have a vengeance-warranting meaning only if the agent of said action were still alive.

⁵⁴ See e.g., A. Smith (2012) and Shoemaker and Vargas (2019) for a defense of a *functional* account of blame.

reactive attitudes and emotions, primarily resentment. Talbert claims that the point of blaming (i.e., expressing resentful attitudes), or our interest in blaming, is to protest. Hieronymi (2019), however, argues that while resentment may function as a protest, protest is not and cannot be an aim or purpose of blaming. To Hieronymi, there is a clear disparity between protesting and resentment—protesting is a voluntary communicative act, while resentment is not and cannot be; I will return to this concern in Section 6.2. A. Smith (2012), on the other hand, finds that reactive attitudes of resentment are not a necessary component of blame. Smith instead claims that the element of moral protest is “what unites all of the behavioral and attitudinal responses we are inclined to categorize as instances of blame” (p. 29). In particular, Smith advocates a modified version of Scanlon’s relationship-impairing account of blame and proposes that to blame a person is to judge that the person has relationship-impairing attitudes toward others and to actually modify one’s own attitudes, intentions, and expectations toward the person *as a way of protesting* (Ibid., p. 43).

Hieronymi again claims that while blaming attitudes (e.g., resentment) may function as protest in our social lives, it is a mistake to understand our issuance of such attitudes as a communicative act, like that of protesting. I want to make a stronger claim. In the cases that I am interested in, blaming someone constitutes an act of protest. When one blames someone on account of their objectionable behavior, one thereby protests that behavior. What is being protested against is the objectionable behavior in question, yet one’s protest is still directed toward the actor who committed that behavior. I will call this strand of blame, the issuance of which constitutes an act of protest, *protesting blame*.

Protesting blame is communicative and performative in its nature. In this sense, blaming, or one’s issuance of blame, resembles or shares crucial characteristic similarities with a speech act. Several philosophers have already made a remark on this resemblance. Frye (1983), for instance, claims that “being angry at someone is somewhat like a speech act in that it has a certain

conventional force whereby it sets people up in a certain sort of orientation to each other; and like a speech act, it cannot ‘come off’ if it does not get uptake” (p. 88). Fricker (2017) argues that blame—at least a paradigmatic species of blame that she calls *communicative blame*—is a performance with an illocutionary point of finding fault with the other party and communicating this judgment of fault with the added force of negative emotional charge. Simion (2021) also defends the thesis that explicitly blaming someone (i.e., when I utter, “I blame you”) constitutes a performative speech act.

Let me provide a very brief overview of Austin’s speech act theory. Austin (1962) finds that there are three categories of acts that we can perform with speech: locution, illocution, and perlocution. While there are numerous, competing accounts of how to best understand the distinction between these three acts, here is one interpretation that I find plausible. *Locution* is an “act *of* saying something” (Austin, 1962, p. 94, *my italics*); it refers to an utterance of any meaningful sentence. Locution, when made in certain contexts under certain conditions, may constitute an act with a certain performative force—for instance, an act of asserting, advising, warning, promising, refusing, ordering, requesting, and so on. We can call this *illocution*, or an illocutionary act, which is an act of doing something “*in* saying something” (Ibid., *my italics*). Depending on the context, the same locution might comprise a different illocution. For instance, the utterance of the same sentence, “Turn off your cell phone” may constitute an act of command or an act of request depending on who says it to whom in what context (e.g., a teacher to a student in a classroom versus a friend to another friend while watching a movie). Lastly, some illocutions can result in some changes in their hearers. *Perlocution* is an act of doing something “*by* saying something” (Ibid., *my italics*); it refers to an act of producing some changes in the hearer, whether such changes were intended or expected by the speaker or not.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ While Austin (1962) uses the term “perlocutionary acts,” in some readings, perlocutions are understood as mere effects of an illocution, not a distinct type of an act that one can do with speech. Yet, Austin writes: “We have the idea of an ‘act’ as a fixed physical thing that we do, as distinguished from conventions and as

An illocutionary act, or a speech act, has a distinct illocutionary point, its characteristic aim intended by the speaker. The illocutionary point of an act of promising, for instance, is to commit oneself to a future course of action, while the illocutionary point of an act of asserting is to describe how things are and perhaps to bring about the same belief in the hearer (Green, 2021). Austin emphasizes that an illocutionary act can achieve its illocutionary point and retain its illocutionary force only when it secures uptake from its hearer—that is, only when the hearer understands the meaning and the characteristic force of the speech act (Austin, 1962, pp. 116-117).

I am less concerned with extensively analyzing the speech-theoretic implications of blaming.⁵⁶ My point is that like a speech act, blaming, or one's issuance of blame (not necessarily including the explicit utterance of the sentence "I blame you"), has a distinct performative force. It has the characteristic aims that can be obtained in part by securing uptake from its target audience.

What, then, are the characteristic aims of *protesting blame*? The two primary aims of protesting blame are: (i) to identify and declare the event in question as an act of an offense, and (ii) to resist the identified offense. Its subsidiary aim is to affirm (or to reaffirm) to its target audience that the act *is* a protest-warranting offense, and that one's protesting response *is* valid. Protesting blame can obtain these points only when it secures uptake from its target audience—that is, only when its target audience understands what the speaker purports to do and what it can accomplish when it is successfully taken off. Depending on the situation, the target audience of protesting blame may include the offender, other members of the moral community, and the blamer himself. I will elaborate on this point in Section 5. But first, let me flag an important difference between my account of protesting blame and other existing protest accounts of blame.

distinguished from consequences. But [...] we can import an arbitrarily long stretch of what might also be called the 'consequences' of our act into the nomenclature of the act itself is, or should be, a fundamental commonplace of the theory of our language about all 'action' in general." (p. 107).

⁵⁶ For this discussion, see e.g., Simion (2021).

4.2. Fault-tracing Protesting Blame

Despite the differences that I have discussed earlier, there is an important commonality in the accounts developed by Hieronymi (2001), Smith (2012), and Talbert (2012). That is, they all seem to describe a stand of fault-tracing blame. In other words, they all seem to be committed to the idea that blame involves tracing and negatively appraising some fault within a person manifested by their action. Let me elaborate a bit more on each of these accounts.

In a series of papers, Hieronymi argues that negative reactive attitudes, such as resentment, “cannot be separated from ‘aretaic’ appraisal” of a person (Hieronymi, 2004, p. 140). Following Strawson, Hieronymi claims that “[r]eactive attitudes, presumably, are reactions to one’s *perception of* or *judgments about* the quality of another person’s will towards oneself or others” (Ibid., p. 120). When one’s resentment functions as protest, what it responds to and protests against is a moral claim implicit in another person’s objectionable behavior. Hieronymi (2001) writes:

[A] past wrong against you, standing in your history without apology, atonement, retribution, punishment, restitution, condemnation, or anything else that might recognize it as a *wrong*, makes a claim. It says, in effect, that you can be treated in this way, and that such treatment is acceptable. That—that claim—is what you resent. It poses a threat. In resenting it, you challenge it. If there is nothing else that would mark out that event as wrong, there is at least your resentment. And so resentment can be understood as protest. (p. 546)

She further explains:

An event can make a claim when it is *authored*, that is, when it is an action. An action carries meaning by revealing the evaluations of its author. The event could not make a claim or carry meaning (positive or negative) if its perpetrator were not capable of making moral statements with his actions. (Ibid., pp. 546-547, *my italics*)

A person's action makes a moral claim (or carries a meaning) that triggers and warrants resentment as a protesting response by revealing the person's objective evaluation of the recipient's worth; it is their way of "saying to us 'I count but you do not,' 'I can use you for my purposes,' or 'I am here up high and you are there down below'." (Ibid., p. 546; originally from Murphy, 1988). This claim, when remained unresisted, poses a present threat to one's standing. What one's resentment protests is this claim implicit in someone's offensive action that persists as a threat. Accordingly, an action fails to carry a resentment-licensing meaning when it is not authored by its actor in the relevant sense—that is, when it fails to authentically reveal the author's objectionable quality of will toward others (e.g., the blamer sees that the blamed party didn't in fact disregard their interests), or when the author has now retracted their claim that previously prompted resentment as a response (e.g., by sincerely renouncing their deed and apologizing).⁵⁷

Like Hieronymi, Talbert (2012) adopts a Strawsonian view, in which blaming someone primarily consists in the expression of negative reactive attitudes, such as resentment (p. 90). Again, like Hieronymi, Talbert contends that one's negative reactive attitudes toward a person are prompted and justified by one's judgment that their behavior reveals "unjustified ill will, contempt, or disregard" (Ibid., p. 90) toward oneself or others, such as "their offensive judgments [that] "those people don't have the same standing we do' or 'those people don't have any right to complain about being treated this way.'" (Ibid., p. 99).

As I mentioned earlier, unlike Hieronymi and Talbert, Smith (2012) finds that negative reactive attitudes, such as resentment, neither exhaust nor are necessary for blame. Instead, following Scanlon, Smith claims that blaming someone primarily consists in modifying a set of relationship-constituting attitudes, intentions, and expectations toward them as a way of protesting.

⁵⁷ In these cases, Hieronymi argues that anger loses its point and rational justification; for an extended discussion on *forgiving* and *excusing*, see Chapter 3.

Smith further concurs with Scanlon that what prompts and warrants blame is our judgment that the person's behavior reveals their "attitudes that impair [their] relations with others" (Smith, 2012, p. 44), such as their problematic disregard or lack of "concern for the interests of others" (Scanlon, 2008, p. 128).

In sum, all three of these accounts are committed to the view that blame involves tracing and negatively appraising some kind of fault within a person, located in their mind, self, or will. In their accounts, blame in the form of moral protest exclusively responds to and is warranted by our judgment of fault about a person. For Smith, it is our judgment of a person's relationship-impairing attitudes toward others; for Talbert and Hieronymi, it is our judgment of a deficient quality of a person's will. If so, we can perhaps call this a strand of *fault-tracing protesting blame*.

4.3. Protesting Blame without Fault

However, blame in the form of moral protest need not involve negative moral appraisal of a person or bits of a person revealed by their behavior (e.g., their quality of will). Instead, I argue that protesting blame can respond to and be warranted by the protest-warranting meaning of an action, which is not constituted or determined by our judgment of fault about its actor.

In the previous section, following Scanlon, I proposed to understand blame as a response to the blame-warranting meaning of our action, as opposed to a response to its moral permissibility. However, I further argued that we can accept Scanlon's idea that blame is a response to the meaning of our action while rejecting his idea that such blame-warranting meaning of our action is necessarily determined by our judgment of fault about the agent—in Scanlon's view, in particular, our judgment that the agent's action reveals their objectionable, relationship-impairing attitudes toward others. The meaning of our action, or the significance that it holds to its recipients, is not always determined solely by facts about or *internal* to the agent—for instance, as Scanlon posits, the agent's reasons for acting. Instead, our actions often carry a meaning that is at least in part, if not primarily, imported

from facts *external* to the agent, such as facts constituting the sociocultural, political, and historical context in which those actions take place. I contend that such meaning of our actions can and do sometimes prompt and warrant normatively significant reactions from their recipients, such as blame in the form of moral protest.

If blame (specifically, protesting blame for the purpose of my discussion) is a response to the meaning of our action, and if such blame-licensing meaning of our action can be comprised by facts external to the agent, we can make sense of blame that is not aimed at tracing and negatively appraising some kind of fault within an agent manifested by their action. Instead, blame as protest can respond to and be warranted by the protest-warranting meaning of our action that is not determined by our judgment of fault about the agent. To differentiate this strand of blame from the ones developed in the earlier accounts, I call this *protesting blame without fault*.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Some have wondered whether my proposed account of protesting blame without fault overlaps with what Watson (2004; original print in 1996) and others have described as an *accountability* conception of blame. Following Watson, moral philosophers have discussed two potentially distinct types of moral responsibility ascription: *attributability* and *accountability*. In a brief summary, *attributability* tracks an *evaluative* aspect of responsibility-ascription, while *accountability* tracks a *punitive* or a *sanctioning* aspect of it. You are *attributability*-responsible for your actions only when they are properly attributable to you by authentically manifesting your ends, commitments, and values that you endorse. You are *accountability*-responsible only when it is appropriate for others to enforce some kinds of expectations on you and sanction you for violating these expectations.

This proposed distinction has yielded a separate question of where to locate blame. Some philosophers (e.g., Zheng, 2016) have explicitly defended an *attributability*-conception of blame, while others (e.g., Wolf, 2019) have defended an *accountability*-conception of blame. My understanding of *protesting blame* does not neatly fit into the dichotomy between *attributability*-responsibility and *accountability*-responsibility. While protesting blame shares an important similarity with an *accountability* conception of blame, it also significantly departs from its core features and conditions. Let me explain.

Similar to *accountability*-responsibility, protesting blame asks the recipient of blame to pick up the costs of their behavior, regardless of whether their behavior manifests some kind of fault located in their mind, self, or will (e.g., problematic states of mind, faulty moral character, or deficient quality of will). It declares the event as an act of an offense and the actor as a recipient of one's protest. It communicates to the offender, the rest of the moral community, or sometimes primarily to the blamer themselves that the behavior in question has offended and insulted them and need be resisted. However, such protest is not to be identified with a *sanctioning* activity. In many cases, protesting blame is not aimed at *sanctioning*, nor does it function as a kind of a *sanction*.

Here is a clear disparity between protesting blame and a *sanctioning* view of blame, which is typically how an *accountability* conception of blame is understood as. Sanctions and penalties are bad, and you should try to

In the following section, I will illustrate how a microaggression as an example could carry a blame-warranting meaning, which does not depend on our judgment of fault about the actor. I will further explain that including my proposed account of protesting blame in our moral landscape can resolve the epistemic challenge raised by microaggressions and properly expand the scope of warranted blame to accommodate the cases that have fallen through the cracks of our standard theoretical framework.

avoid them. Suppose you cheated on the exam but were uncaught and left unpenalized; I can hardly think of a situation in which you would feel upset or disappointed by this result.

Yet, this does not seem to accurately describe a reaction of someone who is (potentially) subject to protesting blame. Suppose you completely forgot about your anniversary with your partner, come home late, and found that your partner was not at all mad at you. She simply and calmly responded: “Ah, you’re home! Let’s go to bed now.” I suspect that you would feel something different from pure joy and relief. You would likely be confused—or even upset—that your partner did not react more seriously or intensely about what you did to her. You might wonder if your partner did not think that spending time with you, or a proof that you cared about this relationship, did not mean much to her in the first place.

While being subject to blame, often expressed via hot emotions and attitudes, could be unpleasant, we still expect to be a recipient of these reactions, especially from our close friends and loved ones. It is because blame is a response to an action’s meaning—what someone’s action meant and how it mattered to us. Being blamed signals that our action has meant something and mattered to the person blaming us. (In a very odd sense, being blamed may be a kind of privilege; it signals that we are able to impart the kind of meaning that triggers and warrants normatively significant reactions from others via our actions.)

Here is another difference. Watson (2004; original prints in 1996) explains that accountability, understood as liability to sanctions, invokes “issues of fairness” (p. 273). A person is accountable for their actions insofar as they are liable to the relevant sorts of sanctions (i.e., adverse treatments) in response to their failure to meet certain expectations; they are liable to such sanctions insofar as it is fair to impose such sanctions. This consideration of fairness has generated a distinct condition or a requirement for the fitting attribution of accountability-responsibility—namely, that a person must have had a “reasonable opportunity to avoid” committing an action that incurred sanctions (Ibid., p. 276). Following Watson, advocates of an accountability-conception of blame (e.g., Wolf, 2019) have defended a similar condition for the fitting attribution of blame.

Because protesting blame is not a kind of sanctioning activity, it also need not invoke the consideration of fairness and require the condition of reasonable avoidability. Our actions can carry a significant meaning to others, even one that triggers and warrants normatively significant reactions from them, regardless of whether we could have reasonably avoided it. It is not unfair to respond to such a meaning, especially when such a response is aimed at and functions as protesting (i.e., communicating and ultimately defending one’s protest), instead of sanctioning.

These discrepancies show that protesting blame importantly departs from a conventionally understood model of accountability-responsibility or an accountability conception of blame. A more helpful way of understanding this picture would be to place protesting blame next to appraising and sanctioning views of blame, which already play a distinctly valuable role in our moral and social lives, respectively.

5. Filling the Lacuna

5.1. Meaning of Microaggressions

Recall our example of a microaggression from the previous chapter. A white American A asks, “Where are you from?” and an Asian American B responds, “Boston.” A asks B again, “Where are you *originally* from?”, in which a white American A asks an Asian American B , “Where are you *originally* from?” What might be the meaning of A ’s behavior?

Recall that in Scanlon (2008)’s account, the blame-warranting meaning of A ’s behavior would be determined by facts about A —e.g., facts comprising A ’s objectionable states of mind, A ’s faulty moral character or self, or the deficient quality of A ’s will toward B . More precisely, it would be determined by A ’s objectionable attitudes toward B reflected in A ’s problematic reasons for acting, which would render B ’s modifying their relationship with A appropriate.

However, as I have shown in my extended discussion on microaggressions and modern injustice in the previous chapter, A ’s behavior, and the significance that it holds to its recipient B , cannot and should not be assessed in isolation from its background. A ’s behavior is a constituent of a larger system of oppression, which functions to solidify unjust power structures. When properly situated in this context, A ’s behavior carries a particular meaning to its recipient B , regardless of what A intends to communicate and regardless of A ’s awareness of this meaning—namely, that B is not a ‘real’ American and is an ‘outsider’ to this country. This meaning of A ’s behavior is at least in part, if not primarily, determined by facts about the causal, sociocultural, and historical context in which it takes place, not by facts about A ’s internal states of mind.

I contend that such meaning of our action, determined by facts external to us, can and does sometimes prompt and warrant blame as a response. In other words, I find that blame can be a response to the meaning of our action, which is not determined by our judgment of fault about their agent, located in their mind, self, or will.

5.2. Resolving the Epistemic Challenge

Let's now return to the epistemic challenge posed by microaggressions. In the previous chapter, I argued that an individual blamer is warranted in having blaming attitudes toward an agent if they are warranted in believing or judging that the agent in fact possesses the particular properties that render these attitudes fit. In a standard framework where blame is primarily understood as a fault-tracing response, the relevant properties that would render our blaming attitudes fit are the properties that would manifest some kind of fault within an agent's mind, self, or will. I then argued that due to the very nature of microaggressions that makes it a distinct species of injustice (i.e., apparent subtlety and assumed innocence), their individual recipients can rarely be warranted in forming a judgment that their actors in fact possess these properties. As a result, these individuals are almost never warranted in the blaming attitudes that often arise as natural reactions to their encounters with microaggressions.

However, in an expanded framework where blame is understood as a response to the meaning of an action, where such meaning can *also* be constituted by facts external to the agent, the particular properties that would render our blaming attitudes fit are no longer limited to the properties that would authentically manifest some kind of fault within the agent. They could also include properties that show that the agent's action has a blame-warranting—in my account, *protest-warranting*—meaning to its recipient.

A recipient of a microaggression can be warranted in forming the judgment that this subtly oppressive behavior carries this broadened sense of blame-warranting meaning. While they may still be wrong or mistaken, the process of making this judgment no longer requires the task of tracing and analyzing the agent's internal states of mind, which is likely impossible in the cases of microaggressions. What is put on the discussion table is no longer the question of whether the act in question authentically manifests some kind of fault in an agent's mind, self, or will, but instead, the

question of whether the act carries the kind of meaning that would prompt and warrant blame as a protesting response, given the relevant sociocultural and historical context of its occurrence. The kind of information needed to settle this question, I contend, is more likely accessible to and can more easily be shared and distributed to the parties involved.⁵⁹

A recipient of a microaggression is still rarely warranted in judging that its actor is conventionally (i.e., aretaically) blameworthy. However, with this broadened understanding of what might constitute and determine the meaning of our action, we can resolve this challenge and explain how some instances of microaggressions may trigger and warrant blame as a protesting response.

To be clear, my suggested attempt to broaden the meaning of our action is meant to supplement, not replace, its meaning relying on the individual agent's internal state of mind. As Scanlon says, we do often want to know what the action in question reveals about the agent—e.g., their motives, character, or the quality of their will toward us. My claim is that another significant dimension of our action's meaning can be determined by factors external to us, and that such meaning can also warrant normatively significant reactions from its recipients, such as blame.

5.3. Fighting Hermeneutical Injustice

Expanding the idea of the blame-warranting meaning of our actions can also help address a distinct type of epistemic injustice. In *Epistemic Injustice* (2007), Miranda Fricker introduces the notion of *hermeneutical injustice*: “the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience

⁵⁹ Of course, in what Calhoun (1989) describes as an “abnormal moral context,” where moral knowledge disseminates unevenly within a community, some groups may access the knowledge regarding the moral significance of an action or a practice faster and more easily than the rest of the community. For instance, socially marginalized groups frequently facing microaggressions can access relevant moral knowledge about the practice (e.g., what microaggression is, why it matters, what counts as an instance of a microaggression, etc.) more easily than others. Calhoun observes that sometimes, these inner groups with the prior access struggle to spread that knowledge outside of their groups, especially when doing so serves to dismantle the existing social orders that have been benefiting the outsider groups.

I still contend that broadening blame-warranting meaning of our action in the way that I suggested still ease the process of creating and distributing the knowledge regarding the moral significance of microaggressions.

obscured from collective understanding owing to a [lacuna] in the collective hermeneutical resource” (p. 155). When there are certain gaps in our collective hermeneutical resources (e.g., lack of a word or a concept), we experience a cognitive disablement, where we cannot identify, understand, and articulate our experience to others and sometimes even to ourselves. This phenomenon becomes an injustice when such gaps are “caused and maintained by a wide-ranging and persistent hermeneutical marginalization” (Ibid., p. 159), in which some groups are persistently excluded from contributing to the shared hermeneutical resources due to their marginalized social identities.⁶⁰

I argue that exclusively focusing on the meaning of our action determined by facts internal to an individual agent creates a similar lacuna in our collective resources for properly understanding the significance of our actions to their recipients, as exemplified by microaggressions. As we have discussed earlier, due to the epistemic challenge caused by the distinct nature of microaggressions, members of socially marginalized groups can rarely access the meaning of a microaggression constituted and determined by an agent’s problematic motives, their objectionable attitudes, or deficient quality of their will toward others. This lacuna has created difficulty in identifying and communicating their experience of being repeatedly subject to this subtle species of injustice. I further suspect that these gaps are at least in part sustained by the fact that the groups that are disproportionately subject to this species of injustice *are* the very groups that are continuously precluded from making contributions to collective resources due to their marginalized status.

We can fill this lacuna by broadening the scope of the blame-warranting meaning of our actions. In addition to carrying a meaning determined by an agent’s internal states of mind (e.g., their

⁶⁰ For instance, Fricker discusses a lacuna caused by the absence of the term “sexual harassment.” Before this term was introduced, we collectively could not identify, understand, and communicate the experience of victims suffering from unwelcomed sexual advances from men. Fricker further observes that “it was no accident that their experience had been falling down the hermeneutical cracks,” for women’s “unequal hermeneutical participation is the deeper reason why [their] cognitive disablement constitutes an injustice” (Fricker, 2007, p. 153).

motives or the quality of their will), our action can *also* carry a meaning that is determined by facts comprising the sociocultural and historical background in which it occurs. Individual recipients can access this meaning of microaggressions. They can identify, understand, and communicate what these behaviors mean, to themselves and even to those who are less keen on picking up their meaning. While they cannot access the knowledge of what these subtly oppressive behaviors manifest about individual actors' internal states of mind, they can access the knowledge of what these behaviors mean that is imported from facts comprising the context of structural and systematic oppression. While this will not eliminate a cognitive disablement caused by the subtle nature of this newly attended species of injustice, it can provide a much-needed resource for these groups to make their experience intelligible and communicable to others and to themselves.

6. Objections and Replies

In this section, I address two related yet distinct objections to my account of protesting blame. Both objections press on the apparent disparity between blame and protest. The first objection claims that a protest account of blame cannot accommodate the cases of private blame. The second objection posits that blaming attitudes are and must be non-voluntary reactions and, hence, cannot be identified with a voluntary communicative act of protesting.

6.1. Private Blame

We sometimes blame a person for their misconduct without expressing it to anyone other than ourselves (e.g., the person themselves or other members of the community). However, we cannot seem to make sense of private or unexpressed protest. It seems that protest must be expressed and communicated for it to be successfully performed and achieve its aim. The objection states that any protest account of blame, then, cannot accommodate the cases of private blame, an essential component of our blaming practice that any successful account should aim to account for.

While Chislenko (2019) raises this objection specifically against a protest account of blame, the same concern applies to other *communicative* accounts of blame, identifying blame (or blaming) as a distinct kind of communicative activity. McKenna (2012), for instance, considers this objection to their *conversational* account of blame, and Fricker (2017) to their account of *communicative* blame.

There have been several plausible replies provided to this objection. McKenna (2012) and Fricker (2017) respond that private blame should be understood as a *derivative* of communicated blame (or what McKenna calls directed blame), which they view as the fundamental or paradigmatic form of blame. They propose that we understand the nature and norms of private blame by referencing them back to the core characteristics of communicated blame. Fricker, for instance, argues that unexpressed blame is still an instance of communicative blame (i.e., “of a type that is best understood as essentially apt for communication”) that is simply not communicated (e.g., given the costs and risks of communicating it).

Smith (2012) claims that unexpressed blame still entails some modification of our attitudes, intentions, and expectations toward the blamed party, and such modified reactions, even when they are known to others, still “embody, at a deep level, both moral protest and a desire that the wrongdoer morally acknowledge his wrongdoing” (p. 44). Following Watson (1987)’s claim that reactive attitudes are “incipiently forms of communication” (p. 230), so long as the recipient comprehends the message, Smith claims that blame consisting in such privately modified attitudes is still “incipiently communicative both in the sense that it registers (i.e., communicates, even if only to the victim herself) the existence of unjustified wrongdoing and in the sense that it seeks some sort of moral recognition of wrongdoing on the part of the blameworthy agent” (Smith, 2012, p. 44).⁶¹

⁶¹ While McKenna (2012) also concurs that reactive attitudes are incipiently communicative, a blamer in McKenna’s example still directs (and in some sense, expresses) their changed attitudes to the blamed party.

Chislenko (2019) does not find Smith's reply successful. Chislenko takes issue with both of Smith's claims: (i) unexpressed blame still implicitly seeks some kind of moral reply (e.g., from the wrongdoer or at least from the moral community), and (ii) blame's registering to oneself the existence of a wrongdoing counts as protest. Chislenko writes: "Even if blame's 'registering' a wrong is communication with oneself, this is not clearly a kind of protest. And since blame can be unexpressed, it need not actually seek any recognition from anyone." (Chislenko, 2019, p. 168)

Chislenko then suggests a response that they find more convincing. Borrowing Macnamara (2015)'s distinction, Chislenko claims that while unexpressed blame is not an instance of a communicative *activity*, it may still be an instance of a communicative *entity*. Macnamara gives an example of an email alerting the date of the upcoming colloquium that is yet to be sent and still saved in a drafts folder, and a "No Trespassing" sign that is yet to be put up in one's lawn and still stored in one's garage (Macnamara, 2015, p. 217). While an unsent email and a stored sign are not communicative acts, they are still communicative entities. An email or a sign is a message that represents the world as it is (e.g., that the colloquium will take place on this date), could, or should (e.g., that passersby must not cross the borders of one's property). In the cases of an unsent email and a stored sign, a message is still *created* despite its not having (yet) *sent* and *reached* its recipients. In other words, an unsent email and a stored sign still have the "core characteristics of representational content and the function of eliciting a specified form of uptake of that representational content in a recipient" (Ibid., p. 219). Adopting Macnamara's analysis, Chislenko suggests that the following response to this objection: while unexpressed blame in the form of inner protest cannot be an instance of a communicative *activity*, it is still an instance of a communicative *entity* directed at others and a mental activity directed at oneself (Chislenko, 2019, p. 170).

However, Chislenko's suggested reply does not resolve the concern raised by the objection, at least for the accounts like mine and Smith's, in which blaming constitutes an act of protest.

Chislenko suggests that in the cases of private blame, a communicative act of protesting has not (yet) occurred. Like an unsent email and a stored sign, a message is created but not sent to its recipient. While it is communicative in nature and aims to communicate to its recipients, such communication has not (yet) taken place. However, in the cases of private blame, one has already blamed a person. Blaming has already taken place. In an account where blaming constitutes an act of protest, then, protesting must also have taken place. To resolve this objection, this type of a protest account of blame, like mine, must be able to explain how by privately blaming a person, one thereby has protested. It has to show how protesting has also successfully taken place.⁶²

How can privately blaming a person constitute a communicative act, especially that of protesting? I contend that the primary target audience of private blame, or its intended recipient, is no one other than the blamer themselves. In privately blaming you, I do not intend to let it be known to you. I do not intend to secure your uptake or make you comprehend that what I am doing is to blame you. This includes a variety of different cases beyond the cases of dead and distant, where I know that I cannot physically secure your uptake. For instance, I may be worried about the costs or risks of your knowing that I blame you. Perhaps I am worried that our not-yet-so-resilient relationship would get damaged. Perhaps I suspect that you would find it reprehensible that I (dared to) blame you for something that you did not think of as significant or offensive and would try to punish me or take vengeance on me for my unwarranted reaction, which would be especially costly for me when you have some sort of discretion or authority over me (e.g., when you are my employer or a supervisor). Perhaps I am certain that I would not secure your uptake even if I were to try—for

⁶² By successfully taking place, I do not mean that blame as protest has thereby achieved its point; I mean that it has successfully secured its intended illocutionary force without implying that it necessarily obtained its intended perlocutionary effects.

instance, you would think that I am not in fact blaming you but simply making a fuss to secure your attention. Perhaps I am simply not interested in your recognition as it matters less to me.

While Smith (2012) notes that private blame may only communicate what it intends to communicate (i.e., the existence of unjustified wrongdoing) to the victim oneself, Smith claims that blame, even private blame, still seeks some sort of reply either from the wrongdoer or the broader moral community, such as their acknowledgment of wrongdoing (p. 44). Smith, like Chislenko, seems to think that the cases of private blame are instances in which the blamer still aims to communicate with others, yet in which such an aim is not achieved. I disagree with this analysis. In the cases of primary blame, the primary target audience of blaming is no one other than the blamer oneself. In these cases, an act of communication has successfully taken place. A message is not only created but is already sent out to its intended recipient; a sign is not only written but is proudly put up for its intended viewer.

In this sense, I concur with Talbert (2012)'s remark that communication implicit in blame as a protesting response could be and often is primarily directed toward oneself. In "Self-respect and Protest" (1976), Boxill insightfully observes that victims of oppression may protest injustice "even when it is clear that this will bring no respite and, instead, cause them further injury" (p. 62); when they still protest, they express "a righteous and self-respecting concern for [themselves]" (p. 61). Boxill further posits that "there is no reason to suppose that the self-respecting person must want others to believe what he believes" (Ibid., p. 62)—one may protest injustice out of one's respect toward oneself without having any further interest in also informing or reforming others. Following Boxill, Talbert claims that blame could take a similar form of protest—that is, "protest that does not aim at convincing others of one's moral standing but of affirming and reinforcing one's own commitment to this fact" (Talbert, 2012, pp. 106-107). Talbert writes: "[s]uch protest is communicative, but the communication is meant largely for the protestor and for his fellow

sufferers; to the degree that it communicates with the oppressor, it is not an invitation to dialogue so much as a defiant declaration” (Ibid., p. 106).

Talbert emphasizes the self-communicating function of blame as a protesting response to make a point that it can also be directed toward morally impaired or incompetent wrongdoers, from whom we cannot seek uptake for our protest. This observation of Boxill and Talbert, however, neatly applies to the cases of private blame. It helps us understand how even in the cases of private blame, both blaming and protesting could have taken place. If so, the alleged disparity between blame and protest shown by the cases of private blame may disappear.

6.2. Blame as Non-voluntary Reaction

The second objection also posits that there is an unyielding disparity between blame and protest, especially when blame consists in negative reactive attitudes, such as resentment. Here, I return to Hieronymi (2019)’s claim about the non-voluntariness of these reactive attitudes, which I briefly mentioned in Section 4.1. Hieronymi writes:

[W]hen I resent, I am not thereby engaging in a voluntary communicative action. [...] I do not resent in order to protest or in order to mark the wrong as wrong. Rather, I react to the threat posed to my standing or status with resentment. Although my resentment functions, in our social life, to mark the wrong as wrong, and so *functions* as a kind of protest, that is not *my* aim or purpose. (Hieronymi, 2019, p. 87, footnote 26).

Resentment, by its nature, is a *non-voluntary* reaction. Protesting, by its nature, is a *voluntary* communicative act. While this may not be a problem for some accounts of blame that only emphasize its protesting function (like Hieronymi’s), it may create a challenge for other accounts that identifies blaming as an act of protest (again, like mine and perhaps Smith’s).

By saying that our reactive attitudes, such as resentment, are non-voluntary, Hieronymi means that we cannot adopt or withdraw these attitudes at will, for any reason that we take to show

that it is worth adopting or removing these attitudes. For instance, we cannot voluntarily adopt resentment for the reasons that we count in favor of resenting and cannot voluntarily withdraw resentment for the reasons that we count against resenting. These reactive attitudes authentically reflect a person's take on certain relevant aspects of the situation, not a person's all-things-considered judgment on whether it would be good or bad to have these attitudes. In particular, Hieronymi argues that these attitudes reflect a person's take on a narrower set of considerations that directly bear on the fittingness of these attitudes—e.g., whether there is an instance of resentment-warranting offense. Moreover, Hieronymi claims that these reactive attitudes must remain non-voluntary in this sense for them to play the roles that they are assigned to play (e.g., ascribing moral responsibility) and to retain their significance.

I concur with Hieronymi that our reactive attitudes are sensitive to our judgments and that we cannot revise these attitudes freely at will. For instance, I cannot suddenly stop being angry at you simply because you promise to pay me a big sum of money for doing so. What I can do, instead, is to take voluntary steps to rid myself of or alleviate my anger. I do think, however, that the considerations on which we get to revise our attitudes are not strictly limited to the considerations that we take to bear on the fittingness of these attitudes, as Hieronymi contends. It does seem to be in my capacity to revise or withdraw my anger toward you upon judging that it is not worth it to continue being angry at you.⁶³ I do not always need to take further steps (e.g., “to undergo therapy or take medication or at least put some effort into trying to reframe or reinterpret your situation”) to genuinely feel that my anger has run out (“I’m *done*.”).

⁶³ That said, the different kinds of reasons to revise or withdraw our blaming attitude (especially, the distinction between the reasons that directly bear on the fittingness of these attitudes and those that don't) play an important role in our blaming practice. For an extended discussion on *forgiving* and *letting go*, see Chapter 3.

That said, Hieronymi still raises an important objection, or a task of clarification, to an account of blame that identifies blaming as an act of protest. I concur with the observation that we do not resent *in order to* protest. Reactive attitudes are reactions to our perception of the event; it makes less sense to say that they are produced for a particular purpose (e.g., protesting). However, I believe that our attitudinal response to a potential instance of an offense should be registered as a protesting response, with a point of protesting, for it to qualify as blaming.

Our reactions to a potential act of an offense do not always happen all at once. I contend that our initial reactions to an event do not always, at least sometimes not quite yet, constitute blaming. For one's attitudinal response to an event to qualify as blaming, it first has to be registered *by* and *for* oneself as a forceful moral emotion. In other words, for one's attitudinal response to take off as an act of blaming, it first has to secure uptake from oneself. One has to comprehend that one's own feelings and attitudes are generated as a *fighting* response, declaring an act in question as being unacceptable and resisting it. Our initial and immediate reactions to an instance of an offense do not instantly come with this recognition. Such reactions, while lacking this recognition, I argue, do not yet amount to blaming.

In other words, one's initial reactions to a potential instance of an offense, while lacking one's own recognition of their nature as a fighting response, do not yet amount to what Frye (1983) describes as *righteous anger*, which many have observed to be a core attitudinal response comprising blaming.⁶⁴ Frye (1983) famously claims that "anger is always righteous." However, one can get angry or have a similar kind of negative emotion without understanding what one feels and why one feels what one does. Perhaps in such a case, what one feels does not qualify as anger but merely amounts to frustration, discomfort, or annoyance. I need not dispute this claim. It is fine to say that all anger

⁶⁴ E.g., Strawson (1962), Wallace (1994, 2011), Hieronymi (2001, 2019), Wolf (2011), Talbert (2012, 2022), Menges (2017), and more.

is righteous and, yet, anger only extends to our attitudes to what one perceives as an instance of an offense.⁶⁵ My point is that for one's attitudinal response to an instance of an offense to be a moral emotion and carry the force of a moral emotion of registering and resisting a wrong, one has to recognize and register it as such.⁶⁶

Take microaggressions as an example. Holder et al (2015) explain that the recipients of racial microaggressions often engage in a repeated process of questioning their perception and interpretation of the event. Participants in their study, for instance, share their experience of being routinely excluded in the workplace, such as not being invited to social gatherings and work- and career-related meetings. One of the participants reports:

I tend to play the scene over and over again, so before really coming to a conclusion you start to do the process of elimination. Is it that I'm new here? Is it that they're all friends? Is this something that was planned in advance? Then you start to really begin to isolate. Then once you get right down to it, this has to be an issue of race. (Holder et al, 2015, p. 172)

One's immediate reaction to a situation like this may not amount to righteous anger or other forms of blaming attitudes. One may get annoyed, distressed, and even intensely frustrated, while not perceiving an event as a wrongful or offensive act ("What if they are just friends having lunch together?") and not registering their own feelings as a response that fights it. In such a case, I take that one's reactions do not yet qualify as blaming. It is at least in part through one's own recognition

⁶⁵ This is what Frye (1983) seems to have in mind, as she writes: "to be angry, you have to have some sense of the rightness or propriety of your position and your interest in whatever has been hindered, interfered with, or harmed, and anger implies a claim to such rightness or propriety" (p. 86).

⁶⁶ The kind of comprehension needed to register one's reaction as a moral emotion is importantly different from the assessment of whether one's feeling is justified (e.g., whether the person who committed the action lacks all excuses and is an appropriate target of blame). What is needed is not one's recognition that one's blame is warranted but one's recognition that one *is* blaming.

of what one does and what it can accomplish (i.e., to declare an occurrence of an offense and to protest it) that one's fighting reaction gets to obtain its performative force.

In sum, I agree with Hieronymi's observation that our reactive attitudes are not fully voluntary. Even when one instantly recognizes the fighting nature and capacity of one's blaming attitudes, it would be still misleading to say that one has issued or produced those attitudes *in order to* protest. That said, I still contend that our attitudinal response to a potential instance of an offense has to be registered by and for us as a protesting response, with a point and characteristic force of protesting, for it to qualify as blaming.⁶⁷

There may be more apparent disparities between blame and protest that I have not yet considered. Yet, this should not be a concern for my account. I do not suggest that all instances of blaming are those of protesting and all instances of protesting are those of blaming; there could be instances of blaming without protest and protesting without blame.⁶⁸ The crux of my account is that among the important points of blame is that of moral protest, and that blaming can sometimes constitute the act of protest.

7. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have returned to the problem that our standard conception of blame as a *fault-tracing* response alone may no longer be equipped to adequately guide moral interactions in our community. To address this problem, I have suggested a pluralistic picture of blame, in which blame

⁶⁷ This would be the case in my proposed account of *protesting blame*. A different strand of blame that identifies it as a different kind of activity will likely carry its own characteristic force and will need be registered as such.

⁶⁸ Typically, instances of blame without protest that are often discussed include instances of private or unexpressed blame; as I argued earlier, I think that private blaming can still constitute an act of protesting. Instances of protest without blame may include peaceful protests led by Martin Luther King Jr.

can serve multiple different points, including those that require tracing and negatively appraising a person's fault and those that do not require this step.

In particular, I have introduced a strand of *protesting blame*, in which blame as moral protest responds to and can be warranted by the blame-warranting (i.e., protest-warranting) meaning of our action, which is not necessarily dependent on our judgment of fault about the actor. If blame is understood as a category of reactions that responds to the meaning of our action, such blame-warranting meaning of our action can include both the meaning constituted by the actor's internal states of mind and the meaning determined by facts external to the actor. I have argued that adopting a pluralistic picture of blame and, especially, including my proposed account of protesting blame in this picture, can resolve the epistemic challenge of microaggressions and properly expand the scope of warranted blame to accommodate the cases that have been overlooked.

Next, I will explore the possible implications of my account on our discussions on forgiveness. I will argue that incorporating my proposed account of *protesting blame* will allow us to expand the scope of not just warranted blame but also genuine forgiveness, thereby preserving our experiences of forgiveness that are not adequately captured in the conventional framework.

CHAPTER 3.

FORGIVING THE UNBLAMEWORTHY

1. Introduction

In the standard view of forgiveness, forgiving someone requires our judgment that our blame issued toward that person is warranted. In the standard view of blame, we judge that we are warranted in blaming someone when we are warranted in finding that person blameworthy, in some robust sense of being ‘at fault’ for their objectionable behavior. If so, the standard view of forgiveness, when combined with this standard view of blame, leaves no room for forgiving someone whom we regard as unblameworthy in this conventional sense (or ‘aretaic’ sense, as I referred to in Chapter 1).

When we cease to blame someone whom we regard as unblameworthy (i.e., someone whom we judge not to be ‘at fault’ for having committed their objectionable behavior), the standard view of forgiveness, combined with the standard view of blame, will diagnose that we have not in fact forgiven this person. These views will insist that what we have done is something similar to forgiveness in one way (i.e., in ceasing to blame) but not in another, and that we are mistaken to think otherwise.

I find this result unfortunate. In life, we do often strive to forgive and sometimes succeed in genuinely forgiving people despite our judgment that they are not conventionally (i.e., aretaically) blameworthy. When we do so, our experience should be correctly preserved as that of forgiveness, instead of being reduced to or confused with other similar phenomena.

My goal in this chapter is to illuminate and support our experiences of forgiveness in these types of cases. By accepting a pluralistic picture of blame, in which blame has multiple different points, we can expand the scope of warranted blame and, thus, of genuine forgiveness. This way, we can preserve our experience of forgiving unblameworthy people without blurring the line between forgiveness and other similar phenomena and while preserving the distinct value of such forgiveness in our lives.

Here is how I will proceed. I will first introduce the standard view of forgiveness and the standard view of blame and explain how these two views, when combined, cannot make room for forgiving unblameworthy people (Section 2). These standard views will instead insist that we can at best excuse these people or to simply let go of our blame (Section 3). I will propose to amend this result by revising our dominant assumption regarding the right kinds of reasons to forgive (Section 4) and by expanding the scope of warranted blame with my account of blame as a *protesting* response (Section 5). I will then argue that my proposed account of forgiveness can still meet the two desiderata of reliably distinguishing forgiveness from related phenomena and preserving the distinct value of forgiveness (Section 6). I will close by considering and responding to two objections to my account of forgiveness (Section 7).

2. Blame, Forgiveness, and Unblameworthy Agents

2.1. The Standard View of Blame

Like other evaluative attitudes (e.g., fearing attitudes⁶⁹), our blaming attitudes toward a person are fitting when the person possesses the particular properties that render our attitudes fit. Our blaming attitudes toward a person are warranted when we are warranted in judging that the

⁶⁹ See the extended discussion in Chapter 1.

person possesses these particular properties. What, then, are the set of properties about a person, which renders our blaming attitudes toward them fit?

In the standard view of blame, these are the properties that would render a person ‘blameworthy’ in the conventional (i.e., aretaic) sense—i.e., the properties that would allow us to draw a tight or deep connection between a person and their action that would render them ‘at fault’ for their action. A person is blameworthy in this conventional sense if their behavior manifests some kind of fault within the person—e.g., their problematic states of mind, faulty moral character, or deficient quality of will toward others.

This presumed relation between the fittingness of our blaming attitudes and the conventional sense of a person’s blameworthiness is implicitly rooted in our dominantly accepted understanding of the nature of blame—namely, that blame is a response that (i) traces the wrongness or badness of an action back to some fault within a person and (ii) negatively appraises the person (e.g., their mind, character, or the quality of their will) based on their action. For this reason, in the earlier chapters, I called this the *fault-tracing* view of blame.

These properties that allegedly track a person’s ‘fault’ reflected in their action are conveniently captured in what we call the conditions of blameworthiness. Recall the following three popularly invoked conditions:

- The *Quality of Will* condition: An agent x is blameworthy for φ -ing only if x ’s φ -ing expresses x ’s objectionable quality of will toward others.
- The *Knowledge* condition: An agent x is blameworthy for φ -ing only if x had or reasonably could have been expected to have relevant knowledge regarding the significance of φ -ing at the time of φ -ing.
- The *Control* condition: An agent x is blameworthy for φ -ing only if x had or reasonably could have been expected to have sufficient control over φ -ing at the time of φ -ing.

The *Quality of Will* condition assesses whether there is some kind of fault within a person's will. In the standard view of blame, the *Knowledge* and *Control* conditions also serve to ensure a tight or deep connection between a person and their action.⁷⁰ If a person lacked the relevant knowledge regarding the significance of their behavior and could not reasonably be expected to have this knowledge at the time of acting and, therefore, could not reasonably be expected to have acted differently, their behavior would fail to manifest fault within their mind, character, or will.

In sum, in the standard view of blame, our blaming attitudes toward a person are fitting when the person possesses the properties that render them conventionally blameworthy—i.e., when the person meets the conditions of conventional (i.e., aretaic) blameworthiness, which would ensure a tight or deep connection between the person and their action that would properly render them 'at fault' for their action. Our blaming attitudes toward the person are warranted in this view, then, when we are warranted in judging that the person meets these conditions.

2.2. The Standard View of Forgiveness

Consider, now, the Standard View of Forgiveness:

The Standard View of Forgiveness: Forgiving someone involves: (i) ceasing to blame that person, (ii) for the right kinds of reasons, (iii) while judging one's blame toward that person to be warranted.

Pending variations in exact phrasing, several philosophers have argued for the conjunction of these three necessary conditions (e.g., Hieronymi, 2001; Murphy, 2005; Griswold, 2007; Milam, 2019).

Satisfying (i) without satisfying either (ii) or (iii), or both (ii) and (iii), would fail to qualify as

⁷⁰ As I clarified in Chapter 1, I do not mean to suggest that advocates of the standard ('fault-tracing') view of blame must require all three conditions, or that those who do not subscribe to this standard view must not require these conditions. My observation is that when these conditions are invoked in the context of the standard view, they function as the very conditions that allow us to draw a tight or deep connection between a person and their action and, thus, render the person 'at fault' for their action.

forgiveness in this view. In other words, when you cease to blame a person, but for the wrong kinds of reasons or without judging that your blame issued toward them is warranted, this view will diagnose that you have not in fact forgiven that person. I will explain each of these conditions in more detail in the following section.

Before I move on, let me make two caveats here. First, while I will mainly focus on reexamining the second and the third conditions in this chapter, there is a substantial debate among philosophers regarding the first condition—i.e., regarding what it *takes* to properly withdraw blame for it to qualify as forgiveness. A dominant view has been that it must involve overcoming—eliminating or reducing—one’s blaming feelings and attitudes, such as resentment (e.g., Murphy, 1988; Hieronymi, 2001; Griswold, 2007); let me tentatively call this the “overcoming” view. Some have argued that what matters is not that one succeeds in removing these attitudes but that one forswears them by making a positive commitment no longer to be resentful (e.g., Schönherr, *forthcoming*); call this the “foreswearing” view. Others have argued that what is required is that one relinquishes certain rights or entitlements that one has gained in virtue of being a victim of an offense (e.g., Nelkin, 2013; Warmke, 2016); call this the “relinquishing” view. Due to its popularity, some philosophers have called the overcoming view the standard or the orthodox view of forgiveness (e.g., Zaibert, 2009). I use the term “the standard view” to denote a broader view that accommodates variations in the ways in which one withdraws one’s blame. The claim that I aim to defend in this chapter is that we can and often do genuinely forgive a person whom we judge to be conventionally (i.e., aretaically) unblameworthy—how exactly such withdrawal of blame must be instantiated calls for a separate discussion. That said, in Section 6, I will briefly explain my own view, which most closely aligns with but still in some important sense departs from the relinquishing view.

Second, I have said that when you cease to blame a person without satisfying the second or the third condition in the standard view of forgiveness, this view will diagnose that you have not in

fact forgiven this person. There may be two distinct questions here. The first question concerns what makes an instance of withdrawing blame forgiveness *at all*, and the second question concerns what makes it rationally or morally *appropriate*. Some might argue that only the first and the third conditions bear on the former question, and that the second condition, regarding the right kinds of reasons to withdraw blame, bears on the latter question, along with other conditions that also assess the appropriateness of forgiveness (e.g., its standing conditions⁷¹).

There are arguments for and against adopting this more lenient version of the standard view. On the one hand, it may allow for a broader range of forgiveness done for different kinds of reasons, subject to further discussion regarding its appropriateness.⁷² On the other hand, it may hinder us from distinguishing forgiveness from other phenomena that also involve withdrawing one's warranted blame. As I will show, there is a value in further distinguishing forgiveness from related phenomena by appealing to the kinds of reasons for which we withdraw our blame, which we judge to be warranted. In other words, I find that there is good reason to view an instance of blame withdrawal done for the so-called "wrong" kinds of reasons as something other than genuine forgiveness. That said, I will also argue that we should adopt a more flexible view of the so-called "right" kinds of reasons to forgive to accommodate a range of cases that have been overlooked or excluded in our discussions.

⁷¹ A common assumption is that forgiveness requires rather strict standing conditions. A popular view has been that only direct victims of a wrongdoing have standing to forgive (e.g., Murphy 1988; Walker 2013); more recently, however, some philosophers have defended the possibility of third-party forgiveness (e.g., MacLachlan 2017; Chaplin 2019).

⁷² See e.g., Ingram (2013)'s discussion on the prudential value of forgiveness.

2.3. Unblameworthy Agents

Let's now consider the cases of unblameworthy people—i.e., those whom we judge to fail to meet the conventional conditions of blameworthiness. Consider, for instance, the following two cases:

Mother: *C* quit her job to enroll in a Ph.D. program in philosophy, a career that she has dreamt of for years. Since starting the program, *C* has gotten into multiple heated fights with her mother *D*. *D* is deeply upset that *C* is wasting her youth and losing her 'golden time' for marriage, for *D* firmly believes that the secure path to happiness for a woman is to marry a decent man and form a happy family. *C* knows that *D* loves her and only wants what is best for her. Given what she knows about her mother's life, *C* confidently judges that *D* simply did not understand and could not have been expected to understand what philosophy meant to *C*. Still, *C* finds herself blaming *D* for discouraging her from pursuing her dreams, and her relationship with her mother is strained.

Past Self: *E* passed up an exciting opportunity to pursue their dream by remaining in a secure but unfulfilling job. Years later, this decision still haunts *E* and causes them pain. Looking back, *E* know that they meant well and were doing the best that they could for their future. *E* did not and could not have been expected to know that their decision would be a terrible mistake. Still, *E* blames themselves.

In **Mother**, *C* confidently judges that her mother *D* is not blameworthy in the conventional (i.e., aretaic) sense. While *D* has deeply hurt her feelings on multiple occasions and actively discouraged her from the career that she knew was right for her, *C* judges that *D* is not 'at fault' for what she has done. *C* knows that *D* deeply loves her and is acting out of genuine concern for her

well-being. *C* also knows, perhaps better than most other people⁷³, that based on how *D* was raised and educated and has lived her life, *D* simply did not understand what philosophy meant to *C* and could not reasonably be expected to form different values and beliefs, which would have allowed her to act differently. In other words, based on what she knows about her mother, *C* judges that *D* fails to meet the conventional conditions of blameworthiness—specifically, both the Knowledge Condition and the Quality of Will Condition.

In **Past Self**, *E* confidently judges that their own past self is not conventionally blameworthy. *E* knows—again, likely better than anybody else—that their past self was not ‘at fault’ for having made a decision that turned out to be a bad mistake. *E* knows that they were genuinely trying their best to make a decision that would promote their long-term well-being. *E* also knows that they simply did not know and reasonably could not have known better to make a different decision at that time.

Despite knowing her mother very well (perhaps better than most other people), *C* could still be mistaken about her judgments about *D*. We are often led to form partial judgments about a person because we know them well.⁷⁴ Similarly, there is a possibility that *E* is mistaken in their own self-retrospection.⁷⁵ However, as I will explain shortly, what is at stake in seeing if *C* could genuinely forgive her mother *D*, and if *E* could genuinely forgive their own past self, is that they confidently, not necessarily correctly, makes these judgments about them.

In **Mother** and **Past Self**, *C* and *E* confidently judge that the targets of their blame (i.e., their mother and their past self) are not conventionally (i.e., aretaically) blameworthy. In the standard,

⁷³ Daughters may be in a better epistemic position to assess their mothers’ access to this information, as they are not simply close family members but also victims of similar branches of oppression.

⁷⁴ See e.g., S. Stroud (2006)’s discussion on doxastic partiality.

⁷⁵ You may experience cognitive bias in the form of *rosy retrospection*, in which you judge the past more affectionately or more positively than you judge the present, *self-deception*, or *defensiveness*.

fault-tracing view of blame, their blaming attitudes are not warranted, as they are not warranted in judging that the targets of their attitudes possess the very properties that would render them ‘at fault’ and, hence, conventionally blameworthy.

3. Forgiving, Excusing, and Letting go

Suppose after some time and through some process (we’ll talk more about this process in Section 4), *C* ceases to blame her mother *D*, and *E* ceases to blame their past self. Both *C* and *E* will fail to satisfy either (ii) or (iii), or both (ii) and (iii), in the standard view of forgiveness. This view will then diagnose that *C* and *E* have not in fact forgiven them; what they have done, instead, is to *excuse* them or to simply *let go* of their blame.

3.1. Excusing, Not Forgiving

When *C* ceases to blame her mother *D*, and when *E* cease to blame their past self, *C* and *E* fail to satisfy (iii) from the standard view of forgiveness. This view will then diagnose that what they have done is to excuse them, not to forgive them.

While both excusing and forgiving involve ceasing to blame someone,⁷⁶ there is an important distinction between these two practices—namely, our judgment about the warrantedness of our

⁷⁶ You can and often do excuse a person without or before blaming them. You may also forgive a person without or before blaming them. For instance, Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* portrays a scene in which Bishop Myriel forgives Jean Valjean for stealing silverware without blaming Valjean. Some, though, may argue what Bishop has done is the act of *mercy*, not that of forgiveness; see e.g., Murphy (1988) for the distinction between mercy and forgiveness.

I contend that what is needed for forgiveness is not an *actual* occasion of blaming, but rather one’s judgment that blame is a warranted response. Excusing, on the other hand, cannot accompany this judgment. In this chapter, I will focus on the cases of withdrawing blame that has already been issued, as these cases create a challenge of distinguishing forgiveness from other phenomena that also involve a withdrawal of blame. For an opposing claim, see e.g., Griswold (2007) who claim that in cases where you *don’t* have any blaming feelings, you’re *not* in a position to forgive though you ought to be thus positioned (p. 40).

blame.⁷⁷ If we cease to blame someone while judging that our blame toward them is not warranted, or more precisely, *because* we judge that our blame toward them is not warranted, then we have excused that person, instead of forgiving them. To forgive a person, we should cease to blame that person while judging that our blame is warranted.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ I am not making a distinction between the following two claims: (i) blame toward an agent x is warranted, and (ii) x is a warranted object of blame. (Note that in Chapter 1, I have distinguished (ii) from the following claim: (iii) x is conventionally/aretaically blameworthy, in the sense of being ‘at fault’ for their action.)

⁷⁸ This claim that I just made—namely, that forgiveness requires a judgment that one’s blame is warranted—needs clarification. *When* are we expected to make this judgment? One might claim that forgiveness does not or cannot require a judgment that one’s blame is still warranted at the time of forgiving. One might say that what forgiveness requires, and what separates it from related practices such as excusing, is instead a judgment that one’s blame *was* or *had been* warranted at the time of blaming. What grounds this claim is the idea that a person is an apt object of forgiveness when and only when they are no longer an apt object of blame. This idea has generated the so-called paradox of forgiveness, on the one hand, and the puzzle of fitting resolution of reactive attitudes, on the other hand.

For instance, some philosophers have argued that forgiving an already repentant wrongdoer is pointless or redundant as they no longer deserve to be the object of negative reactive (e.g., blaming) attitudes anyway. Forgiving an unrepentant wrongdoer, on the other hand, is unjustified as they do not deserve to be forgiven. Forgiveness, in this sense, is viewed as internally inconsistent or paradoxical (e.g., Kolnai, 1973; Calhoun, 1992; Zaibert, 2009).

Some philosophers, like Hieronymi (2001), agree that a repentant wrongdoer is no longer an apt object of blame. Genuine (or what Hieronymi calls “uncompromising”) forgiveness, however, is not redundant; it is instead what rationally follows, or what rationally ought to follow, resentment’s “los[ing] its footing” (Hieronymi, 2001, p. 549). This kind of view generates a puzzle of how the presumed fittingness of our reactive attitudes can rationally and fittingly diminish.

One response to this puzzle is that our negative reactive attitudes can fittingly diminish when the very reasons that constituted their fittingness change or diminish. Hieronymi (2001), for instance, argues that the rational justification of our blaming attitudes would dissipate if the threat posed by the wrongdoing, which initially grounded the fittingness of our resentment, were to diminish by the offender’s sincere repentance and apology. Na’aman (2019, 2021), on the other hand, argues that affective attitudes (e.g., anger) can fittingly diminish *over time* even when the reasons grounding their fittingness persist; the longer these attitudes endure, the less rational they become. Anger that was fitting at a past time may no longer be fitting at a later time.

My personal view is that our blaming attitudes need not be rendered superfluous and unwarranted at the time of withdrawal for their withdrawal to qualify as forgiveness. In my reading, Callard (2017) appeals to a similar strategy. Callard argues that while we have reason to stay angry forever in response to the past occurrence of a wrongdoing, we may also find reason to cease to be angry. To Callard, your anger is not merely a response to the past event of my wrongdoing, but rather what that event more fundamentally signifies about me and the relationship between us (e.g., my violation of a shared norm between us to value our relationship). Upon sighting the evidence that I have now returned to co-valuation of our relationship (e.g., through my apology and expression of contrition), you may now have reason to cease to stay angry at me. My reading of Callard is that such reason to stay angry at me *need not* undermine your reason to get angry with me in the first place. Na’aman (2019), on the other hand, reads that Callard (2017), like Hieronymi (2001), explains the fitting

Going back to our central cases, in **Mother** and **Past Self**, *C* and *E* confidently judge that the targets of their blame are not blameworthy in the conventional (i.e., aretaic) sense. In the standard view of blame, we are not warranted in blaming a person unless we are warranted in judging that they are conventionally blameworthy. Therefore, in the standard view of forgiveness, combined with the standard view of blame, we are not warranted in blaming those whom we judge to be unblameworthy—and thus, fail to satisfy (iii). The view will then insist that *C* and *E* cannot intelligibly forgive their mother and their past self, respectively, but that they ought to excuse them.

3.2. Letting Go, Not Forgiving

Even if *C* and *E* satisfy a nonstandard version of (iii), they may fail to satisfy (ii) in the standard view of forgiveness. In such a case, this view will insist that what *C* and *E* cannot intelligibly forgive their mother and their past self, respectively. What they can do, instead, is to let go of their blame.

Again, it is a widely accepted view in the philosophical literature that forgiveness requires withdrawing blame for the particular, so-called “right” kinds of reasons. Such reasons for which one withdraws blame have also been viewed as the means by which we can reliably distinguish forgiveness from related phenomena, such as *excusing* or *justifying*. For instance, as we just discussed in the previous section, we would be excusing a person if we were to withdraw blame upon judging that the person is not an apt object of our blame despite their having committed an offense. We would be justifying a person’s behavior if we were to withdraw blame upon judging that what they have done is not an instance of an offense in the first place.

Recently, Brunning and Milam (2022) have directed our attention to another related practice, which had not yet received much attention in the philosophical discussions despite its common

resolution of anger by appealing to the change in the very facts that constituted the reasons that initially grounded their fittingness.

appearance in our lives—namely, the practice of *letting go* of one’s blame. In the authors’ account, letting go, like excusing and forgiving, also involves withdrawing one’s blame. However, unlike excusing and more like forgiving, it may still involve our judgment that our blame is a warranted response. They suggest that like our attempt to distinguish forgiveness from practices like excusing and justification, we can also distinguish forgiveness from letting go based on the reasons for which one withdraws one’s blame that one judges to be warranted. Hence, the authors write:

Forgiving: For X to *forgive* Y for A is for X to overcome their blame toward Y for A for the right kinds of reasons (R1, R2, R3, etc.), while still viewing Y as having been blameworthy for A (Brunning and Milam, 2022, p. 8).

Letting Go: For X to *let go* is for X to overcome their blame toward Y for A for the right kinds of reasons (R4, R5, R6, etc.), while still viewing Y as having been blameworthy for A (Ibid., p. 9).

I will rewrite these formulations as follows⁷⁹:

Forgiving’: For X to *forgive* Y for A is for X to withdraw their blame toward Y for A for the right kinds of reasons to forgive (R1, R2, R3), while still judging that X’s blame toward Y is warranted (or that Y is an apt object of X’s blame on account of A).

Letting Go’: For X to *let go* is for X to overcome their blame toward Y for A for the right kinds of reasons to let go (R4, R5, R6, etc.), while still judging that X’s blame toward Y is warranted (or that Y is an apt object of X’s blame on account of A).

⁷⁹ According to the authors, it still involves our judgment that the agent is *culpable* or *blameworthy* at the time of their offense. I replaced this with the judgment that our blame is warranted, or that the agent is an apt target of our blame, at least at the time of their offense. These two claims (“an agent is blameworthy” and “the agent is an apt object of blame”) are, as I have said earlier, not usually separated in our discussions of blame. However, as I have explained in the earlier chapters, this distinction matters for the purpose of my discussions.

While the authors do not give an exhaustive account of the right kinds of reasons to forgive and the right kinds of reasons to let go, they presume that the former has to do with the wrongdoer's remorse, apology, and demonstration of their care and regard. Milam, in an earlier article, more directly defends this claim that "we forgive in response to a perceived change of heart by the offender" (Milam, 2019, p. 242). Other reasons to relinquish blame are not reasons to forgive but instead are reasons that support other responses, such as justification, excuse, or letting go (Ibid., p. 248).

Importing this idea from Brunning and Milam (2022) and Milam (2019), we can rewrite the standard view of forgiveness as follows:

The Standard View of Forgiveness': Forgiving someone involves: (i) ceasing to blame that person, (ii) for the right kinds of reasons (**i.e.**, based on a perceived change of their heart), (iii) while judging one's blame toward that person to be warranted.

In this version of the standard view, if we cease to blame a person not based on a perceived change of their heart but for other reasons, while still judging that our blame is warranted, we are simply letting go of our blame.

However, when *C* and *E* cease to blame their mother and their past self, they are likely not doing so in response to the evidence that these agents have gone through a change of heart. In **Mother**, *C* likely does not expect her mother *D* to come to recognize the problematic nature of her behavior, repent, and offer an apology. (*D* could think, for instance, that she was only taking care of her daughter, as she should, and that there is nothing for her to apologize.⁸⁰) There could be cases in which someone in *C*'s situation succeeds in bringing their mother to repent and apologize. Yet, there

⁸⁰ She may still apologize for simply hurting her daughter's feeling without understanding or admitting that she has done anything wrong. I presume that this does not qualify as a substantive change of heart that allows the blamer to dissociate the blamer from their wrongdoing.

would also be cases in which they try, fail, and eventually realize that they cannot realistically bring their mother to come to an enhanced moral understanding regarding the significance of their behavior. I want to argue that they can still genuinely forgive their mother even in the absence of any evidence that they have gone through a change of heart, and without expecting⁸¹ that they will eventually do so. The standard view of forgiveness will then diagnose that what they have done is simply to let go of their blame.

In **Past Self**, the offender (i.e., *E*'s own past self, whom we may call the past-*E*) cannot be brought to repent, apologize, and reform as they exist in the past. If anyone were to repent or apologize, it would be the present-*E* repenting and apologizing to the present-*E*, resenting the past-*E*. If so, the present-*E* will fail to satisfy (ii) in the standard view of forgiveness. Accordingly, in the standard view, *E* is viewed as simply letting go of their blame, instead of forgiving their past self who is incapable of going through a meaningful change of heart.⁸²

In sum, the standard view of forgiveness, combined with the standard view of blame, leaves no room for genuinely forgiving unblameworthy agents in **Mother** and **Past Self**. These views will insist that what we have done is either to excuse these people or to simply let go of our blame. Again, I find this result unfortunate. In the following sections, I attempt to amend this result by reexamining the standard views of blame and forgiveness.

⁸¹ See e.g., Fricker (2018)'s discussion of *proleptic gifted forgiveness*. Fricker claims that we may offer forgiveness with the expectation that it would have a proleptic force of bringing the offender back to an enhanced moral alignment in the future.

⁸² Those who do not subscribe to this view of self-identity may think that one can forgive oneself—not one's past self—by going through a meaningful change of heart. One commits a wrong, realizes that it was wrong, and now regrets one's past behavior. Yet, in these cases, one's change of heart would take place *before*, not *after*, one blames oneself. To be more precise, *by* going through a meaningful change of heart, one gets to realize the offensive nature of one's past behavior or decision. One's withdrawal of blaming attitudes, if present, is not prompted by one's change of heart. I suspect that the standard view of forgiveness, then, still cannot make room for self-forgiveness in these cases.

4. Reasons to Forgive

In this section, I question the dominantly accepted view that we can and ought to forgive an offender when and only when they have had a change of heart and now repent what they did.⁸³

Our discussion on forgiveness commonly assumes that forgiveness must be done for particular reasons or on particular grounds. Murphy (1988), for instance, writes:

I suggest, my ceasing to resent will not constitute forgiveness unless it is done *for a moral reason*. Forgiveness is not the overcoming of resentment simpliciter; it is rather this: forswearing resentment on moral grounds. (p. 24, *my italics*)

Similarly, Griswold (2007) writes:

And as already noted, if X stops resenting Y, it does not follow that X has forgiven Y; amnesia, for example, is not the same thing as forgiveness. So forgiveness cannot simply be forswearing resentment, even though it does require at least the moderating of resentment. We recognize a different phenomenon, namely that of letting go of resentment *for moral reasons*, as well as of revenge, without forgetting the wrong that was done, and even in some cases (re)accepting the offender as a friend. This is what we are calling forgiveness. (p. 40)

What, then, are such appropriate—apparently “moral”—reasons to withdraw blame, which makes it an instance of forgiveness? A popular answer to this question, as mentioned earlier, has been that reasons to forgive must involve a change of heart in the wrongdoer⁸⁴, typically evidenced

⁸³ Milam (2019) and Hieronymi (2001) puts this claim in the context of the “right” and “wrong” kinds of reasons to forgive.

⁸⁴ The phrase “a change of heart” is from Murphy (1988) and Milam (2019). I will understand a “change of heart” to include any substantial form of a change in the person, which allegedly allows us to separate them from the version of themselves who committed a blame-warranting offense. This is not to say that they are now separated from their past deed; the record of their past wrongdoing would stay intact even in the cases of forgiveness. This also does not mean that their repentance is a sign that they have *overall* become a better person. The offender’s change of heart, such as their sincere repentance, allegedly allows us to no longer judge them negatively in light of their wrongdoing, or more precisely, what their wrongdoing signifies (e.g., ill

by their acknowledgment and renunciation of a wrongdoing, repentance, and offering of a sincere apology (e.g., Murphy 1988, Hieronymi 2001, Griswold 2007, Milam 2019). This response also coincides with our ordinary thinking about forgiveness that we ought not forgive an unrepentant sinner, as also manifested in our everyday practice, literature, and pop culture.

This commonly accepted answer, which equates the right kinds of reasons to forgive with reasons tied to the wrongdoer's change of heart, however, skips a step in the argument. Here is the missing step: reasons to forgive arise when blame successfully achieves its point.⁸⁵

We think that reasons to forgive require the wrongdoer's repentance and apology because we think, at least implicitly, that the point of blame *is* to accuse the wrongdoer of some kind of fault and to inspire remorse. (This is another dominantly accepted presumption, which, I contend, is tied to our understanding of the specific nature of blame as a *fault-tracing* response.) This is why we think that we are ready to forgive a person upon facing the evidence that the offender has gone through a change of heart, as it is the very sign that our blame has achieved this point. However, we should not skip over this step and simply claim that the right kinds of reasons to forgive *are* reasons tied to the offender's change of heart.

As I have argued in the earlier chapters, following McKenna (2012) and Fricker (2017), I find that blame is a diverse and disunified practice.⁸⁶ In particular, I think that our blaming responses

quality of their will). Allais (2008), for instance, clarifies that "it is only with respect to the way the victim thinks and feels about the wrongdoer as a person that [such] a separation can be made" (p. 51).

⁸⁵ This idea of blame's meeting its point is owed to Fricker (2018)'s discussion of a paradigm-based account of forgiveness. I will explain her account in more detail, as well as where her understanding of a point of forgiveness comes apart from mine, in Section 6.

⁸⁶ This is not to say that it is a futile attempt to try to examine common qualities of what we view as paradigmatic cases of blame; rather, the point is that the collection of such qualities may not paint an exhaustive picture of our blaming practice to the extent that any instances lacking such qualities fail to qualify as instances of blame. For instance, while it is true that many paradigmatic cases of blame include an affective component (e.g., resentful feelings and attitudes), this need not mean that any instance lacking such a component should fail to qualify as blaming.

can have multiple different points—e.g., inspiring remorse, prompting moral alignment, altering a relationship, communicating, protesting, and more. I argue that blame can achieve at least some of these points without requiring that the offender go through a change of heart. Instead, the kind of evidence that we would need to prompt forgiveness would *vary* based on the respective point of our blaming responses.

Put simply, the claim that the right kinds of reasons to forgive are reasons tied to the offender's change of heart in fact decomposes into two independent claims: (i) one may genuinely forgive when and only when blame has achieved its point, and (ii) the point of blame is to induce a change of heart and remorse in the offender. We can endorse (i) without necessarily endorsing (ii), especially in a pluralistic picture of blame where it can have multiple different points.

In the following section, I will examine how blame as a *protesting* response, in particular, may successfully achieve its point without a perceived change of heart of the wrongdoer. I will further argue that including my proposed account of *protesting blame* in our moral landscape will allow us to make room for forgiving unblameworthy agents.

5. Forgiving the Unblameworthy

5.1. Protesting Blame, Revisited

Let me briefly recap the account of blame that I have developed and defended in the previous chapter—i.e., an account of blame that functions as moral protest. In my account, blaming as a protesting response has two primary aims: (i) *identifying* the event as an act of an offense, and (ii) *protesting* against the identified offense. It also has a subsidiary aim of (iii) affirming (or reaffirming) to the target audience that the act is an offense that in fact warrants blame as a protesting response. Following Boxill (1976) and Talbert (2012), I argued that the target audience of blame as a

protesting response includes not just the wrongdoer and the rest of the moral community but the blamer themselves.

My proposed account of *protesting blame* departs from the existing philosophical accounts of blame that also emphasize its protesting element (e.g., Hieronymi, 2001; Talbert, 2012; A. Smith, 2012), as I argued that blame as a protesting response can respond to and be warranted by the ‘blame-warranting meaning’ of our actions, which is not dependent on our judgment of fault about the agent (e.g., their faulty moral character, problematic states of their mind, or ill quality of their will). Following Scanlon (2008), I argued that blame is a distinct category of responses to the ‘meaning’ of our actions (as opposed to a response to their permissibility)—i.e., the kind of significance that they hold to their recipients. Contra Scanlon, I argued that such blame-warranting meaning of our actions is not necessarily determined by facts about the agent. Our actions can and do often carry a meaning that is at least in part determined by and imported from facts constituting the sociocultural, political, and historical context in which they take place. I claimed that our actions sometimes carry a meaning that triggers and warrants blame as a protesting response without manifesting any faulty motives or poor quality of will toward others on our part.

A central example that I used to demonstrate this point was *microaggressions*: a distinct species of structural injustice manifested by (i) subtle degradations or put-downs, (ii) whether intentionally committed or not, (iii) experienced by members of socially marginalized and subordinated groups based on their perceived group membership (e.g., race, ethnicity, national origin, gender identity, sexual orientation, class, disability status, etc.). I argued that this distinct species of subtle injustice functions to solidify the existing marginalization of these groups by (iv) normalizing exclusionary or unequal treatments of these groups while effectively policing nonconforming responses.

Take an example of a microaggression where an Asian or Latinx American gets a ‘compliment’ on their fluency in English (“Your English is so good,” or “Wow, you speak almost

without an accent!”).⁸⁷ Seen as an isolated event, it may seem like an innocent compliment. Yet, after repeated exposures to similar patterns of these behaviors, *each* of these behaviors carries a certain, often unmistakably clear ‘meaning’ to its recipient, regardless of what the individual actor or the speaker has intended to communicate, and regardless of whether they knew about this meaning. The example above carries the meaning that the recipient of this ‘compliment’ is not a real American—that they are a ‘foreigner’ or an ‘outsider’ in this country, assumed to be not fluent in English. I argued that a micro-aggressive behavior—like the example above—can carry the meaning that can trigger and warrant blame as a protesting response.

If blame as a protesting response can respond to and be warranted by the meaning of our actions, and if such protest-warranting meaning of our action can be determined independently of our judgment of fault about the offender, such blame can successfully meet its point without judging that the offender has gone through a change of heart.⁸⁸

5.2. Amending the Result

In Section 1 and 3, I argued that the standard view of forgiveness, combined with the standard view of blame, leaves no room for genuinely forgiving people who are recognized to be conventionally unblameworthy. I further argued that this result is unfortunate, as we often do forgive people despite our judgment that they are not ‘at fault’ for having done what they did. But adopting a pluralistic picture of blame and, especially, including my proposed account of *protesting blame* to this picture can amend this result and make room for forgiving unblameworthy agents.

⁸⁷ This is a microaggression frequently given not only to *n*th-generation immigrants in America but also to members of other countries, where English is an official language (e.g., Singapore, India, Nigeria, and many more). In this context, the same speech/behavior would carry a different problematic meaning (e.g., that someone of a marginalized racial/ethnic identity cannot be fluent in English).

⁸⁸ This picture of forgiveness departs from so-called “unconditional” or “gifted” forgiveness. While it may take place independently of what the offender does, it is still *conditional* on blame achieving its point.

First, by adopting a pluralistic picture of blame, *C* and *E* can now escape the charge that they must be *excusing* their mother and their past self, rather than forgiving, as they now can be warranted in judging that their actions (i.e., their mother's discouraging them from pursuing an advanced degree or their own decision to miss out on their dream job) carry 'blame-warranting' meaning. *C* and *E* can be warranted in blaming their mother and their past self as responses to such 'blame-warranting' meaning of their actions without simultaneously judging that they are conventionally (i.e., aretaically) blameworthy.

Second, *C* and *E* can also drop the charge that they are simply *letting go* of their blame. I have argued in the previous section that reasons to forgive arise when blame successfully achieves its point, and that the kind of evidence that we will need to see if this has been done will depend on blame's respective point. In my proposed account, blame as a protesting response has the aim of protesting an identified offense and, in doing so, affirming its offensiveness and the validity of the blamer's protesting responses—in many cases, to others, but in some cases, to no one other than themselves. In such a case, one's blame can successfully achieve its point in the absence of any evidence—or any interest in gathering the evidence—that the offender has gone through a change of heart and now repents.⁸⁹ One can withdraw one's blame upon judging that it has successfully achieved its point of protesting and affirming to no one other than oneself that one's protest was valid.

Here, then, is the amended result. In **Mother** and **Past Self**, *C* and *E* may cease to blame their mother and their past self upon judging that what happened was a protest-warranting offense

⁸⁹ Of course, if the target audience of your blame as a protesting response is the offender, you will need the evidence that the offender themselves has acknowledged the offensive and protest-warranting nature of their own behavior.

and that their blame has achieved its point of protesting. When they do, I argue, *C* and *E* can be said to have forgiven these agents.

6. Forgiveness: Its Point and Significance

In Section 2, we started our discussion with the standard view of forgiveness:

The Standard View of Forgiveness: Forgiving someone involves: (i) ceasing to blame that person, (ii) for the right kinds of reasons, (iii) while judging one's blame toward that person to be warranted.

In Section 3, I have rewritten this standard view as follows, reflecting the dominant assumption that the right kinds of reasons to forgive are the reasons tied to the offender's change of heart (e.g., their sincere repentance):

The Standard View of Forgiveness': Forgiving someone involves: (i) ceasing to blame that person, (ii) for the right kinds of reasons (**i.e.**, based on a perceived change of their heart), (iii) while judging one's blame toward that person to be warranted.

In Section 4, I rejected this dominant assumption and argued instead that the right kinds of reasons to forgive arise when blame successfully meets its point. Incorporating my suggestion, I can now rewrite the view as follows:

The Standard View of Forgiveness'': Forgiving someone involves: (i) ceasing to blame that person, (ii) for the right kinds of reasons (**i.e.**, based on blame's achieving its point), (iii) while judging one's blame toward that person to be warranted.

While this view maintains an overall structure similar to the standard view of forgiveness, it deviates significantly from its initial version after a critical revision of the standard view of blame and a clarification of the second condition. As a result, it may be misleading to label it as an updated version of the standard view. I will keep its label as it is to emphasize the modifications that I have

made in the earlier sections of this chapter, as well as the elements that I have retained. That said, it is acceptable to regard it as a *non-standard* view of forgiveness.

Here now is the question—does this updated view paint a plausible picture of forgiveness? To answer this question, I will assess if this view meets the following two desiderata: (i) reliably distinguishing forgiveness from related phenomena (e.g., excusing and letting go) and (ii) preserving the distinct value of forgiveness.

To start with the first desideratum, I contend that this view allows us to reliably distinguish forgiveness from related phenomena, such as excusing and letting go. Since I have not updated the third condition that sets apart forgiveness from excusing⁹⁰, I will explain how we may still distinguish forgiveness from letting go of one's blame. Here is the suggested distinction:

Forgiving⁹⁰: For X to *forgive* Y for A is for X to withdraw their blame toward Y for A for the right kinds of reasons to forgive (**i.e.**, upon judging that blame has successfully met its point), while still judging that X's blame toward Y is warranted.

Letting Go⁹⁰: For X to *let go* is for X to overcome their blame toward Y for A for the right kinds of reasons to let go (**i.e.**, upon judging that it is not worth it to continue blaming), while still judging that X's blame toward Y is warranted.

We forgive a person, whom we view as an apt target of our blame, when we cease to blame them upon thinking that our blame has successfully achieved its point (for instance, protesting). We let go of our blame when we cease to blame them upon judging that it is not worth it to continue blaming (for instance, we may think that continuing to harbor blaming attitudes and feelings is too costly or

⁹⁰ Both in the initial standard view and in my updated view, the difference between excusing and forgiving remains the same: one excuses someone by withdrawing one's blame when one judges that one's blame is unwarranted and forgives someone by withdrawing one's blame when one judges that one's blame is warranted. The change that I suggested, instead, lies in *when* one may judge one's blame to be warranted. I argued that by including my proposed account of *protesting blame* in our moral landscape, we can accommodate a wider range of cases in which we may judge our blame to be warranted.

ineffective). If so, we can reliably distinguish the occasions in which we forgive a person from the occasions in which we simply let go of our blame by appealing to the reasons for which we withdraw our blame.⁹¹

To see if my view meets the second desideratum, we should first ask the following: What is the distinctive value of forgiveness? To answer this question, we should first examine the point of forgiveness.

What is the point of forgiveness? Fricker (2018) provides one response. Fricker argues that in order to understand the point of the paradigm case of forgiveness, we need to look at the point of the paradigm case of blame. What she views as the paradigm case of forgiveness is what she calls *moral justice forgiveness*, which is conditional forgiveness that needs be earned by the offender's remorseful apology.⁹² What she understands as the paradigm case of blame is what she calls *communicative blame*, the point of which is "to inspire remorse in the wrongdoer" and hence to effect "an increased alignment of the wrongdoer's moral understanding with that of the blamer" (Fricker, 2017, p. 167). In Fricker's view, when this point of blame is achieved, the remaining blame-feeling serves no further purpose and becomes morally redundant. The point of forgiveness, in both its paradigm and derivative form, according to Fricker, is to liberate the forgiver from blame-feeling that has now been made redundant as it has done its job (Fricker, 2018, p. 249).

⁹¹ I contend that reasons to let go of one's blame do not include the cases in which one judges that one's blame is *no longer* rationally and morally warranted *upon* finishing its job.

⁹² Fricker (2018) also discusses the cases of unconditional "gifted forgiveness" that can take place prior to the wrongdoer's remorseful apology. However, Fricker finds that such "gifted forgiveness" is derivative, "continent cultural iterations" of "moral justice forgiveness" (Ibid., p. 245). In other words, *gifted forgiveness* is conceptually dependent on *earned forgiveness* that is explanatory basic. Such gifted forgiveness can serve the same purpose of removing now redundant blame-feeling yet via a *proleptic* mechanism. *Proleptic gifted forgiveness* treats an unremorseful wrongdoer as if they are already remorseful, thereby inducing their remorse. Fricker writes: "the Gifting Forgiver takes up a stance of non-demand, evincing the (passive yet sometimes powerfully effective) hope that the culprit will come to remorsefully acknowledge the moral meaning of his actions at a point in the not too distant future" (Ibid., p. 253).

While I agree with Fricker that forgiveness arises when blame achieves its point, I do not share the view that the point of forgiveness is to free the forgiver from morally superfluous blaming attitudes. Blame can become redundant on different grounds, and we may find a good reason to free ourselves from pertinent attitudes without such withdrawal being an instance of forgiveness. If we put focus on liberation from blame feelings, we may face the challenge of distinguishing forgiveness from related phenomena that serve a similar function.

Recall Brunning and Milam (2022)'s discussion of reasons to let go of one's blame. The authors discuss three different types of reasons to let go of one's blame; in all of these cases, the blamer judges that it is not worth it to continue blaming yet on different grounds. One has *overriding* reasons to let go of one's blame when one judges that it is not worth it to continue blaming because it is too costly. For instance, upon judging that continuing to harbor blaming attitudes and feelings is too psychologically, physically, or socially costly, one may decide to simply let go of one's blame, without necessarily excusing or justifying the offender's behavior. One has *resignation* reasons to let go of one's blame, on the other hand, when one judges that it is not worth it to continue blaming because it is ineffective. Brunning and Milam explain that in fragile contexts (e.g., the situations in which the offender is insensitive to the negative significance of their behavior, the blamer's standing is compromised, or the blamer fails to receive uptake for their blame due to their marginalized social status), one may judge that one's blame cannot perform its intended function and withdraw blame that is now rendered impotent. Lastly, one has *alignment* reasons to let go of one's blame when one judges that it is not worth it to continue blaming because it is unnecessary. This includes the cases in which an offense is committed by someone whom one already stands in a close personal relationship where "one can often maintain a harmony of moral understanding and motivation without the sting of blame" (Brunning and Milam 2022, p. 12), and the cases in which one can expect third parties (e.g., allies) to bring about the intended result of one's blame.

In the latter two cases, one withdraws one's blame upon judging that it serves no further purpose—either because it is impotent or because it is simply unnecessary. If the point of forgiveness is to liberate one from now-redundant blaming attitudes, we cannot further separate the cases of forgiveness from those of letting go.

What, then, is the point of forgiveness, if not liberation from redundant blaming attitudes? Here is a response that I find plausible. The point of forgiveness is to reorient our normative relationship with the person who used to be the object of our blame, now defined by an updated set of norms guiding our relationship between the forgiver and the forgiven party.

In this sense, my view closely aligns with what I introduced as the “relinquishing” view of forgiveness in Section 2, in which forgiveness involves relinquishing certain entitlements and rights that one has gained in virtue of being a victim of an offense (e.g., Twambley, 1976; Allais, 2008; Nelkin, 2013; Warmke, 2016). This view is also often called the “debt-cancellation” view, as it contends that the point of forgiveness is to release the offender from some sort of “debt” that had been incurred in light of their blame-warranting offense. In light of committing an offense, the offender owes “a special kind of personal obligation” to the victim (Nelkin, 2013, p. 175), including, for instance, the obligation to sincerely repent and apologize. In forgiving, the victim releases the offender from such obligation and relinquishes their rights or entitlements to demand repentance and apology.⁹³

⁹³ This “debt-cancellation” view of forgiveness—with the analogy of a forgiver as a debt collector and a forgiven party as a debtor—offers a plausible explanation of why forgiving someone often leads to reconciliation, or why it is often deemed irrational to continue blaming or later blame again a person whom we have already forgiven. When the debt is properly collected in due terms (e.g., when sincere apology is properly made and received), there is nothing further that the debtor owes to the debt collector and nothing further that the debt collector can demand from the debtor. In this view, there seems to be no reason why one should not resume one's relationship with the forgiven party, for nothing should stand as an obstacle in future interactions between the two parties.

I concur with Warmke (2016) and other advocates of this view (or some version of this view) that forgiveness has a power to shift the norms of interactions between the victim and the offender. Yet, I find that it is misleading to say that forgiveness “cancels out” these norms or “wipes the slate clean” (Allais, 2008). Forgiveness does not *erase* the norms that used to guide the normative relationship between the victim and the offender. What it does instead is to *replace* these norms with a new set of norms that now constitutes the updated normative relationship between the forgiver and the forgiven party. Such norm alterations, I argue, can properly take place only after blame achieves its point.

Here is a simple example of how norm alternations take place via forgiveness. You break a promise that you made to me. I find your behavior objectionable and protest. Suppose after some time, I forgive you. Upon forgiving you, I am no longer in a position to continue demanding an apology from you or asking for further reparation. I am, however, still in a position to take further caution in my future interactions with you. For instance, even after forgiving you, I may still be hesitant to trust your next promise. I may send you multiple reminders that I otherwise would not bother to give. I may be less understanding if you break promises to me in the future and also be less inclined to forgive you. Likewise, upon being forgiven, you are no longer in a position where you need to continue apologizing to me or trying to make amends. However, you are still expected to be more careful and put extra effort into not committing a similar mistake in your future interactions with me. You are also expected to understand that I may react differently, perhaps more sensitively, the next time you breach my expectation. It is in this sense that forgiveness *updates* the norms guiding our interactions, instead of *canceling out* the existing norms.

What, then, is the distinct value of forgiveness? I contend that the value of forgiveness lies in creating a space in our lives to process our blame. Instead of focusing on getting rid of blame, a

practice of forgiveness allows us to let our blame achieve its point and, as a result, bring us proper closure. It is this kind of closure, I believe, that allows us to move forward in our lives.

Moving forward, in this sense, does not imply reconciliation with the offender or welcoming them back into one's life.⁹⁴ It implies that one is now willing to step away from the previous position that one occupied as a blamer and simultaneously release the offender from the position that they occupied as the target of one's blame. It implies that one is willing to redefine the normative relationship between oneself and the offender, this time as the one between the forgiver and the forgiven party, which is defined by a new set of norms associated with these positions.

I have argued earlier that blame as a protesting response aims to protest an identified offense and convince its target audience that what happened was a protest-warranting offense. I then argued that when the target audience of the blaming response is no one other than the blamer themselves, one's blame can successfully achieve its point without demanding a change of heart from the offender and, hence, cue genuine forgiveness.

Let me briefly add that it is not always an easy task to convince oneself that one's own blaming reaction is warranted. Recall the two examples that I discussed in this chapter—one involving forgiving one's parents and another involving forgiving one's past. First, children often feel intense "guilt" as they rebel against their parents' expectations. A psychiatrist Malkah Notman (2006), for instance, reports how young women struggle to manage the conflict between the expectations of their mothers and their own career goals. Notman writes:

[T]he need to please, or fulfill one's mother's fantasies, and be a "good girl," can bring the young woman into conflict with her mother's expectation for grandchildren or more

⁹⁴ Bovens (2008), for instance, discusses a victim of sexual assault who forgives their perpetrator but no longer wishes to engage with them in the future. Allais (2008) discusses family members of victims of mass murder granting forgiveness to the perpetrator while not wishing to further engage with them.

traditional family life. Work and career can be consistent with expressions of aggression and ambition possibly not openly recognized by her mother. There can thus be internal conflict between identification with her mother and her own ambitions and rebellion. For the daughter, achievement can also represent a source of conflict as a competitive victory, about which she can feel guilty as well as gratified. (Notman, 2006, p. 142)

It takes both time and effort for these children to overcome their immediate reaction of guilt for rebelling against their parents and to convince themselves that their fight *was* justified. Only when their fighting reaction has done its job allowing them to successfully affirm their worth to themselves that these children can be ready to forgive their parents, have proper closure, and move forward—even in situations in which they know that they cannot expect their parents to repent or be brought to understand the problematic nature of their behavior. I contend that preserving their experience of forgiveness *as such* (i.e., allowing them to recognize and register that they can and have now forgiven their parents) is a crucial step toward having this kind of closure.

Second, our immediate reaction to the bad decisions that we made or the bad behaviors that we did in the past is often “denial.” We tend to deny that it was a serious misstep or that we have no one other than ourselves to blame for this misstep. It is important to be charitable and compassionate toward oneself. A tendency to be self-critical is shown to have detrimental health effects, including the development of depressive symptoms, whereas self-compassion is shown to alleviate these negative effects.⁹⁵ This is especially problematic, as this tendency can be exacerbated for certain social groups that are under heightened social pressure to constantly scrutinize and censor their behaviors (e.g., women). Self-compassion, or “forming an emotionally positive attitude and relationship to oneself,” however, crucially involves validating one’s own feelings and

⁹⁵ See e.g., Zhang et al (2019) for the summary of studies done to show the link between self-criticism and depressive symptoms and between self-compassion and positive well-being.

perceptions of reality (Zhang et al, 2019, p. 203). However, I find that such validation is sometimes also needed in cases in which one perceives one's own past behavior as a protest-warranting offense committed toward oneself, like *E* in **Past Self**.

There are cases in which one feels the need to protest against one's past self for committing an offense that negatively affected (or still negatively affects) one's life. In such a case, one can choose to forget that it happened, downplay its significance, make an excuse, or simply let go of one's feelings. Alternatively, one can directly face one's misstep and protest, thereby validating one's reaction to one's own behavior that one finds unacceptable and problematic. It is only then that one gets to truly forgive one's past self. I find that occasionally blaming oneself is compatible with adopting a generally less judgmental and less critical stance toward one's own behaviors, thoughts, and personal traits. Adopting a generally empathetic and compassionate stance toward oneself also does not imply that one must overlook any and all misbehaviors that one may commit. I contend that at least in some cases, sustaining a positive emotional relationship with oneself involves validating one's feelings toward one's past and being able to forgive oneself for one's misdeed.⁹⁶

7. Objections and Replies

In this last section, I will consider and respond to two objections to my proposed account of forgiveness. The first objection criticizes that forgiveness without the offender's change of heart fails to manifest the appropriate degree of self-respect on the part of the forgiver, whereas the second objection worries that it fails to show respect to the forgiven party by eliminating their role in a supposedly dyadic process.

⁹⁶ I personally found this experience an essential component in my process of developing what Bartky (1990) describes as *feminist consciousness*. It involved me looking back at my past and actively protesting against my past values and behaviors, especially ones about or done toward myself. While it was a painful process, I could eventually forgive my past without compromising my judgment that what I did warranted a protest.

7.1. Disrespecting the Victim

The first objection states that forgiveness that does not require the wrongdoer's change of heart is objectionably servile. Murphy (1988), for instance, writes that "the primary value defended by the passion of resentment is *self-respect*" (p. 16) and that "a too ready tendency to forgive may properly be regarded as a *vice* because it may be a sign that one lacks respect for oneself" (p. 17). Similarly, Novitz (1998) claims that being "too ready to attempt the task of forgiveness, and too eager to abandon feelings of resentment, is itself a character flaw" (p. 312).

Murphy (1988), in particular, argues that forgiveness compatible with self-respect requires a "divorce of act from agent" (p. 25), and that "the clearest way in which a wrongdoer can sever himself from his past wrong" is through repentance (p. 26). Forgiveness directed toward a repentant wrongdoer is permissible, as it is not inconsistent with self-respect. One's hasty readiness to forgive (e.g., in the absence of the wrongdoer's sincere repentance that allows for a proper severance between them and their wrongful act), on the other hand, fails to demonstrate self-respect.

I have two replies to this objection. First, I agree with Murphy that forgiveness ought to demonstrate proper respect for oneself. However, I do not share the view that forgiveness compatible with appropriate self-respect requires the offender's sincere repentance. It is again because I think that our blame can have multiple different points, and that it can meet at least some of such points without requiring the offender's change of heart.

Murphy seems to subscribe to what I have called the standard, "fault-tracing" view of blame, in which blame traces and negatively appraises some kind of fault in a person expressed by their action, such as their faulty motives, problematic states of mind, or objectionable quality of will. If one's blame were to be a response to a perceived fault in a person, it makes sense that one would need evidence that the person is now divorced from their previous act, which indicated such a fault, to properly withdraw one's blame. Murphy writes:

One reason we so deeply resent moral injuries done to us is not simply that they hurt us in some tangible or sensible way; it is because such injuries are also *messages*—symbolic communications. They are ways a wrongdoer has of saying to us, "I count but you do not," "I can use you for my purposes," or "I am here up high and you are there down below." [...] In having a sincere change of heart, he is withdrawing his endorsement from his own immoral past behavior; he is saying, "I no longer stand behind the wrongdoing, and I want to be separated from it. I stand with you in condemning it." [...] Thus I can relate to him now, through forgiveness, without fearing my own acquiescence in immorality or in judgments that I lack worth. I forgive him [because of] what he *now* is. (Murphy, 1988, pp. 25-26).

Murphy views our resentment as a response to what the wrongful act signifies about the wrongdoer and their contempt (or ill will) toward us. To properly withdraw resentment, we would need evidence that they no longer harbor these faulty attitudes toward us—that they are now a different person who no longer merits our previous negative appraisal.

Yet, as I have shown earlier, once we reject the premise that blame is primarily a fault-tracing response, we no longer need evidence that the person has gone through a change of heart to properly withdraw blame. Instead, forgiveness compatible with self-respect can arise when one judges that one's blame has successfully met its point and is now ready to readjust the norms guiding one's normative relationship with the offender.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ There is a remaining worry that someone with low self-esteem still may be inclined to hastily withdraw their blame. I suspect that while they may be inclined to more easily let go of their blame, it would be harder for them to genuinely forgive the offender. It would take more and perhaps a longer time for those who lack a sense of self-worth to successfully convince themselves that their protesting response was justified. When they instead think to themselves that their fight was unwarranted in the first place or that is not worth it anymore (e.g., "I had enough"), they are excusing the offender or simply letting go of their blame, not practicing genuine forgiveness.

Second, relatedly, I contend that my proposed account of forgiveness could be positively empowering for the forgiver. Recall the standard view in which forgiveness requires the offender's repentance. There is a stronger and a weaker version of this account of forgiveness. In a stronger version, we rationally ought to forgive upon seeing that the offender sincerely repents and apologizes; continuing to harbor blaming attitudes toward a truly repentant and apologetic offender is "simply not *rational*" (Murphy, 1988, p. 29) or may "constitute mere vindictiveness" (Hieronymi, 2001, p. 548). In a weaker version, while repentance need not oblige the victim to forgive, it is still required to initiate forgiveness. Even in a weaker view, to practice forgiveness, the victim will need to wait until the offender repents and successfully distances themselves from their previous act. It is in this sense that Callard (2017) seems to write:

Confrontation is a rational response to anger, because it is a cry for the help that the angry person really does need. When I have wronged you, I am the one who can free you from what is, in the solitary throes of your anger, bound to look to you like a reason to be angry with me forever. (p. 135)

In many paradigmatic cases, forgiveness will result from the joint effort of the blamer (i.e., an aspiring forgiver) and the offender. Yet, there are also cases in which one's blame may successfully meet its point without requiring the offender's change of heart, including the cases in which the blamer does not expect the offender to repent or to come to an enhanced moral understanding regarding the objectionable nature of their behavior. As I have discussed earlier, the distinct value of forgiveness lies in its power to shift the norms guiding the normative relationship between the blamer and the offender. If so, it could be positively empowering and, hence, compatible with the forgiver's sense of their worth, that the forgiver gets to prompt such reorientation of the normative relationship in their own terms at their own pace—that is, upon judging that their blame has successfully met its point.

7.2. Disrespecting the Offender

The second objection also raises concerns regarding the potential lack of respect that may be demonstrated by my proposed account of forgiveness. However, instead of worrying about the forgiver's lack of self-respect, this objection posits that my account may fail to respect the offender. Forgiveness is presumed to be a dyadic practice that requires a joint effort of the offender and the forgiver. An account that allows the forgiver to practice genuine forgiveness without requiring any moves on the part of the offender (e.g., their acknowledgment of the wrongdoing or sincere repentance) may reveal a problematic lack of respect toward the offender.

Fricker (2018), for instance, argues that *gifted* forgiveness, which does not require the offender's repentance, may descend into the forgiver's moral and epistemic domination of the offender. Fricker writes:

The ever-present risk in the great one-sided emotional efforts of the Gifting Forgiver is that she simply by-passes the opportunity for moral dialogue and contestation that communicated blame is likely to openly inspire. Thus we see how Gifted Forgiveness can be employed, whether innocently or strategically, to pre-empt dialogue and thereby to impose the hurt party's moral interpretation in a way that renders it somewhat immune to challenge. The purported wrongdoer who might have gladly taken up an opportunity to challenge the forgiver's moral-epistemic perspective is effectively pre-empted, wrong-footed, perhaps altogether silenced. (Fricker, 2018, pp. 176-177).

In sum, gifted forgiveness, though it may seem generous and may indeed be well-intentioned, may result in imposing the forgiver's one-sided interpretation of what has happened (e.g., whether the act in question was in fact offensive and, if so, to what extent, as well as the kind of reactions that it would warrant) and shutting off the possibility of having an open dialogue about this interpretation with the offender.

Like blame, forgiveness can be unilaterally practiced. Unilaterally practiced forgiveness, however, does not necessarily *end* moral dialogue. It is a move by the offended party that signals that they will no longer occupy the previous position of blamer and instead occupy a new position as forgiver. At the same time, it signals that they will no longer view the offender as an object of their blame but instead view them as a person whom they have now forgiven. This move, as I claimed earlier, will appropriately update the norms guiding future interactions between the two parties.

Forgiveness, however, is not necessarily the last move. The forgiven party can make another move, including appreciating forgiveness, challenging the proposed interpretation of the event, or even dismissing it as nonsensical. Suppose *C* judges that her blame (e.g., as a protesting response) has successfully met its point and succeeds in forgiving her mother *D*. Suppose further that *C* tells *D* that she has now forgiven her. *D* could potentially be confused and ask back: “What are you forgiving me *for*? I have not done anything wrong.” In such a case, *D* is still challenging *C*’s interpretation of her behavior (e.g., sabotaging her daughter’s dream and happiness) and insisting on her own perception of what she did (e.g., protecting her daughter and her well-being). *C* may then consider her next move based on *D*’s reaction—for instance, she may try harder to convince *D* or decide that she does not want to engage in further contestation. Regardless of what happens next, forgiveness need not be the last move; it is “a contribution to, and thus a component of”⁹⁸ the joint moral activity of dealing with the aftermath of harm.

While calling this a “joint” moral activity, I do not mean that each move has to be practiced bilaterally. I simply observe that unilaterally practiced moves need not prevent the other party’s next

⁹⁸ McGowan (2009) claims that we can plausibly view all cooperative activities as norm-governed. These are not necessarily explicit, rigid, or even consciously recognized norms; these are rather some guidelines that denote which behaviors or moves are considered permissible and impermissible as contributions to the activity in question. I contend that the victim’s offering forgiveness need not be the last move in this joint moral activity of dealing with the aftermath of harm.

move or silence them, as Fricker worries. Take blame, for instance. When one unilaterally practices blame, without letting the offender challenge one's interpretation of the event (e.g., that an offense was committed), it does not force the offender to change or erase their own perception of the event. At best, it may prompt them to reexamine their interpretation. (Recall how difficult it can be to convince individual perpetrators of microaggressions that their behaviors are unjust.) It is true that unilaterally practiced blame and forgiveness do not always leave room for a continuing dialogue between the two parties, especially when the blamer or the forgiver is unwilling to listen to another party's perspective. Yet, mandating this step as an essential component of these practices carries its own risks. In situations in which there is unevenly distributed moral knowledge⁹⁹ and disproportionately assigned credibility to one of the parties¹⁰⁰, requiring the continuation of a dialogue or contestation as an essential component of justifiable blame or forgiveness (e.g., requiring a wrongdoer's acknowledgment of the wrongdoing and repentance as a necessary component of forgiveness) may serve to systematically silence the less credited party.

8. Conclusion

In our currently dominant framework, where blame is understood as a *fault-tracing* response, we lack the resources to coherently explain our phenomenology of blaming and forgiving people whom we judge to be conventionally (i.e., aretaically) unblameworthy. However, we do often find ourselves blaming and then striving to forgive people whom we deem not to be 'at fault' for their misdeeds, such as our loving parents or our own past selves. When we do, our experiences of forgiving these people holds a distinctive value for us, which cannot be adequately captured by the similar experiences of excusing or letting go. My proposed account of *protesting blame* can fill this

⁹⁹ Again, see e.g., Calhoun (1989)'s discussion on abnormal moral context.

¹⁰⁰ Again, see Fricker (2007)'s discussion of epistemic injustice.

lacuna. It explains how we can properly blame those whom we judge to be aretaically unblameworthy as well as how we can intelligibly and meaningfully forgive them.

REFERENCES

- Adams, R. M. (1985). Involuntary Sins. *The Philosophical Review*, 94(1), 3-31.
- Allais, L. (2008). Wiping the Slate Clean: The Heart of Forgiveness. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 36(1), 33-68.
- Arpaly, N., & Schroeder, T. (2014). *In Praise of Desire*. Oxford University Press.
- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford University Press.
- Bartky, S. L. (1990). *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*. Routledge.
- Bell, M. (2012). The Standing to Blame. In D. J. Coates and N. A. Tognazzini (Eds.), *Blame: Its Nature and Norms* (pp. 263-281). Oxford University Press.
- Bovens, L. (2009). Must I be Forgiven?. *Analysis*, 69(2), 227-233.
- Boxill, B. R. (1976). Self-Respect and Protest. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 6(1), 8-69.
- Brunning, L., & Milam, P-E. (2022). Letting go of blame. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 1-21.
- Brennan, S. (2016). The Moral Status of Micro-Inequities. In M. Brownstein and J. Saul (Eds.), *Implicit Bias and Philosophy, Volume 2: Moral Responsibility, Structural Injustice, and Ethics* (pp. 235–253). Oxford University Press.
- Calhoun, C. (1989). Responsibility and Reproach. *Ethics*, 99(2), 389–406.
- Calhoun, C. (1992). Changing One's Heart. *Ethics*, 103(1), 76-96.
- Callard, Agnes (2017). The Reason to Be Angry Forever. In M. Cherry and O. Flanagan (Eds.), *The Moral Psychology of Anger* (pp. 123-137). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Campbell, B., & Manning, J. (2014). Microaggression and Moral Cultures. *Comparative Sociology*, 13(6), 692-726.
- Chalmers, D. J. (2020). What is conceptual engineering and what should it be?. *Inquiry*, 1-18.
DOI: 10.1080/0020174X.2020.1817141
- Chaplin, R. (2019). Taking it Personally: Third-Party Forgiveness, Close Relationships, and the Standing to Forgive. In M. Timmons (Eds.), *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics, Volume 9* (pp. 73-94). Oxford University Press.
- Chislenko, E. (2019). Blame and Protest. *The Journal of Ethics*, 23, 163–181.
- Cortina, L. M., Kabat-Farr, D., Leskinen, E. A., Huerta, M., & Magley, V. J. (2013). Selective Incivility as Modern Discrimination in Organizations: Evidence and Impact. *Journal of Management*, 39(6), 1579-1605.

- Dover, D. (2019). The Walk and the Talk. *Philosophical Review*, 128(4), 387-422.
- Fatima, S. (2017). On the Edge of Knowing: Microaggression and Epistemic Uncertainty as a Woman of Color. In K. Cole and H. Hassel (Eds.), *Surviving Sexism in Academia: Feminist Strategies for Leadership* (pp. 147-154). Routledge.
- Fatima, S. (2020). I Know What Happened to Me: The Epistemic Harms of Microaggression. In L. Freeman and J. W. Schroer (Eds.), *Microaggressions and Philosophy* (pp. 163-183). Routledge.
- Freeman, L., & Schroer, J. W. (Eds.). (2020). *Microaggressions and Philosophy*. Routledge.
- Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford University Press.
- Fricker, M. (2017). What's the Point of Blame? A Paradigm Based Explanation. *NOÛS*, 50(1), 165–183.
- Fricker, M. (2018). Ambivalence About Forgiveness. *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements*, 84, 160-185.
- Friedlaender, C. (2018). On Microaggressions: Cumulative Harm and Individual Responsibility. *Hypatia*, 33(1), 5-21.
- Frye, M. (1983). *Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. Crossing Press.
- Green, M. (2021). Speech Acts. In E. N. Zalta (Eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2021 Edition)*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/speech-acts/>.
- Griswold, C. (2007). *Forgiveness: A philosophical exploration*. Cambridge University Press.
- Haslanger, S. (2012). *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*. Oxford University Press.
- Hieronymi, P. (2001). Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 62(3), 529-555.
- Hieronymi, P. (2004). The Force and Fairness of Blame. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 18, 115-148.
- Hieronymi, P. (2008). Responsibility for believing. *Synthese*, 161(3), 357-373.
- Hieronymi, P. (2014). Reflection and Responsibility. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 42(1), 3-41.
- Hieronymi, P. (2019). I'll Bet You Think This Blame is About You. In D. J. Coates and N. A. Tognazzini (Eds.), *Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility Volume 5: Themes from the Philosophy of Gary Watson* (pp. 60-87). Oxford University Press.
- Hill, Jr., T. E. (1973). Servility and Self Respect. *The Monist*, 57(1), 87-104.
- Holder, A. M. B., Jackson, M. A., & Ponterotto, J. G. (2015). Racial Microaggression Experiences

- and Coping Strategies of Black Women in Corporate Leadership. *Qualitative Psychology*, 2(2), 164-180.
- Ingram, S. (2013). The Prudential Value of Forgiveness. *Philosophia*, 41, 1069-1078.
- Jamieson, D. (1992). Ethics, Public Policy, and Global Warming. *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 17(2), 139-153.
- Jerald, M. C., Cole, E. R., Ward, L. M., & Avery, L. R. (2017). Controlling Images: How Awareness of Group Stereotypes Affects Black Women's Well-Being. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 64(5), 487-499.
- Kagan, S. (2011). Do I Make a Difference?. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 39(2), 105–141.
- Kolnai, A. (1973). Forgiveness. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 74, 91-106.
- Lorde, A. (1997). The Uses of Anger. *Women's Studies Quarterly: Looking Back, Moving Forward: 25 Years of Women's Studies History*, 25(1/2), 278-285.
- Lukianoff, G., & Haidt, J. (2015). The Coddling of the American Mind. *The Atlantic*.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/>
- Marchiondo, L., Ran, S., & Cortina, L. (2018). Modern Discrimination. In A. J. Colella and E. B. King (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Workplace Discrimination*, (pp. 217-236). Oxford University Press.
- Manne, K. (2018). *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*. Oxford University Press.
- MacLachlan, A. (2019). In Defense of Third-Party Forgiveness. In K. J. Norlock (Eds.), *The Moral Psychology of Forgiveness* (pp. 135-159). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Macnamara, C. (2015). Blame, communication, and morally responsible agency. In R. Clarke, M. McKenna, and A. M. Smith (Eds.), *The Nature of Moral Responsibility: New Essays*, (pp. 211-235). Oxford University Press.
- McClure, E. and R. Rini (2020). Microaggression: Conceptual and Scientific Issues. *Philosophy Compass*, 15(4), 1-11.
- McConahay, J. B., Hardee, B. B., & Batts, V. (1986). Has Racism Declined in America? It Depends on Who is Asking and What is Asked. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 25(4), 563-579.
- McGowan, M. K. (2012). On 'Whites Only' Signs and Racist Hate Speech: Verbal Acts of Racial Discrimination. In I. Maitra and M. K. McGowan (Eds.), *Speech and Harm: Controversies Over Free Speech* (pp. 121-147). Oxford University Press.
- McKenna, M. (2012). Directed Blame and Conversation. In D. J. Coates and N. A. Tognazzini (Eds.), *Blame: Its Nature and Norms* (pp. 119-140). Oxford University Press.

- McTernan, E. (2018). Microaggressions, Equality, and Social Practices. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 26(3), 261–281.
- Menges, L. (2017). The emotion account of blame. *Philosophical Studies*, 174, 257–273.
- Milam, P-E. (2019). Reasons to Forgive. *Analysis*, 79(2), 242–251.
- Murphy, J. G. (1988). Forgiveness and Resentment. In J. G. Murphy & J. Hampton (Eds.), *Forgiveness and Mercy*, (pp. 14-34). Cambridge University Press.
- Murphy, J. G. (2005). *Getting Even: Forgiveness and Its Limits*. Oxford University Press.
- Na’aman, O. (2019). The Rationality of Emotional Change: Toward a Process View. *NOUS*, 55(2), 245–269.
- Na’aman, O. (2020). The fitting resolution of anger. *Philosophical Studies*, 177, 2417–2430.
- Nagel, T. (2013; original print in 1976). Moral Luck. In R. Schafer-Landau (Eds.), *Ethical Theory: An Anthology, Second Edition* (pp. 322-329). John Wiley & Sons.
- Nelkin, D. K. (2013). Freedom and Forgiveness. In J. Caouette and I. Haji (Eds.), *Free Will and Moral Responsibility*, (pp. 165-188). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Notman, M. T. (2006). Mothers and Daughters as Adults. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 26(1), 137-153.
- Novitz, D. (1998). Forgiveness and Self-respect. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, LVIII(2), 299-315.
- Parfit, D. (1984). *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford University Press.
- Pickard, H. (2013). Irrational Blame. *Analysis*, 73(4), 613-626.
- Reiheld, A. (2013). Asking Too Much? Civility vs. Pluralism. *Philosophical Topics*, 41(2), 59-78.
- Rini, R. (2018). How to Take Offense: Responding to Microaggression. *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 332-352.
- Rini, R. (2021). *The Ethics of Microaggression*. Routledge.
- Scanlon, T. M. (2008). *Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, Blame*. Harvard University Press.
- Scarantino, A., & De Sousa, R. (2021). Emotion. In E. N. Zalta (Eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2021 Edition)*.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/emotion/>
- Schönherr, J. (forthcoming). Forgiveness: overcoming vs. forswearing blame. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*.

- Schur, M. (2018). S3E10: Janet(s). *The Good Place* [TV Series]. Fremulon, 3 Arts Entertainment and Universal Television.
- Schur, M. (2019). S3E11: The Book of Dougs. *The Good Place* [TV Series]. Fremulon, 3 Arts Entertainment and Universal Television.
- Sher, G. (2006). *In Praise of Blame*. Oxford University Press.
- Shoemaker, D. (2017). Response-Dependent Responsibility; or, A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Blame. *Philosophical Review*, 126(4), 481-527.
- Shoemaker, D., & Vargas, M. (2019). Moral Torch Fishing: A Signaling Theory of Blame. *NOÛS*, 1–22.
- Simion, M. (2021). Blame as Performance. *Synthese*, 199, 7595–7614.
- Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (2005). It's Not My Fault: Global Warming and Individual Moral Obligations. *Perspectives on Climate Change: Science, Economics, Politics, Ethics Advances in the Economics of Environmental Research*, 5, 293–315.
- Smith, A. M. (2007). On Being Responsible and Holding Responsible. *The Journal of Ethics*, 11, 465–484.
- Smith, A. M. (2012). Moral Blame and Moral Protest. In D. J. Coates and N. A. Tognazzini (Eds.), *Blame: Its Nature and Norms* (pp. 27-48). Oxford University Press.
- Strawson, P. F. (2013; original print in 1962). Freedom and Resentment. In R. Schafer-Landau (Eds.), *Ethical Theory: An Anthology, Second Edition* (pp. 340-352). John Wiley & Sons.
- Stroud, S. (2006). Epistemic Partiality in Friendship. *Ethics*, 116(3), 498-524.
- Sue, D. W. (Eds.). (2010). *Microaggressions and Marginality: Manifestation, Dynamics, and Impact* (Kindle Edition). John Wiley & Sons.
- Sue, D. W., & Spanierman, L. (2020). *Microaggressions in Everyday Life* (Kindle Edition). John Wiley & Sons.
- Talbert, M. (2012). Moral Competence, Moral Blame, and Protest. *Journal of Ethics*, 16, 89-109.
- Talbert, M. (2022). Attributionist Theories of Moral Responsibility. In D. K. Nelkin and D. Pereboom (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Moral Responsibility* (pp. 53-70). Oxford University Press.
- S, K. R. (2008). Macrononsense in Multiculturalism. *American Psychologist*, 274-275.
- Tognazzini, N., & Coates, D. J. (2021). Blame. In E. N. Zalta (Eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2021 Edition)*.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/blame/>.

- Twambley, P. (1976). Forgiveness and Mercy. *Analysis*, 36(2), 84-90.
- Young, I. M. (1990). *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton University Press.
- Young, I. M. (2011). *Responsibility for Justice*. Oxford University Press.
- Walker, M. U. (2013). Third Parties and the Social Scaffolding of Forgiveness. *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 41(3), 495-512.
- Wallace, R. J. (1994). *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments*. Harvard University Press.
- Wallace, R. J. (2011). Dispassionate Opprobrium: On Blame and the Reactive Sentiments. In R. J. Wallace, R. Kumar & S. Freeman (Eds), *Reasons and Recognition: Essays on the Philosophy of T.M. Scanlon* (pp. 348-369). Oxford University Press.
- Warmke, B. (2016). The Normative Significance of Forgiveness. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 94(4), 687-703,
- Watson, G. (2004). *Agency and Answerability: Selected Essays*. Oxford University Press.
- Wolf, S. (1990). *Freedom Within Reason*. Oxford University Press.
- Wolf, S. (2011). Blame, Italian Style. In R. J. Wallace, R. Kumar & S. Freeman (Eds), *Reasons and Recognition: Essays on the Philosophy of T.M. Scanlon* (pp. 332-345). Oxford University Press.
- Wolf, S. (2019). Attributability and the Self. In D. J. Coates and N. A. Tognazzini (Eds.), *Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility Volume 5: Themes from the Philosophy of Gary Watson* (pp. 38-59). Oxford University Press.
- Wolf, S. (2022). *Criticizing Blame*. Manuscript.
- Zaibert, L. (2009). The Paradox of Forgiveness. *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, 6, 365–393.
- Zhang, H., Watson-Singleton, N. N., Pollard S. E., Pittman D. M., Lamis, D. A., Fischer, N. L., Patterson, B., & Kaslow, N. J. (2017). Self-Criticism and Depressive Symptoms: Mediating Role of Self-Compassion. *OMEGA—Journal of Death and Dying*, 80(2), 202-223.
- Zheng, R. (2016). Attributability, Accountability, and Implicit Bias. In J. Saul and M. Brownstein (Eds.), *Implicit Bias, Volume 2: Moral Responsibility, Structural Injustice, and Ethics* (pp. 62–89). Oxford University Press.
- Zimmerman, M. J. (1988). *An Essay on Moral Responsibility*. Rowman & Littlefield.