

Interpreting Blame

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I

‘Blame’ refers to a class of responses to morally faulty actions. Although experiences of blaming and being blamed are familiar parts of everyday life, it is not entirely clear what blame involves. So it is worth seeking a clearer interpretation of blame simply as a way of better understanding our moral lives. But this is also worth seeking because we need a clearer understanding of blame in order to understand, and perhaps resolve, some important philosophical puzzles.

For example, most of us are strongly inclined to think that it is appropriate to blame people who commit terrible crimes. But, on the other hand, we are also sometimes inclined to think that these people cannot properly be blamed if, as seems likely, their characters and actions are caused by factors outside of them, over which they have no control. Similarly, we are inclined to think that two drivers who are equally careless deserve the same amount of blame, but also inclined to think that if one of them kills a pedestrian then he or she should be blamed more severely than the other who, through sheer good luck, gets home without an accident. In order to resolve these puzzles we need to understand why it should seem to be the case that blame is appropriate only for things that are under an agent’s control, and what kind of control is required. And in order to understand these things we need to understand what blame is.

A satisfactory account of blame should be as faithful as possible to the phenomenology of blaming and to our judgments about when it is appropriate to blame people and in what degree. But, as I have said, it is not entirely clear what we have in

mind in speaking of blame, and the things we are inclined to believe about blame form an inconsistent set. This is why I will refer to what I am offering as an interpretation of blame rather than an analysis, which would suggest a higher degree of clarity and specificity in the object of analysis than I believe exists. Any interpretation of blame will be in some way revisionary: accepting it will involve changing our minds about some things we previously were inclined to believe. An interpretation would be revisionary in a bad way if it involved changing our minds just in order to avoid the puzzles I have mentioned. A satisfactory response to these puzzles has to be grounded in a deeper understanding of blame, in the light of which we can see why some of the things we were previously inclined to think are in fact mistaken. A satisfactory interpretation of blame should also explain why the puzzling cases are puzzling—why it is that we are pulled in two directions in these cases.

One natural interpretation of blame is that to blame someone is just to have a negative moral assessment of what he has done and the character that this reflects. This interpretation is suggested by the frequent pairing of blame with praise. Since praise is a (positive) evaluation, blame would also be purely evaluative if it were simply the negative correlate of praise. But this interpretation of blame is unable to explain the puzzles just mentioned. If blame is merely a negative evaluation, it is difficult to see why it should seem inappropriate to blame people for characteristics that are due to factors that are not under their control. Whatever caused us to be the way we are, we *are* that way, with our particular faults and virtues. If blame is just a form of evaluation, there is no reason why causal explanations of our character and actions should undermine blame, any more than such explanations undermine appraisals of our intelligence, or our athletic

or aesthetic skills.¹ Similarly, if blame is merely evaluative, then moral luck cases should not be at all puzzling: it should be simply obvious that the two drivers in the case I described are equally blameworthy, since their actions and character are faulty in the same way.

An alternative interpretation takes blame to be a kind of punishment. This might explain why blame requires freedom, if it is unfair or otherwise objectionable to punish people for things that they could not have avoided doing, or for traits that they could not avoid having. This could also explain our puzzlement about moral luck cases, if we are inclined to think that the driver who kills a pedestrian should be punished more severely, but this thought is in tension with our recognition that that driver is morally no worse than the one who merely drove recklessly.

It is not clear, however, what punishment or penalty is supposed to be involved in our ordinary practice of blaming. Perhaps the penalty is just the unpleasantness of being subject to moral criticism. But negative assessment of our talents and skills is also unpleasant, and criticism of these kinds, for traits that we could not have avoided having, seems quite appropriate, at least if it serves some social purpose.

Perhaps blame is not itself a sanction, but rather a judgment that some sanction would be appropriate. If these sanctions are justified only if people have had a fair chance to avoid them, this would explain why blame is appropriate only for things that are under a person's control. But it does not seem that whenever we blame someone we have in mind that some sanction is called for, let alone what this sanction might be. Perhaps this

¹Hume's interpretation of moral criticism is purely evaluative (a matter of "disinterested approval and disapproval.") This is what leads him to believe that the only lack of freedom that undermines blame is the lack of "liberty of spontaneity," which distorts the connection between an agent's action and his or her character.

is something about which competent users of the term ‘blame’ can disagree. But I, at least, when I blame someone, do not believe that it would be a good thing if they should suffer in some way.²

So it is worth looking for an interpretation of blame that lies between these two extremes: an interpretation that involves more than mere negative assessment but is not a form of punishment. In this essay I will consider three interpretations of blame that lie in this intermediate space. The first interprets blame as the expression of a moral emotion such as resentment or indignation. The second goes beyond this and sees blame as not only expressive but also communicative: as a demand for justification, explanation, or apology. The third is my own view, which sees blame as a modification of one’s understanding of one’s relationship with the person blamed.³ I will present this view in Part I and then, in Part II, respond to some objections to it, coming mainly from views of the other two kinds I have mentioned.

I

To explain my interpretation of blame, I will start by explaining the abstract idea of a relationship, on which it is based. I understand a relationship as a set of intentions and expectations about our actions and attitudes toward one another that are justified by certain facts about us. The concept of a relationship is a normative concept specifying the conditions under which a particular relationship of this kind exists, and the attitudes and intentions that parties to such a relationship ought, ideally to have toward each other.

² As will become clear, I do believe that they should be treated in a way that they have reasons to dislike, but not as a form of punishment and not *because* they dislike it.

³ Presented in *Moral Dimensions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), Chapter 4.

Friendship, for example, involves intentions to spend time together, to stand ready to aid each other, to share and keep confidences, to take pleasure in each other's successes and be distressed by each other's setbacks, and in general to be particularly concerned with each other's welfare. These intentions (and the corresponding expectations) are made appropriate by such things as the friends' common interests, and experiences, their enjoyment of each other's company. This abstract normative ideal of the relationship of friendship should not be confused with the particular relationships that hold between actual individuals who are friends. These relationships are constituted by the actual attitudes that the parties have toward one another. If these conform closely enough to the normative ideal of friendship then they count as friendships even though their relationship may be flawed as measured by this ideal.

Another kind of relationship is the kind that people stand in to one another when they share a commitment to some group, cause, or ideal. Like friendship, these relationships have preconditions: they hold only between individuals who have commitments of the relevant kind, or perhaps, in some cases, who share some properties in virtue of which they *should* have such a commitment.

I believe, more controversially, that there is also such a thing as the moral relationship that we stand in to all rational creatures. As in the case of other relationships, the normative concept of this relationship specifies, first, the conditions under which people stand in the relationship and, second, the norms governing attitudes that those who stand in this relationship should, ideally, have toward one another. As to the first, the moral relationship holds among all rational agents. As to the second, the normative concept specifies that we should have certain general intentions about how we will

behave towards other rational creatures, namely, in my view, that we will treat them only in ways that would be allowed by principles that they could not reasonably reject. It also specifies other attitudes that we should have toward one another, such as being pleased if things go well for another person and regretful (and certainly not pleased) when things go badly for them.

Unlike friendship and other relationships of the kinds I have mentioned, the moral relationship does not apply only to people who know of or are acquainted with one another, or who actually have certain attitudes toward one another. It holds universally, of all rational agents. It is thus, in a way, inescapable. By failing to hold certain attitudes one can fail or cease to be friends, or fellow members of a political party.⁴ But no matter what attitudes a person has, and no matter how badly he or she may have behaved, we still stand in the moral relationship with that person. This may seem to imply that what I am calling the moral relationship is not an actual relationship between individuals. A real relationship between two people, it might be said, is constituted by their actual attitudes toward one another. Since what I am calling the moral relationship holds independently of such attitudes, it might be said not to be a relationship at all but just a set of moral requirements. There is, it might be said, nothing in this case corresponding to the actual relationship between two friends.

This does not seem to me to be correct. Insofar as we hold general moral views about what we owe to others and what they owe to us, these views constitute a relationship in the abstract sense I have in mind: a set of intentions and expectations

⁴ Universality and inescapability need not go together. It may be claimed, for example that members of certain ethnic groups are bound by norms of that group whether or not they choose to accept this or not. In many cases this claim does not seem defensible, but when it is, the relationship in question would be inescapable although not universal.

about how we will behave toward one another. We have such intentions and expectations regarding not only our interactions with friends and associates but also intentions and expectations that define a relationship not with other people in general. We have, for example, views, and intentions, about the care one should take not to injure strangers, and the duties one has to aid them should we be in a position to do so. The normative ideal of the moral relationship specifies what these intentions and expectations ought to be. Our actual attitudes may fall short of this ideal, but we have them nonetheless. I recognize that this stretches the normal idea of a relationship, but I believe that enough of that idea remains for it to be a useful framework for interpreting blameworthiness and blame.

Blame and blameworthiness as I understand them are always relative to some relationship or relationships. A person is *blameworthy* in my view if they do something that indicates intentions or attitudes that are faulty by the standards of a relationship. Someone is morally blameworthy if his or her attitudes are faulty by the standards of the moral relationship. But people can also be judged to be blameworthy because their attitudes are faulty by the standards of some other relationship, such as friendship (thus impairing the person's relations with those to whom he or she stands in this relation.)

The relationships I have mentioned as examples have been ones, like friendship, which we properly value. But I believe that there can be attitudes properly called blame relative to other relationships. For example, a Mafioso can be said to blame an associate for violating the code of *omertà*. Since, we assume, the associate has good moral reason for this violation, he is not *morally* blameworthy for it and, I would say, not blameworthy at all (that is, not blameworthy by any defensible standard.) But this does not mean that his comrades' attitude toward him is not an attitude of blame, because they accept and

value the relationship of which this code is a part, even if they do not have good reason to do this.⁵

A judgment of blameworthiness is a judgment that an action shows something about the agent that impairs, in various ways, his or her relations with others. The nature of this impairment will vary, depending on the ways that these others interact with that person—on which more particular relations they stand in to this person and the significance for them of that person’s faults. A judgment of blameworthiness is a judgment that those others have reason to understand their relations with that person in ways other than they normally would. Like an assessment of a person’s character, it is an impersonal judgment that one can make, with the same content, no matter how one is related to the person in question.

But blame, the response that this impairment calls for, is more personal. To *blame* a person is to judge that person to be blameworthy and, as a consequence, to modify one’s understanding of one’s relationship with that person (that is, to alter or withhold intentions and expectations that that relationship would normally involve) in the particular ways that that judgment of blameworthiness makes appropriate, given one’s relation with the person and the significance for one of what that person has done. The modification that is appropriate will vary depending on how one is related to the person in question and to his or her action. It will depend, for example, on whether one is a member of the agent’s community or a stranger, and whether one is the victim of the agent’s action, a relative of the victim, or a bystander.

⁵ This paragraph responds to a question raised by Jussi Suikkanen in “Intentions, Blame, and Contractualism,” *Jurisprudence* 2 (2011), 561-573, p. 572.

The personal nature, and hence variability of blame on the interpretation I am offering is a reflection of the fact that, like Strawson, I am interpreting blame as involving reactive attitudes—attitudes toward a person that are reactions to the attitudes that toward others that are reflected in his or her actions.⁶ The main difference between my view and Strawson's lies in the particular reactive attitudes that we regard as centrally important. While not discounting emotions altogether, I emphasize changes in intentions. Strawson emphasizes reactive emotions (although, I will explain later, his view involves other attitudes as well.)

What I have just been doing is simply to emphasize the fact that, unlike an interpretation that sees blame as an evaluation of a person's character, a reactive attitude interpretation like mine or Strawson's can recognize that the kind of reaction that a given agent's actions and attitudes call for can vary from person to person, depending on how they are related to and affected by that person and his or her actions.

The particular modification of attitudes (the kind of blame) that is justified in a given case is determined by first-order normative reasoning: first-order moral reasoning in the case of moral blame, and in other cases moral reasoning supplemented by reasons relating to the special relationships in question. It is strength of this account that it allows explicitly for this kind of variability, since most blaming occurs between people who know each other well, and stand in special relations to one another in addition to the general moral relationship.

⁶ A point noted by Jay Wallace in "Disinterested Opprobrium," in *Reasons and Recognition: Essays on the Philosophy of T. M. Scanlon*, R. Jay Wallace, Rahul Kumar, and Samuel Freeman, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 352.

Blame of a disloyal friend, for example, might involve suspending one's normal intentions to trust the friend and confide in him or her, and assigning a different meaning to one's interactions. Blame of a fellow member of a cause or group might, similarly, involve lessened trust, and decreased feelings of solidarity. In extreme cases, blame in relation to such relationships may involve writing a person off as no longer someone one is related to in the relevant way: no longer a friend or no longer a fellow devotee of the cause or member of the group.

In the case of moral blame, wholesale exclusion of this kind is not a possibility. The moral relationship is, as I have said, inescapable: the requirements of morality still apply to one's treatment of a person no matter how badly he or she has behaved, and whether or not he or she takes those requirements seriously. It is a first-order moral question, therefore, what one owes to a person given the moral deficiencies he or she has displayed. I believe that most basic moral requirements, such as those not to kill or injure a person, are unconditional and are owed to a person no matter what he or she has done. This raises the question of what room there is for meaningful moral blame that goes beyond mere negative evaluation. It seems to me that there is room for this. A person's morally deficient attitudes and behavior can justify a withdrawal of the presumption of trust, and of willingness to enter into relationships that require trust, such as friendship or cooperation. There is also room for decreased willingness to help a person with his or her projects and for a change in one's attitude towards how things go for the person. As I have said, it is normally a moral fault not to be disposed to hope that things go well for a person, not to take pleasure in their going well, or to take pleasure in their going badly. But if a person has behaved very badly toward oneself or others, it is not a moral fault to

fail to take pleasure in that person's successes or not to be distressed at things going badly for him or her.

This change in attitude—not hoping that things go well for a person or being pleased when they do—should not be confused with the retributivist attitude of thinking it *good* that a person should suffer, given what he or she has done, or that this is less bad than that an innocent person should suffer. The difference between hoping that something will happen, or being pleased when it does, and believing it good that it should happen can be seen from the case of attitudes toward the fates of one's friends. If my friend has bought a lottery ticket, then as her friend I hope that she wins, and I will be pleased if she does. But this does not mean that, as a friend, I must think that it would be a better thing if she wins than if someone else, equally in need, gets the prize.

Failure to make this distinction may be one thing that makes it seem to many that blame is appropriate only for things that are under a person's control. If blaming someone involved judging it to be a good thing that he should suffer as a result of what he has done, then, since it seems objectionable to make people suffer for things they could not have avoided, it would be plausible to think that people should not be blamed for things that are not under their control. But, as the contrast between friends and strangers shows, we do not owe it to people generally to hope to the same degree that things go well for them, or to be pleased when they do. These attitudes can vary, depending on our relations with a person. Just as being a friend, or a particularly nice person, can justify our taking increased pleasure in things going well for someone, being a particularly nasty person is adequate reason for decreased empathy of this kind. In neither case—neither in the

upward or the downward direction, as it were—is it required that the person have chosen to be the way that leads us to have these increased or decreased feelings.

This illustrates the general point mentioned above that it is a first order moral question whether the responses involved in moral blame are appropriate only if the faults they are responses to are under the person's control. I believe that with respect to all of the blaming responses I have mentioned the answer is that they do not. We do not owe it to people generally to trust them, be willing to cooperate with them, or to be ready to become their friends regardless of what they are like. And facts about what they are like, quite apart from whether they chose to be that way, are sufficient reason to withhold these attitudes.

This dependence of the appropriateness of blaming attitudes on the relation between the person who is doing the blaming and the person who is blamed, provides an explanation of our reactions to cases of moral luck in the outcome of an agent's actions. Reactions to these cases are puzzling if we take blame to depend only on the moral seriousness of an agent's faults and the degree to which this fault and its consequences are under the control of the agent. When we think of blame as depending only on these factors, we are led to the conclusion that the two drivers in the example I gave should be blamed in the same way and to the same degree. This leaves unexplained our sense that there is some difference between the two that is related to blame.

The feeling that there is a difference can be explained by the difference in the significance of the two drivers faults for those affected. Most obviously, these faults are of very different significance for the family of the person who was killed. It is reasonable for them to give that driver's faults more importance than those of the merely careless

driver in determining their continuing relations with these people—and thus to blame the driver to caused this harm to a different degree. Our judgments of blameworthiness, as neutral observers, will reflect this difference insofar as they are judgments about the differing reactions that various others (those who are harmed and those who are not) will appropriately have to an agent’s conduct. This explains the duality in our reaction to moral luck cases: the two drivers are equally faulty, but the different kinds of significance that these faults have for other people make it reasonable for those people to react to these faults in different ways.⁷ (This explanation is available to any reactive attitude interpretation of blame that allows the appropriateness of reactive attitudes to have this personal character.)

The idea that the form of blame that is appropriate depends on one’s relation to an agent and his or her actions may seem to lead to implausible conclusions about the possibility of blaming people with whom we have no relations and whose actions do not affect us or anyone known to us. For example, can we, on this account, blame Agrippina for murdering Claudius in 54 A. D. (assuming that she did this)? We can, on my account, judge her to be *blameworthy*, since this is a judgment about the responses appropriate for others who did stand in certain relations to her. But what content could an attitude of blaming on our part have? What intentions involving her we might we modify?

An interpretation of blame emphasizing moral emotions such as resentment and indignation also has difficulty with such cases. It would be odd to say that we resent what Agrippina did, since we are not affected by what she did, and it sounds odd as well to say

⁷ This responds to a question raised by Dana Nelkin, in her review of *Moral Dimensions*, (in *Philosophical Review* 120 (2011), p. 606) about how my interpretation of blame can explain both sides of our reaction to cases of moral outcome luck.

that we are indignant about it. Indignation seems overblown because of our lack of connection to what she did. So this problem, insofar as it is a problem, will arise for any account of blame that emphasizes what I called above its personal character. Blame of distant agents is most easily understood as an impersonal evaluative judgment of the agent's action and character. Beyond this, there may seem to be little room for blame, as opposed to a neutral judgment of blameworthiness.

But the account I am offering does allow for another way in which blame of people in the distant past can have content. This content lies in differences in the way we react to what happens to them, the degree to which we are distressed by bad things that happen to them or pleased by their good fortune.⁸ (This aspect of blame could also be captured in Strawson's account via his idea of a withdrawal of good will.) Blame of fictional characters can be understood in the same way. Fiction works in large part by engaging our natural moral tendency to be concerned with the fate of people we hear about—to hope things go well for them and to be distressed when they do not. This engagement creates a large part of the tension that pulls us along as a story unfolds. Our attitude toward the villains in a story (our blame of them), insofar as it goes beyond evaluation, lies in changes in this concern: in being less distressed, and even pleased when things go badly for them.

II

I turn now to some objections to the account of blame that I have offered. According to my account, the fact that certain attitudes, such as a complete disregard for the interests of others, are attributable to a person is sufficient grounds for blaming him or

⁸ I am grateful to Colin Marshall for calling this possibility to my attention in a discussion at New York University.

her. This may seem mistaken because it leaves out what Gary Watson refers to as the requirement that those who are subject to blame should be morally *accountable*.⁹

Psychopaths, for example, may be rational in a general sense, and capable of means-ends reasoning, but nonetheless unable to understand why they have any reason to take moral requirements seriously as limits on the pursuit of their aims. If they see no reason not to kill, injure, or manipulate us when this promotes their ends, then this judgment about reasons is attributable to them. It is their considered judgment about the reasons they have. But if they are incapable of understanding why they should not hold this view, then, Watson believes, it makes no sense to demand of them that they take our interests seriously in the way that morality requires.

By this he does not mean merely that it is pointless to ask them why they hold their views and how they can defend them. Rather, he thinks that given their lack of moral capacity the requirements of morality do not apply to them, and it is senseless to blame them for failing to comply with these requirements. He writes, “I can legitimately require others to do things only if they have good reasons to act in this way because I have required it. In other words, it is normatively infelicitous to make demands of people who have no good reasons to regard the demanding as legitimate.”¹⁰ I take it that by “have no good reason” Watson means “are not capable of seeing that they have good reason,” or that he takes the ability to see that one has a reason of a certain kind to be a necessary condition for having such a reason. I believe, on the contrary, that in the sense

⁹ Gary Watson, “The Trouble with Psychopaths,” in Wallace, et al, eds., *Reasons and Recognition*, pp. 308-309. See also his “Two Faces of Responsibility,” *Philosophical Topics* 24 (1996), pp. 227-248.

¹⁰ “The Trouble with Psychopaths,” p. 314.

relevant to questions of blame a person can be blind to reasons that he really does have. This disagreement may be important to our conflicting views about psychopaths.¹¹

Watson's objection to my view can be understood in two ways. Understood in the first way, it suggests that because my view interprets blame as a unilateral reaction on the part of the person doing the blaming, it does not take into account the responses that are called for on the part of those who are blamed, such as explanation, justification or apology, and hence neglects the fact that blame is inappropriate in the case of individuals who lack the moral capacity to respond in these ways.

In response it should be said, first, that although on my account blame itself (as opposed to some *expressions* of blame) does not literally involve a demand for justification or apology, this account does explain why these responses are called for and how blame can be undermined when they are forthcoming. Blame, as I interpret it, involves a modified understanding of one's relationship with a person, which has been impaired by that person's actions or attitudes. It follows that a person who is blamed, insofar as he or she has reason to want that relationship to be preserved, has reason to respond by justifying what he or she has done (thereby denying that an impairment has occurred) or by offering an apology, which acknowledges the impairment and attempts to restore the relationship on a new footing.¹² To accept a justification or apology is thus to set aside the attitudes that constitute blame as I interpret it, or at least to modify these

¹¹ Watson might say that at least a person who cannot see that he has a certain reason cannot be *blamed* for not seeing it. There is certainly a sense in which this is so: it is not his fault that he can't understand this reason—not his fault that he is a psychopath. But this is in my view a separate question, and in any event is not Watson's main objection.

¹² This depends, as I have said, on whether the person has reasons to value the relationship in question. See note 4 above.

attitudes going forward. I regard it as a strength of my account that it explains the relation between blame, apology and forgiveness in this direct way.

An account that gives central place to moral emotions such as resentment might also explain this relation, given some account of how apology makes these emotions no longer appropriate. It might be said that what makes resentment appropriate is the impairment of one's relationship caused by the person's past attitudes, and that apology undermines resentment by removing this impairment. This seems right, although one might wonder whether resentment is really undermined if the object of resentment the person's past action and the attitudes reflected in it, which apology cannot modify. The attitudes that my interpretation of blame stresses are more explicitly forward looking: they concern the way one intends to be related to a person in the future, given what he or she has done in the past. Insofar as one has reason to want to restore the relationship with a person on something like its former basis, that person's apology, by providing a basis for doing this, can make it the case that one has reason to modify the intentions that are central to blame on my account. I am not saying that an emotion-based account cannot explain these things, but my interpretation seems to me to have the advantage of making the connections more explicit.

It would be unreasonable literally to demand justification or apology from a person who lacks the moral capacity to understand and offer these things. As Watson acknowledges, blame, on my account, need not involve such demand. But the second, deeper form of the accountability objection holds not simply that it is unreasonable to literally demand justification or apology from people who lack moral capacity, but that it is unreasonable to demand that they comply with moral requirements, and to blame them

for not doing so, since they are incapable of seeing that they have any reason to take these requirements seriously.

We are, Watson says, pulled two ways in reacting to psychopaths. On the one hand their cruel and manipulative behavior seems to make them prime candidates for blame. But on the other hand the very incapacity that explains this conduct disqualifies them as moral agents and hence from blame.¹³ Watson believes that my view is unable to account for this ambivalence about the blameworthiness of psychopaths, since it seems to come down firmly on the side of saying that psychopaths are blameworthy, indeed that the attitudes attributable to them make them prime subjects for blame. There is, however, a way in which my view can account for this ambivalence. Insofar as they lack the capacity to understand and respond to moral requirements it is questionable whether they can be participants in the moral relationship. Like young children (but in a different way) they both are and are not members of the moral community. We owe them some kinds of moral concern and care. We may not, for example, kill or injure them at will. But they are not candidates for relations of cooperation or trust, so withholding these relationships is not a modification of a status they would have had, were it not for certain particular instances of behavior and attitude. Because they are psychologically complex, psychopaths are able to *simulate* normal behavior and to use this to manipulate us. They *seem* to be, and can present themselves as, candidates for trust, and hence subject to blame in the form of withholding trust. But when we understand more about what they are like we can see that this is an illusion.

¹³ “The Trouble with Psychopaths,” p. 307.

This might explain the ambivalence about psychopaths that Watson describes. But is holding that psychopaths are in this sense not candidates for normal moral relationships an exemption from blame or a *form* of blame? The answer would seem to lie in whether withholding these relationships has the condemnatory aspect typical of blame. Blame as I interpret it has this aspect of condemnation because it involves withholding trust, cooperation and so on from a person *because of* attitudes that person holds that are faulty by the standards of some relationship to which he or she is a party. It also involves withholding a relationship that they are seeking, in trying to manipulate us. Neither of these things is true of tigers. They are not candidates for trust, which explains why refusing to trust them is not a form of blame. If there is ambivalence in the case of psychopaths, I have suggested, it is about whether they actually are candidates for moral relations at all.

Another criticism of my view has been that its explanation of the condemnatory aspect of blame is too weak. In order to do justice to what Jay Wallace calls the element of “opprobrium” in blame, he and others argue that an adequate interpretation needs to give a greater role to moral emotions.¹⁴

To assess this objection it is helpful to consider the parallel case of gratitude. As Adam Smith points out, blame is best understood as the negative correlate of gratitude rather than praise.¹⁵ Praise is a purely evaluative notion. So the idea that blame is the

¹⁴ By, among others, Jay Wallace in “Dispassionate Opprobrium,” Susan Wolf, in “Blame, Italian Style,” in Watson, et al, eds., *Reasons and Responsibility*, and Michele Mason, “Blame: Taking it Seriously,” in *Philosophy & Phenomenological Research* 83 (2011), pp. 473-481.

¹⁵ See Part II, Section I of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1969). Strawson also mentions gratitude as a reactive attitude, along with resentment. See “Freedom and Resentment,” in Gary Watson, ed., *Free Will* p. 76.

negative correlate of praise supports an evaluative interpretation of blame, and this, as I pointed out above, makes it difficult to explain why it should seem to many that blame is appropriate only for things that are under a person's control. Gratitude, on the other hand, provides the model for an interpretation of blame that is more than mere negative evaluation but yet not punitive.

Gratitude toward a person who has done something to help you is not just a matter of thinking well of that person. It involves, centrally, a change in intention, in the form of an increased readiness to help that person in turn should the need arise and, commonly, an increased tendency to be pleased when something good happens to him or her. In cases of genuine gratitude, helping a benefactor is not seen as a way of rewarding him or her for helping you (the positive analog of a punishment), and certainly not viewed as an incentive, to encourage such behavior in that person and others. Rather, it is simply called for by what the person has done for you—by the way your relationship with that person has been altered by what he or she has done.

It might be said, however, that gratitude is, at base, a moral emotion, a positive correlate of resentment.¹⁶ It is certainly true that feeling grateful generally involves a warm feeling toward the person who has benefited you, in addition to the attitudinal changes I have mentioned, just as blame generally involves hostile feelings such as resentment. I do not mean to deny these emotional factors in either case. The question is what is central to the reactions in question. It seems to me that, however warmly a person might feel toward someone who has benefited him, someone who lacked any increased tendency to help this person in turn could not really be said to be grateful. Such a person

¹⁶ As Strawson indeed suggests. See "Freedom and Resentment," p. 90.

would not understand what it is to be grateful. On the other hand, someone who was very glad to have been helped and saw this as a reason to be ready to help the other person in turn could properly be said to be grateful even if, because he was something of a cold fish, this intention was not accompanied by any further affective element. I am not saying that this is the normal case, or denying that such a person would be odd. The question I am interested in is the relation between affective and other responses and their relative centrality.

The fact that the person I have described intends to help his benefactor in turn *because of the help that person has given him* accounts for the “positive” aspect of his gratitude just as, on my account, the “condemnatory” aspect of blame lies in withholding certain intentions because of the faultiness of a person’s attitudes, as measured by the standards of the relevant relationship. The question is whether further positive or negative emotional responses are not only normal but also essential to the reactive attitudes of gratitude and blame.

To address this question it will be helpful to consider how my interpretation of blame differs from, and also resembles, Strawson’s reactive attitude account. I believe that there is less difference between our views than might at first appear. The first thing to notice is that moral emotions are not the only elements of Strawson’s view. There is also the element of what he calls “good will.” Strawson writes that “Indignation, disapprobation, like resentment, tend to inhibit or at least to limit our good will towards the object of these attitudes, tend to promote an at least partial and temporary withdrawal of good will: they do so in proportion as they are strong; and their strength is in general proportioned to what is felt to be the magnitude of the injury and to the degree to which

the agent's will is identified with, or indifferent to, it." He goes on to say that this withdrawal of goodwill involves also a "modification of the general demand that another should, if possible, be spared suffering" and "preparedness to acquiesce in that infliction of suffering on the offender which is an essential part of punishment."¹⁷ I assume that if he were to say more about gratitude, as a positive reactive attitude, Strawson might have said, similarly, that it tends to promote an *increase* in goodwill and an increased *unwillingness* to acquiesce in another's suffering.

The idea of "good will" is left somewhat vague and unexamined in Strawson's brief remarks. But good will as he understands it clearly goes well beyond mere feelings insofar as it includes to a willingness to acquiesce in the infliction of suffering. As I indicated above, it seems to me that an answer to the first order moral question of whether blame is appropriate only for things that are under a person's control depends crucially on how much this attitude involves—how much of what one normally owes a person is altered or suspended when one blames that person. Here there seems to me to be a significant difference between angry feelings and the infliction of suffering, and that the latter require more by way of justification. It is one thing to say that it is simply part of our practices to feel resentment toward those who violate the norms of interpersonal relationships, and that no argument is needed that the objects of these attitudes could have avoided being subject to them. But it is quite a different thing to claim this about the deliberate infliction of suffering.

I do not believe that moral blameworthiness ever means that the deliberate infliction of suffering is justified. The moral prohibitions against individual's inflicting

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

suffering on one another seems to be unconditional. (Whether the needs of public safety can justify the infliction of suffering by the state is a separate question.) So the benefits that blame can involve withholding on my view are less weighty than Strawson seems to envisage. But it nonetheless seemed to me important, in order to explain and do justice to the thought that blame is appropriate only for things that a person could have avoided, to develop an interpretation of blame that includes more than emotional reactions.¹⁸ In short, it seemed to me that what Strawson calls the “withdrawal of good will” is where the action is: that it is important to be clear about exactly what this involves and about what is required in order for these things to be justified.

An important possible difference between my view and Strawson’s concerns the relation between reactive attitudes such as resentment and indignation, and the withdrawal of good will. It is not entirely clear how Strawson understands the relation between these, and their relation in turn to a person’s violation of moral demands. In the first of the passages I quoted, where he is talking about strength, Strawson seems to be claiming that violations of moral demands give rise to reactive attitudes which in turn bring about (“tend to promote”) the attitudinal changes he calls withdrawal of good will. But later on that page he seems to suggest a more intimate relation between the first of these factors and each of the other two. He says that “the making of the demand [that people comply with moral requirements] *is* the proneness to these attitudes [of resentment

¹⁸ Since I focused on the modification of intentions because I thought that seemed, initially, more difficult to justify than emotional reactions, and more likely to raise issues of freedom and control, I was surprised that Susan Wolf seems to believe the opposite. See *Blame Italian Style*,” p. 342. One possible explanation for this might be that, like Strawson, she takes retributive attitudes such as a willingness to acquiesce in the infliction of suffering to be part and parcel of these emotions, whereas I explicitly exclude these from the modifications of intention that I take blame to involve.

etc.], and that the partial withdrawal of good will which these attitudes entail is the consequence of viewing the person as a member of the moral community “who has offended against its demands.” This suggests that in his view taking moral demands seriously involves seeing both feelings of resentment and the withdrawal of good will as appropriate when these demands are violated (although he continues to say that this withdrawal is “entailed by” those reactive attitudes.)

So there are two possible views here about the relation between moral emotions such as resentment and indignation and the modified attitudes that my account of blame emphasizes, which are parts of what Strawson calls the withdrawal of good will. On one account reactive emotions and these modifications of attitude are both justified as reactions to a person’s faulty attitudes toward others, but the justification of the latter need not go by way of justification of the former. (This is compatible with the idea that the reactive emotions cannot be fully understood without reference to these other modifications of attitude—that resentment would not be resentment if it did not involve some modification of intention--as long as it is understood that these modifications of intention can be independently justified.

This is the position I have taken. I hold that both emotional responses and changes in other attitudes can be justified by an agent’s faults, but I focus on the latter changes of attitude, for reasons I have mentioned. It seems to me that there can be instances of blame without moral emotions. In particular, as I said above, the content of blame of figures in the distant past seems to me best understood in this way.

Wallace argues that this “parallel” account is inadequate and reflects a superficial understanding of the moral emotions.¹⁹ He thus seems to favor an alternative view, suggested by Strawson, according to which the moral emotions explain (“promote”) and even justify what Strawson calls withdrawal of good will. Wallace says (discussing the case of friendship) that the presence of emotions such as resentment gives additional reasons for other adjustments in attitude, thereby giving these adjustments a different meaning than they otherwise would have had.²⁰

It does not seem to me that a feeling of resentment gives one additional reason for withdrawing readiness to trust, cooperate or sympathize with a person. It is much more plausible to say that feeling resentment involves taking oneself to have reasons for these other adjustments in attitude, reasons provided by the same faults that are reasons for resentment. I do believe, as I have said, that such adjustments have special (condemnatory) meaning in virtue of being made for such reasons. Being made for these reasons seems to me sufficient to make these adjustments an instance of blame, although I would not deny that further special meaning can be given by the fact that they are accompanied by resentment, or what Wolf calls “righteous anger.”

The idea that such emotions are essential to blame may be supported by examples that seem to be cases of blame in which there is no modification of intention. I am not positive that there cannot be such cases, although it seems to me that when they are looked at closely some shift in attitude, in addition to emotion, turns out to be involved. Wolf mentions the case of a daughter who borrows her mother’s clothes so freely that the

¹⁹ “Dispassionate Opprobrium,” p. 356.

²⁰ “Dispassionate Opprobrium,” p. 357.

mother wants to put a lock on her closet door.²¹ Contrary to what Wolf says, however, this reaction seems to me to involve a shift in intention as a consequence of seeing one's relationship as impaired. The kind of mother-daughter relationship one has reason to want would involve borrowing and lending clothes with pleasure, trusting the other to exercise the proper restraint and care in doing this. Intentions and expectations of the kind Wolf describes, according to which one does not lend things gladly and take pleasure in sharing, but would prefer to put a lock on one's closet, constitute an impairment in my sense. There is a shift in attitude here that amounts to blame in my view whether it is accompanied by righteous anger or only by disappointment.²²

To sum up my responses to these objections: It would be foolish to deny that moral emotions such as resentment and indignation are appropriate responses to actions and attitudes that are incompatible with important personal relationships, and that these emotions are common elements in the reactions that we call blame. But these emotions are not all that blame normally involves. Other attitudes such as modified intentions are also important. They are, I believe, what gives blame its special weightiness, and what gives rise to concerns about freedom of the will as a precondition for blame. In order to understand blame, and to respond effectively to these concerns, we need to focus on these reactions. In particular, we need to see how they are justified directly by the way in which another person's actions and attitudes impair his or her relations with others, rather than viewing them merely as concomitants of, or as produced by, emotional reactions.

²¹ "Blame, Italian style," p. 336.

²² I discuss a similar familial example in *Moral Dimensions*, p. 73.

