

1. Introduction

Imagine your friend was supposed to meet you for a drink at 6. You arrive at the bar a few minutes early, settle down with a drink, and wait...and wait...and wait. An hour later, your friend walks in with no sign of hurry or fluster. It's not unlikely that you will greet your friend by blaming them for their late appearance: "You're late!" – you might say, accusingly. Or: "Where the hell were you? I've been waiting for an hour!"

We blame one another for moral transgressions by doing something: by accusing the other of wrongdoing ("You did this on purpose"), demanding an explanation ("How could you?", "What were you thinking?") or requesting an apology ("You owe me an apology."). These speech acts, in turn, invite characteristic responses – explanations, excuses, justifications, apologies – and render others inappropriate. Blame can be public, when spoken out loud, or private, when merely thought.

When we blame we engage in a moral practice: a socially recognized activity structured by internal norms.² This paper investigates the nature of this practice. While much has been written on the topic of blame in recent years, philosophers generally regard blame as a mental state. Consequently philosophical inquiry has focussed on characterizing the psychology of blame: what kind of mental state it is.³ Blame as a practice has remained largely unexplored.

My aim is to characterize the nature of our blaming practice by investigating its function. In this regard, I am inspired by Edward Craig. Craig argues that knowledge is not simply...

...a given phenomenon, but something that we delineate by operating with a concept which we create in answer to certain needs, or in pursuit of certain ideals.⁴

He argues that to investigate knowledge we attend to those needs. I suggest that we do the same for blame: we approach it as a practice that we created in order to advance some of our interests or needs. We shed light on the practice by identifying those needs.

To this end, I use the method of reverse-engineering.⁵ I start by

¹ Thank you...

² This characterization of a social practice is based on Rawls [1955], p. 3. See also Williamson [2000], p. 238-244 for a discussion of practices as applied to assertion.

³ For example, see Wallace [1994], Sher [2005], Scanlon [2009], Pickard [2013a], Owen [2012], Murphy [1982], Menges [2017], McGeer [2013], MacNamara [2015], Hieronymi [2003]. See Nussbaum [2016] Appendix A for a critical evaluation of the prospects of this project.

⁴ Craig [1990], p. 3

⁵ I owe this term to Dogramaci [2012].

making some observations about what our blaming practice *is* – what its central features are. I then advance a hypothesis about what the practice is *for*. To anticipate: I will argue that blame serves an epistemic function. It facilitates shared knowledge about how a given wrongdoing has reshaped the normative landscape. I suggest that wrongdoing is a normative power; amongst other things, it brings into existence reparative rights and duties. These include the duty to apologize, to acknowledge one’s wrongdoing, to make amends. Blame serves to facilitate shared knowledge about the nature and extent of these normative changes.⁶ I argue that this hypothesis sheds light on central features of our blaming practice. It also offers a compelling picture of how blame fits together with other moral practices: making excuses, taking responsibility, and forgiveness.

2. Characterizing Our Blaming Practice

To investigate what a practice is *for*, we might want to know what the practice actually *is*. You might be skeptical of whether there is anything informative we can say – isn’t our blaming practice too varied to resist simple characterization? But my aim in this section is not to offer a sharp characterization; rather it is to catalogue some general observations and platitudes about the many ways in which we blame each other.

Our blaming practice is a communicative practice. We blame by saying certain things or – if we blame in the privacy of our own mind – by thinking them. Thus, consider the following:

"You *did this* on purpose!"

"How could she act in this way?"

"What were you thinking?"

"I can't believe he *did this*!"

"She definitely owes him."

"You owe me an apology."

"I will never trust you again after what you did!"

This list encompasses a mixed bag of speech acts: accusation, command, (rhetorical) question, assertion. Yet we readily recognize all of them as ways of blaming someone.⁷ Plausibly, this has to do with their specific content. Thus, we blame someone by accusing them of having *committed a wrong*, having done it *intentionally* or *knowingly*, by demanding certain things – an *explanation*, an *apology*, *compensation*.

The second observation about our blaming practice is that blame comes in many second- and third-personal varieties. I can blame you, the wrongdoer, to your face, asking you to apologize, explain, make amends. But I can also blame you in your absence, in a conversation with another party. I can blame you by

⁶ Fricker pursues a similar project in her [2014]. There are several important differences between hers and the present approach, which I discuss in more detail below. First, I am skeptical that there is a form of blaming interaction that is explanatorily privileged. For this reason, the present approach is not focussed on a “paradigm blaming interaction”. Second, I differ on the importance and role of negative emotional responses.

⁷ The communicative acts in question need not be spoken out loud. They may also include a raised eye brow, a stern look, or a frown.

talking to my friend. (“Can you believe what they did to me?”) I can also blame a third party when I am a mere bystander, personally unaffected by the wrong. We often blame by gossiping about the wrongdoer. (“Can you believe what he did to her?”) All of these ways of blaming are equally prevalent in our practice.

Third, we can blame in both “hot” and “detached” ways. Drawing on Strawson, those writing on blame often draw a close connection between blaming someone and feeling – or at least being disposed to feel – resentment or outrage at them. We certainly do often blame angrily and resentfully. But we can also blame without expressing any affect at all: simply by noting that a misstep was done and an apology is in order. Or we can blame with bemusement or Schadenfreude – particularly, in gossiping blame.

Fourth, blame stings. It is typically unpleasant to be at the receiving end of a blaming-interaction and we are often prepared to go to great lengths to avoid being blamed.⁸

Fifth, blame requires a particular response. If I blame you for having passed on a story I told you in confidence and you fail to respond at all or you shrug your shoulder, call me overly sensitive, or start talking about something unrelated, then I am entitled to feel wronged, not merely frustrated by the lack of uptake. What are acceptable responses to blame? We can accept the blame and take responsibility. Usually this involves acknowledging the wrong done and apologizing for it. It may involve asking for forgiveness. But we can also respond defensively by offering a justification or an excuse. An account of our blaming practice should thus mesh with accounts of other aspects of our practice of holding each other morally responsible: with offering justifications, making excuses.

So much for an initial characterization of our blaming practice. Let’s now think about what the practice is *for*.

3. The Epistemic Function Account

I will start by stating my proposal a nutshell. The function of blame is *epistemic*. Its central aim is to facilitate shared knowledge of the normative changes that have resulted from wrongdoing.

This section aims to motivate the proposal. Wrongdoing, I argue, is a normative power. Much like promises and consent it alters existing rights, duties, and permissions in characteristic ways and brings new rights, duties, and permissions into existence. Normative powers are closely associated with communicative practices. This is because we have an interest in knowing the topology of our normative landscape. Blame is the communicative practice associated with wrongdoing. The next section then puts the proposal to work, showing that it sheds light on our blaming practice.

Wrongdoing as a Normative Power

We engage in wrongdoing when we perform actions that violate moral

⁸ See Pickard [2013], p. 619.

obligations we are under or that infringe on someone's moral rights.⁹

Wrongdoing has consequences. It can cause harm and distress: pain, a chipped tooth, a broken friendship. It also has *normative* consequences: it alters the set of rights, obligations, and permissions that obtain between the wrongdoer, the wronged party, and the moral community. If I wrong you, say by reneging on my promise to bake you a cake, I thereby acquire new duties and you acquire new, corresponding claim-rights against me. Now, in addition to a cake, which I may still owe, I also owe you an apology and explanation, maybe even compensation.

Wrongdoing alters the normative landscape in three characteristic ways. First, it creates *reparative rights and duties*. These include a duty to acknowledge the wrong one has done, a duty to listen to complaints about one's actions, a duty to explain one's actions and motivations, a duty to apologize, a duty to compensate or otherwise make amends. Reparative duties are often directed duties, they are owed to the wronged party who holds the correlate set of claim rights: you owe an apology or compensation *to* someone, namely the person you have wronged.¹⁰ But there may also be undirected reparative duties. If you litter, you are the one who has to clean it up – perhaps even leave it cleaner than you had found it but it's not clear that you owe that to someone in particular.¹¹

Second, wrongdoing changes *feeling norms*. Social context, personal relationships, past actions – both yours and mine – affect what I may, should, or must not feel.¹² Wrongdoing alters these norms. It can entitle the wronged party to feel anger, resentment, frustration, sadness, or disappointment. If, as a good friend, I reveal a secret you confided in me, you are entitled to anger and disappointment. To say that you are entitled is not to say that you will or must feel anger – it's up to you whether to exercise that right. You may be distracted by other things or decide it's more prudent to remain calm. And there are limits on just what kind of anger you are entitled to: unless the betrayal was very grave indeed, you are not entitled to murderous rage. If it was a minor

⁹ . Some instances of wrongdoing are wrongings: when I punch you, it's you who is wronged. But it's possible that not all are: when I destroy an ancient fossil I found on my private beach, I may have committed a wrong without wronging anyone. See Cornell [2015] for a discussion about the relationship between rights and wrongings.

¹⁰ See Thomson [1990], p. 84-98. Thomson argues that violating someone's right leads to "moral residue". Kramer [2005] defends the principle that breaching someone's right, creates a directed moral duty to "remedy the resultant situation in some way", where a moral remedy is "a measure undertaken or undergone in order to acknowledge the wrongness of what one has done to somebody else, and in order to deal adequately with the resultant situation." (p. 313)

¹¹ What about the case of murder? Can there be reparative duties that are owed to a dead person? See Kramer [2005], pp. 325-26 for a detailed response to this objection. One possibility is that dead people can in fact be right-holders. (See Kramer [2000] and [2001].)

¹² See Hochschild [1975], particularly pp. 288-292.

indiscretion, you may be entitled to some annoyance but not to weeks of seething fury.¹³

Wrongdoing creates feeling duties for the wrongdoer. If I have knowingly betrayed your trust, I *should* feel ashamed and remorseful for what I have done. If I have unintentionally harmed you, I *should* feel regret and sorrow. Wrongdoing modifies and creates feeling rights, duties, and permissions.

Third, wrongdoing changes *relationship norms*: for example, the right to someone's trust, time, help, support. The fact that, as a friend, I betrayed your secret makes it permissible for you to withdraw your trust, to stop checking in with me, to leave me off invitations for future birthday parties. The fact that your new colleague treated you badly may mean that you no longer owe her the help and support she would ordinarily be entitled to.

Let's call the way in which a given instance of wrongdoing modifies the reparative rights and duties, feeling norms, and relationship norms its *normative footprint*. Normative footprints vary in shape and size: some are mere blips in the normative landscape, others profoundly reshape it. This depends on many factors: the nature of the wrong, its gravity, the relationship between the wrongdoer and the wronged party. For example, not all instances of wrongdoing will modify relationship norms. A minor wrong in the context of a close relationship – a late arrival to an afterwork drink, an ill-considered remark, a forgotten chore – will typically not have any repercussions for how things stand between the two parties. They do not normally license one to withdraw one's trust, to "cool off" the friendship or to break it up altogether. But all instances of wrongdoing will generally induce normative changes of the first kind.¹⁴ Even a forgotten chore will typically entitle the wronged party to a quick apology.

The idea that wrongdoing has a normative footprint captures the fact that wrongdoing can *create* moral relationships where there were none before. Wrongdoing creates new moral relationships not only in the sense that the wrongdoer may have irrevocably inserted him- or herself into their victim's biography but also in that, as a result of the wrongdoing, the wronged party finds herself in possession of an (unwelcome) set of claim-rights against the perpetrator.¹⁵

Normative powers are activities that, by their very nature, shape the normative landscape – the matrix of rights, duties, and permissions in which we are embedded – in systematic and characteristic ways. In doing so, they modify which rights, duties, and permissions obtain between two parties. It's a familiar thought that promising and consent are normative powers is

¹³ This draws on Strawson's [2008] insight that there is a close connection between blame and reactive attitudes: anger, resentment, indignation. I discuss this relationship in more detail further below.

¹⁴ This echoes some of Wolf's [2001] criticism of Scanlon's [2009] account of blame, on which to be to blame is a matter of having acted in a way that damages the relationship in question.

¹⁵ See Walker [2006], p. 159. See also Cornell [2015], p. 111.

familiar.¹⁶ By making a promise to bake you a cake, I place myself under an obligation to bake it – an obligation that was created by my act of promising. By consenting that you cut my fringe, I thereby waive my right to not have a pair of scissors held to my forehead and thereby render a course of action permissible.

The fact that wrongdoing gives rise to systematic and characteristic changes in the normative landscape suggests that we should classify it as a normative power, too. Violating a moral norm, I thereby create the obligation to apologize, acknowledge, feel bad, compensate. I acquire these reparative duties and bring about the changes in feeling and relationship norms in virtue of having committed a wrong – just as I acquire the duty to bake you a cake in virtue of having promised to do so.

This is not to deny that there are important differences between promises and consent, and wrongdoing. First, wrongdoing can be both intentional and unintentional. Second, a wrongdoer does not generally intend to bring about the relevant normative consequences: she does commit a wrong in order to create a normative footprint. Quite on the contrary, the normative consequences of her actions are typically unwelcome to her. In contrast, promises and consent are intentional and aim to change the normative landscape. We promise in order to place ourselves under a given obligation and we consent in order to create a permission.

Some argue that these differences should lead us to conclude that wrongdoing cannot be a normative power. Thus, Owen suggests that to exercise a normative power, “the speaker must present himself as intending to *hereby* change the normative situation, to change the normative situation by means of this very communication.”¹⁷ One concern is that without such a restriction, we risk over-generating normative powers. This is because many of our actions induce some changes to the normative landscape: if you step on a crowded bus, you thereby acquire a duty to not wildly flail your fists around. But stepping on a bus hardly constitutes a normative power. Normative consequences alone are hence not enough to single out a kind of action as a normative power.

But there is a principled difference between promising, consenting, and wrongdoing on the one hand, and stepping on the bus on the other. For what explains why, now that you are on the bus, you are under an obligation to not flail your fists? You are not under this obligation in virtue of having stepped on the bus. Rather, you are under this obligation because you have a general duty not to harm others. Flailing your fists in close proximity to others would put your fellow passengers in harms way. And that’s why you must not flail your fists. The fact that you stepped on the bus, is neither here nor there. It neither explains nor grounds the obligation to not flail your fists. You were under an obligation to not gratuitously punch others all along.

In contrast, you were under no obligation to bake a cake until you promised me you would, nor were you under an obligation to apologize until you committed a wrong. To explain why you are under those obligations, we

¹⁶ See Owen [2012], Shiffrin [2008], Dougherty [2015].

¹⁷ Owen [2012], p. 5. See also Enoch [2011], p. 15. I’m grateful to [removed for anonymous review] for raising this objection.

have to appeal to your making the promise or committing a wrong – there are no independent, standing obligations to which we can appeal. Unlike stepping on the bus, promising and wrongdoing are indispensable to explaining those obligations because they ground them. You are obliged to bake a cake in virtue of having promised to do so and you are obliged to apologize in virtue of having acted wrongly.¹⁸

This suggests that recognizing wrongdoing as a normative power alongside promise and consent does not open the floodgate to just any action begin a normative power. It is simply not the case that any action constitutively brings about a change in the normative landscape. Only consent, wrongdoing, and promises do. The fact that consent and promises can only be undertaken intentionally marks an interesting difference to wrongdoing. The conclusion this warrants, I suggest, is that normative powers come in different kinds, not that wrongdoing cannot be a normative power.

Normative Powers and Communicative Practices

We have a general interest knowing the normative landscape we inhabit: what we owe to others, what they owe to us, what we are obligated and permitted to do and feel. This interest is both intrinsic and instrumental. As moral agents we care about doing the right thing for its own sake and because wrongdoing makes us liable to complaint, sanctions, and compensation. Second, it's the role of rights and duties to serve as a guide to practical deliberation. But to play this role, we must have epistemic access to them.¹⁹ Third, our rights and duties are partly constitutive of the relationships we stand in with others.²⁰ Our friends are those who we may trust, who we may rely on for help and to whom we owe help and support in return. We have an interest in knowing the status of these relationships.

Given all this, we should expect that for activities that systematically modify the normative landscape, there will be associated communicative practices that aim to make these modifications public.

Both promises and consent are cases in point. There are established speech acts by which we signal that we are making a promise or consenting to something: by saying “I promise” or “you may”. Some philosophers have argued that promises and consent are *essentially* communicative. They argue that I have only made a promise if I have communicated my intention to place myself under the relevant obligation and that I have only consented to a course

¹⁸ We can run an exact parallel argument for the comparison of waiving an obligation versus stepping off the bus.

¹⁹ As Cornell [2015], p. 127 observes:

Rights [...] are significant mainly because they are action-guiding. That is, they tell an agent something about what she should do; they give her reasons. [...] If you owe a duty, you have a certain kind of reason—perhaps especially pressing or second-personal or exclusive of others. So rights, correlative to duties, play a role in our deliberations about what to do. They give us reasons, presumably reasons of a special kind.

²⁰ Shiffrin [2008] argues that having the ability to place oneself under particular obligations can enhance intimate relationships.

of action if I have communicated my intention to waive a particular right.²¹ Others maintain that communication is not necessary; the relevant speech act merely gives us evidence.²² I will not weigh in on this dispute here. What matters is the consensus that communication is important with respect to consent and promises precisely because promises and consent modify our rights and duties.

If wrongdoing is a normative power, we should likewise expect there to be a communicative practice associated that makes its normative changes public: a communicative practice whose constitutive aim it is to facilitate shared knowledge about a wrong's normative footprint.

The need for such a communicative practice is particularly pressing since, unlike promises and consent, wrongdoing can be done unintentionally. The unintentional wrongdoer will often be in the dark about the normative upshots of her actions, since she may be unaware of having acted wrongly. Nor is it always manifest to the wronged party that she has been wronged or what she is owed as a result. So, it is in the interest of both the wrongdoer and the wronged party to have such a communicative practice in place.

4. The Epistemic Function Account

This motivates the *epistemic function account*, on which blame serves this communicative role. Our practice of blame is characterized by its aim to facilitate shared knowledge about wrongdoing's normative footprints.

Before we test the hypothesis, let me clarify it. First, to say that the function of blame is to create shared knowledge is to make a claim about the constitutive aim of the practice. It is to say that this aim is (partly) what makes our blaming practice a *blaming practice*. To say that a practice has a constitutive aim is to make a claim about the nature of the practice as a whole and not about each individual blaming interaction. Thus, I am not suggesting that each and every blaming interaction involves the intention of achieving such shared knowledge, nor that it is a necessary condition for a particular interaction to count as a blaming interaction that it be done with that aim.²³ This is exactly parallel to other claims about constitutive aims in philosophy. For example, to say that belief is a mental state which constitutively aims at knowledge is not to say that every single time an agent forms a belief, this is because she wants to know. People believe things for many, sometimes epistemically nefarious, reasons.

Second, the epistemic function account is intended as a catholic account that captures a common core of our very diverse practice. Since the practice is diverse, there may well be particular sub-types of blame that serve additional functions, over and above the epistemic one. This is compatible with the epistemic function account. What the account is committed to is that insofar as these practice is part of our *blaming practice*, it serves the epistemic function. *Qua* sub-type of blame it may serve additional functions. Thus,

²¹ See Owen [2012], chapter 7, particularly p. 171, Enoch [2011] and Dougherty [2015] for a defense of this view.

²² See Hurd [1996], Alexander [1996].

²³ See Williamson [2000], chapter 12 for a parallel discussion in the case of assertion.

second-personal, affect-laden ways of blaming may, in addition to the epistemic function, aim to instill remorse in the wrongdoer.²⁴

To test the hypothesis, we need to see whether it allows us to reverse-engineer something very much like our blaming practice, shedding light on its central features. As Craig notes in his approach to the concept of knowledge:

For it is not the idea to construct an imaginary concept, but to illuminate the one we actually have, though it be vague or even inconsistent; and to illuminate it by showing that a concept with the hypothesized role would have the characteristics closely resembling those that it exhibits itself.²⁵

I will use the features of our blaming practice highlighted in Section 2 to organize the discussion.

If blame serves to facilitate shared knowledge about the size and shape of the wrong's normative footprint, we would expect such a practice to involve communication of specific rights and duties that have been acquired or modified as a consequence of the wrong. Of course, these normative changes can be communicated in a variety of ways: they can be asserted ("You owe her an apology"), they can be communicated via presupposition in rhetorical questions ("When are you going to apologize for that?") or they can be communicated via an outright demand ("You need to apologize for that!"). In more complex cases of wrongdoing, the relevant blaming-communication may not be a one-off exchange but rather a conversation, which aims to establish just what kind of wrong was done, while also conveying to the wrongdoer how that bears on their duties.

All this chimes well with our observation that our blaming practice is articulate and that it encompasses a wide variety of speech acts. Recall:

"You *did this* on purpose!"

"How could she act in this way?"

"What were you thinking?"

"She definitely owes him."

"You owe me an apology."

"He should be ashamed of himself for doing such a thing."

"I'm so mad at him for what he did to me!"

"I will never trust you again after what you did!"

The epistemic function account allows us to see how this motley bunch of speech acts fits together as part of a unified practice. They all, implicitly or explicitly, communicate aspects of the wrong's normative footprint.

For many interpersonal practices, there is an intra-personal correlate. Chess is an interpersonal practice but I can play chess by ("against") myself. I can do this entirely in my head – no other person or physical prop required. Thus, we should not be surprised to find a private correlate to public blame. We blame others privately by thinking the things we would say "out loud" were we to blame them publicly: "How could he have done this?" Or we might imagine ourselves accusing the wrongdoer: "How could you?!" Does private blame serve an epistemic function? It may not facilitate shared knowledge; still

²⁴ Fricker [2016].

²⁵ Craig [1990], p. 2.

by thinking through the accusations and demands – articulating them to myself – I can come to a better understanding of what it is that the wrongdoer has done and owes as a result. And in this way, private blame can facilitate shared knowledge indirectly: we often articulate to ourselves first what we later articulate to others.

On the epistemic function account, blame facilitates *shared* knowledge. “Shared amongst who?” – you might ask. It’s important that the wrongdoer knows what she owes and the wronged party knows what she is entitled to. But it can also be valuable that the knowledge be shared with those close to the involved parties and even the wider moral community. In light of this, we would expect a blaming practice to encompass second-personal as well as third-personal varieties: blaming wrongdoers “to their face”, blaming them in their absence to third parties, and blaming others even when their wrongdoing has not affected us personally at all. On the epistemic function account we would thus expect blame to come in many second- and third-personal varieties.

Second-personal blame, in which the wrongdoer is blamed directly for their actions – whether by the wronged party or by a bystander – serves the epistemic interests of the wrongdoer. After all, her wrongdoing may have been inadvertent, and so she may be unaware of the shifts in the normative landscape she has caused. And even when her wrongdoing was committed knowingly, a wrongdoer may not fully appreciate the extent of the normative changes that she has brought about. It also provides an opportunity for the wrongdoer to correct misconceptions about her actions or motivations. Perhaps the wrong was justified or excused. If so, the blaming party may have to adjust her expectations about what is owed to her.

Blaming an absent wrongdoer to another party benefits the wronged party who has an interest in knowing what claim-rights she holds against the wrongdoer. Often, even when we know that we have been wronged, we may be confused about the normative upshot. What are we owed? Is it ok for us to resent the wrongdoer or should we cut them some slack? Complaining to a friend or partner about, say, your colleague’s behavior may help you figure that out. Your friend may confirm your impression, or provide some perspective, drawing your attention to mitigating consequences that, in your initial upset, you did not consider. Or they may help you see that the wrong’s normative footprint is much more extensive than you initially thought: that you are fully within your rights to withdraw your trust or to terminate the friendship.

But it’s not just wrongdoer and wronged party who benefit from knowing the normative footprint of a wrong – third parties do, too. Amongst other things, such knowledge is crucial to navigate relationships. If one of your friends betrayed another and has not made amends, this is important for you to know. It may affect how you relate to those two friends, what you mention to one about the other, whether you invite them both to your birthday party, etc. More generally, the normative footprint of someone else’s wrong may have direct implications for what *our* own obligations are.²⁶

²⁶ For example, Thompson [2001] and Butt [2007] argue that if you benefit from past injustice, this places you under certain moral obligations, including duties to compensate to the wronged parties or to their descendants.

Recall our observation was that our blaming practice encompasses both “hot” and “detached” interactions. On the epistemic function account this is to be expected. Often wrongdoing brings about a change in feeling rights. Thus, the wronged party may come to be entitled to feel angry or resentful towards the wrongdoer. And one way in which you may let someone know that you are entitled to anger for what they did is to *express* that anger to them or to others. But we can equally communicate an entitlement to anger without getting angry – coolly, levelheadedly. And in other cases there may simply not be any such entitlement in the first place: when I have been mildly inconvenienced by someone’s unintentional slip up, I may be entitled to an apology and compensation but not to resentment or indignation.

The epistemic function account accommodates “hot” blame without privileging it: it does not see it as explanatorily prior in any way.²⁷ Wrongdoing brings about plenty of other changes to the normative landscape – the duty to explain, to apologize, to compensate – and we can communicate those with detachment.

This may give rise to a worry. Philosophers often draw a distinction between judgments of blameworthiness and blame, claiming that it is one thing to judge that someone is blameworthy and to communicate that judgment, quite another thing to actually blame them.²⁸ What is supposed to be distinctive blame, as opposed to a judgment about blameworthiness, is the presence of affect: anger, resentment, or outrage. The epistemic function account, you might worry, elides this distinction.

The Epistemic Function Account is right not to distinguish between a blaming practice and a practice of making and communicating judgments of blameworthiness. This is because our moral practice lends no support to such a distinction. To illustrate this, consider the following exchanges:

Tina: You said you’d put the letter in the mail for me and you didn’t.

That really creates a huge hassle for me, now.

Peter: Wait. Are you blaming me? Or are you just saying I’m blameworthy?

Tina: ???

Now you might say that this only seems strange because Peter is asking for clarification directly in response to being accused. But it’s difficult to come up with *any* context in which trying to clarify whether someone is blaming or “merely” attributing blameworthy ever seems reasonable. Consider:

Anna: Apparently, Sam and Taylor are no longer on speaking terms.

Tess: Well, Taylor is definitely the one to blame for things turning sour between them.

Anna: Wait, are you saying you *blame* Taylor for their fallout? Or are

²⁷ In this respect, the epistemic function account differs from Fricker’s paradigm-based approach. According to Fricker, emotionally-laden blame, in which the wronged party confronts the wrongdoer “with feeling” about what they have done, is the central case of blame from which all other forms are derivative. See Fricker [2016], p. 171.

²⁸ E.g. Scanlon [2009], p. 128-29, Wallace [1994], p. 76-77, Pickard [2013a], p. 620, McGeer [2013], p. 167.

you merely saying he's *to* blame for their fallout?

Tess: ???

If there was a practice of asserting blameworthiness that is importantly distinct from our practice of blaming, we would expect that there wouldn't be anything strange – at least sometimes – in asking for clarification as to which one we are presented with. (Just as it makes sense to ask: “Wait. Are we playing rugby or American football?”) But such questions seem baffling and bizarre. The epistemic function account has a ready explanation for that fact: to tell someone that they (or someone else) is to blame for X just is a way of blaming them for X.

More generally, there is simply no gap between informing someone that they owe a reparative duty and blaming them for what they have done. To tell someone that they owe an apology for a remark – whether we do so angrily or with unflappable calm – *just is* to blame them for that remark. Again, absent any special backstory, it would be puzzling for that person to come back with the following request for clarification: “Wait. Are you *blaming* me or just telling me I need to apologize?”

There's another reason you might want to place emotional attitudes, such as anger, or resentment, at the center of our blaming practice to account for blame's characteristic *sting*. As Pickard argues:

Assessing the extent to which an account of blame captures its sting is thus the task of assessing the extent to which an account of blame captures what prototypically stings when blame is manifest.²⁹

To explain this characteristic sting, Pickard argues, we have to appeal to the fact that negative emotions are central to blame. Similarly, Fricker argues that affect-laden blame constitutes a paradigm form of blame that is explanatorily prior to all other variants of blame. This “basic second-personal interaction” is, according to Fricker one in which...

I wrong you, and in response you let me know *with feeling* that I am at fault for it. It is an essentially second-personal, I-Thou interaction.³⁰

And McGeer argues:

I doubt we can come to a satisfactory compromise between psychological realism and normative acceptability by trying to occupy an elusive middle ground in the analysis of blame, preserving its “quality of opprobrium” while stripping away its unsavory features, identified in particular with the angry punitive face of blame....

[B]lame is typically emotionally toned, manifested in a variety of expressive behaviors that will often be experienced *as* punitive by those to whom it's directed.³¹

It's true that we generally dislike being on the receiving end of a blaming interaction and that we may experience being blamed as punitive. But accommodating this insight does not require us to place negative emotions at the center of our blaming practice. We don't just care about how others feel about us, we also care about what they think. When your friend is blaming you

²⁹ Pickard [2013], p. 619.

³⁰ Fricker [2016], p. 171.

³¹ McGeer [2013], p. 166.

for having treated her badly, her anger or disappointment may provide some of the sting but so does the fact that she now thinks less of you, that you may have jeopardized the friendship you value, that your own self-image as a loyal friend is being put in question, that you will have to admit a mistake and apologize.

Broadly, we can respond in two ways when we are being blamed. We can dispute it. Or we can take responsibility. The epistemic function account sheds light on both.

Consider first making an excuse. This generally involves giving an explanation for why we acted the way we did. Not just any explanation: in making an excuse, the aim is not merely to render our course of action understandable but to put on the table additional considerations about the nature and circumstances of our wrongdoing that cast it in a different normative light – circumstances that the blaming party may either not be aware of or (we think) may not be giving sufficient weight to. But even this is not the whole story: we can offer such an explanation without making an excuse. I can say to someone “I’m so sorry I forgot to pick up the milk. I was really tired from the long day at work – but still, I should have remembered.” Or we explicitly say: “I’m sorry. I got distracted but I don’t intend this as an excuse.”³²

On the epistemic function account, blame aims to facilitate shared knowledge about the wrong’s normative footprint. The point of making an excuse then is to dispute the normative footprint’s size. We make excuses by adducing considerations about the context of our actions with the aim to convince the other party that the nature and scope of the normative changes our wrongdoing has given rise to is smaller than initially supposed. To make an excuse – ourselves or on behalf of someone else – is to *negotiate* about the size of the normative footprint.

This leaves space for our practice of offering explanation without making excuses. To do so, is to offer more information about one’s wrongdoing without thereby disputing its normative footprint. What could be the point of doing so? For one, wrongdoing may give rise to an obligation to explain why you have acted as you did. If so, to “explain yourself” is part of your reparative duties. In this case, it makes sense to flag that you are offering the explanation as a means to discharging your reparative duty, as opposed to disputing that you are under it. Second, we may offer such explanations to present our wrongdoing as an aberration – an “out of character” misstep that will not happen again. In doing so, we may not want to quibble about the normative footprint itself. Still, we may hope to influence the blaming party’s opinion of us.

To make an excuse is one way to dispute blame. Another is to offer a justification for what one did. Justifications, too, aim to dispute the size of the wrong’s normative footprint. The normative effect of a successful justification may thus be the same as that of a successful excuse. But the normative mechanism by which that effect is accomplished is different. Justifications seek to reduce the normative footprint of a wrong by disputing its moral status – that is, by disputing its wrongness. Thus, one way of arguing that one’s wrongdoing was justified is to argue that circumstances were such that the

³² Baron [2007], p. 29.

wrong constituted merely a *pro tanto* wrong, not an *all things considered* wrong: you did smack your colleague but only because he was about to be bitten by a black fly.

Rather than disputing blame, we can also accept responsibility. The epistemic function account offers us a natural way of spelling out what this involves. To take responsibility is to accept the normative footprint of one's wrong: it is to acknowledge one's wrongdoing and accept the resulting reparative and feeling duties attributed.

This allows us to make sense of a curious feature of our moral practice: sometimes it can be morally admirable to accept full blame even when one could avail oneself of a legitimate excuse. Suppose you have – once again – forgotten to buy milk on the way home and your partner is annoyed with you. As it happens, this time there were genuinely mitigating circumstances at work: you had a very upsetting conversation with a colleague just before heading home and your mind was replaying the conversation. Still, when your partner confronts you about the forgotten milk, it may be very good of you to just own the mistake and accept full responsibility, rather than pointing to your stressful circumstances.

Why is it admirable to forgo making excuses (even though there is one to be made) and simply accept the blame? We can make sense of it as follows: in such cases, what the wrongdoer in fact owes – given the circumstances and nature of their wrongdoing – is strictly speaking less than what is being attributed to her by the blaming party. When the wrongdoer forgoes excuses and chooses to accept blame, she voluntarily takes on the additional reparative duties. In this respect, taking responsibility can involve an exercise of our normative power, much in the same way as making a promise: we voluntarily place ourselves under a certain set of obligations. And just as with promises, this can be a generous, admirable thing to do – provided, of course, it is done for the right reasons, such as, for example, to spare the wronged party further distress.

The epistemic function account also predicts that some ways of responding to blame may not merely be frustrating or upsetting but wrongful. Think about the obligations that are incurred by the wrongdoer: to acknowledge her wrongdoing, to listen to the wronged party's complaints, to explain her actions, to apologize. In blaming the wrongdoer, we tell her that she has incurred some of these obligations; that these are things she owes *right now* because of what she has done.

By ignoring, or aggressively disputing, blaming the victim, or launching into a long litany of implausible excuses, the wrongdoer genuinely adds insult to injury. Not only has she, say, broken a promise, she is now also refusing to acknowledge that failing, to apologize for it, to make amends. In doing so, she is breaching her reparative duties to the wronged party – reparative duties to whose existence she had been alerted through the act of blame. This constitutes a further wrong on top of the original one, with its own distinctive normative footprint, which may include further reparative duties. This chimes with the fact that there is nothing unusual about someone's apologizing for the way they responded to having been blamed – perhaps, with reflexive defensiveness – in addition to also apologizing for the original wrong.

Let us take a step back. I have argued that the epistemic function account – the hypothesis that blame serves the overarching goal of facilitating

shared knowledge about the normative footprint of wrongdoing – allows us to “reverse-engineer” something that looks very much like *our* blaming practice. It unifies the great diversity of blaming forms and expressions. The normative footprint of a wrong can be communicated through a variety of speech acts – outright demands, rhetorical questions, assertions, complaints, or expressions of anger and resentment. Depending on who they are directed to, the speech acts can serve to enlighten the wrongdoer about the normative consequences of their action, or they can serve to help the wronged party better understand what she is owed.

Insofar as our blaming practice serves these important moral-epistemic interests, it is a practice that it is overall good for us to have. The epistemic function account thus serves to vindicate and legitimize its existence.

While the account vindicates the general existence of this practice, it need not vindicate all ways in which we engage in it. We may well engage in ways of blaming that are not conducive to furthering these epistemic aims – ways that are more likely to spark defiance and denial on the part of the wrongdoer than appreciation of the normative consequences of her wrong. There may also be ways of blaming that may mislead the wronged party herself about what she is owed or entitled to – ways that either minimize or discount what she is owed or that render a mole hill into a mountain. Insofar as these blaming-practices do not further the constitutive aim of blame, they are defective *qua* blame and we have reason to abandon or reform them. The epistemic point of blame thus provides us with a framework for critique.³³

5. Blame and Forgiveness

I want to end by considering a challenge for the epistemic function account: how does this account of blame fit with forgiveness? Forgiveness precludes blame; the two are complementary. This presents a challenge for the epistemic function account because philosophers, taking their cue from Butler, have tended to understand forgiveness in terms of reactive attitudes. To forgive involves “getting over” or “letting go” of anger, resentment, and other negative emotions. This quote from Murphy is broadly representative:

[F]orgiveness is the foreswearing of *resentment* – where resentment is a negative feeling (anger, hatred) directed toward another who has done one moral injury or harm (e.g., violated one’s rights).³⁴

Negative emotions thus are front and center in this way of thinking about forgiveness, which makes it natural to expect that they will play a similarly central role in blame. This sits poorly with the epistemic function account.

But there is an alternative approach that has recently gained some

³³ Can we give concrete examples? Pickard [2013b] argues that affect-laden, angry blame misfires when directed at patients with personality disorders in clinical settings. These ways of blaming are counterproductive in that they can trigger anger, self-harm, and disengagement from the clinical relationship that is premised on trust, rather than leading the blamed party to take responsibility for their actions. Pickard and Lacey [2015] extend this point to the treatment of criminal offenders.

³⁴ Murphy [1982], p. 504. See also Allais [2008]. See Garcia [2011] on discussion about whether the dominant view rests on good Butler exegesis.

traction and that offers a better fit: it characterizes forgiveness as a matter of releasing the wrongdoer from his “moral debt”. In what follows I aim to provide enough of a sketch of this approach to show that it is both independently attractive and makes for an appealing package with the epistemic function account – a detailed defense will have to wait for another paper.

A prominent defender of the “moral debt”-approach to forgiveness is Brandon Warmke, who explains the basic idea as follows:

...forgiving alters the norms of interaction for both the victim and the wrongdoer in certain characteristic ways: the victim relinquishes certain rights or permissions and the wrongdoer is released from certain personal obligations.³⁵

This view of forgiveness treats it as a normative power – to forgive a wrongdoer involves waiving one’s right to complain about the wrong, to call in an apology, to demand compensation and to release the wrongdoer from the correlate obligations. Forgiveness erases wrongdoing’s normative footprint: it waives reparative duties and reverses changes to feeling and relationship rights.

This view of forgiveness is independently attractive. It retains Butler’s insight that there is some connection between forgiveness and negative emotions: part of what I do when I forgive you for having wronged me is to waive my right to anger, resentment, or indignation. If I occasionally find myself feeling pangs of resentment, this is my problem: something I have to manage, get over. But it also captures other features of forgiveness. Forgiveness has consequences for how wronged party and wrongdoer interact. If I have forgiven you, I may no longer demand an apology, ask you again and again to explain yourself, expect favors, etc. And it naturally accounts for the fact that forgiveness goes along with a communicative practice. There’s a variety of speech acts that communicate the erasure of the wrong’s normative footprint: from “it’s fine”, or “don’t worry about it”, to the explicit “I hereby forgive you.

We can now tell a compelling story about the relationship between wrongdoing, blame, and forgiveness. Wrongdoing creates a normative footprint. Blame communicates it. Forgiveness erases it.

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³⁵ Warmke [2016], p. 15. See also Cornell [2017], pp. 243-46 for a discussion of parallels between forgiving and granting permission. See also Nelkin [2013].

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