1. Introduction

Imagine your friend was supposed to meet you for a drink at 6. You arrive at the pub a few minutes early, settle down with a beer, and wait…and wait…and wait. An hour later, your friend walks in with no sign of hurry or fluster. It's likely 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!"

When we blame one another for moral transgressions, we are *doing* something: we accuse the other of wrongdoing ("You did this on purpose"), demand an explanation ("How could you?","What were you thinking?"), or request an apology or compensation ("You owe me a drink!"). 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.

This suggests that there is a moral practice of blaming that we frequently engage in – a socially recognized activity structured by internal norms.[2] My aim in this paper is to investigate its nature.

While there is an expansive literature on blame, the social practice of blaming has largely flown under the radar. The received wisdom is to think of blame as a psychological phenomenon: a mental state. Consequently, a central line of philosophical inquiry has focussed on the question what kind of mental state it is: an emotion, a desire, a judgment, or some combination thereof?[3]

My project here is a different one. I focus squarely on blame as a social phenomenon: as something we do, usually with others. To investigate its nature, I draw on a methodology that has been popular in epistemology and attend to the *function* of blame. Practices usually develop in response to our needs. Their *point* is to advance some of our interests. By identifying the need in question, we can shed light on central features of a practice and how the various features hang together.[4]

This methodology is inspired by Edward Craig's approach to knowledge. 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

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[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] A similar strategy is used by Dogramaci [2012] to develop an account of our epistemic evaluative language.

of certain ideals.[5]

He argues that to investigate knowledge we attend to those needs. Starting with a conjecture about what the needs might be, we examine what a concept serving these needs would be like. The aim is to see if, in doing so, we succeed in reverse-engineering something recognizable as *our* concept of knowledge:

> We take some prima facie plausible hypothesis about what the concept of knowledge does for us, what its role in our life might be, and then ask what a concept having that role would be like, what conditions would govern its application . . . then see to what extent it matches our everyday practice with the concept of knowledge as actually found.[6]

I suggest we follow the same method for blame. We start with a hypothesis about what need of ours the practice of blame fulfills. We investigate what a practice serving this need would look like. We then check whether those match the central features of our actual blaming practice. For as Craig argues:

> …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.[7]

The proof of a hypothesis lies in the pudding: does it enable us to reverse-engineer our own blaming practice?[8]

The hypothesis I want to explore is that our blaming practice serves an *epistemic function*. It facilitates shared knowledge about how an act of wrongdoing has reshaped the normative landscape. The normative landscape is the web of rights, duties, and permissions in which we are all embedded. Wrongdoing changes the normative landscape in characteristic and systematic ways. It brings into existence reparative rights and duties, such as 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.[9]

I argue that this hypothesis gives us a coherent and systematic account of many central features of our blaming practice. At the same time, it offers a

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[5] Craig [1990], p. 3

[6] Craig [1990], p. 2-3.

[7] Craig [1990], p. 2.

[8] See Gardiner [2015] and Hannon [2019], chapter 1 for discussion of this methodology and how it differs from the project of conceptual analysis in epistemology.

[9] 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. To anticipate: Fricker suggests to give an account of blame by attending to the function of a "paradigm" blaming interaction. In contrast, I am skeptical that we can point to a blaming interaction that is explanatorily privileged to count as a "paradigm". Second, I differ on the importance and role of negative emotional responses. See also Bagley [2017].

compelling picture of how blame fits together with other, closely related, moral phenomena: making excuses, taking responsibility, and granting forgiveness.

2. Characterizing Our Blaming Practice

Before investigating what a practice is *for*, we first need a grip on what it actually *is*. So let me begin by cataloguing some general observations and platitudes about the many ways in which we blame each other.

The first thing to note is that 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.[10] 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*.

Second, our blaming practice is that blame comes in many first-, second-, and third-personal varieties. I can blame myself by apologizing, expressing remorse, or wishing I had done things differently. I can do so publicly, in conversation with someone else, or by thinking those things to myself. I can blame you, the wrongdoer, to your face, asking you to apologize, explain, make amends. I can also blame you in your absence, in a conversation with another party. I can blame you by talking to my friend. I can also blame a third party when I am a mere bystanders, personally unaffected by the wrong. We often blame by gossiping about the wrongdoer. ("Can you believe what he did to her?") All of these forms of blame are equally prevalent in our practice.

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

Fourth, blame often 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.[11]

Fifth, to blame someone is to initiate a linguistic exchange that requires a particular response. Suppose I blame you for having passed on a story I told

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[10] 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.

[11] See Pickard [2013], p. 619.

you in confidence and you fail to respond at all or start talking about something unrelated. Such a response betrays a misunderstanding – willful or not – of the kind of interaction we are engaged in. At best it will be baffling – don't you understand that I am blaming you for an indiscretion? More commonly, it will be insulting. I am entitled to feel wronged, not merely frustrated by the lack of uptake. What are appropriate responses to blame? One is to 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, such as offering justifications, and making excuses.

This is by no means an exhaustive characterization of our blaming practice. But it draws out some of its most striking features. The next step is to put on the table a hypothesis about its function.

3. The normative footprint of wrongdoing

I suggest that the function of blame is *epistemic*. Wrongdoing has a normative footprint. It alters existing rights, duties, and permissions in characteristic ways and gives rise to new rights, duties, and permissions. The function of blame is to facilitate shared knowledge about the normative footprint – that is, the normative changes that have resulted from a wrong.

This section motivates the hypothesis. I argue that we have an interest in knowing the layout of the normative landscape. It is for this reason, that there are communicative practices closely associated with the normative powers of promises and consent. Wrongdoing is similar to those normative powers in that it also systematically reshapes the normative landscape. Thus, we should expect there to be a communicative practice associated with it.

Wrongdoing leaves normative footprints

We engage in wrongdoing when we perform actions that violate moral obligations we are under or that infringe on someone's moral rights.[12]

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

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[12] 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.

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.[13] 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 this to someone in particular.[14]

Second, wrongdoing changes *feeling norms*. Social context, personal relationships, past actions – both yours and mine – affect what I may, should, or must not feel in a given situation.[15] 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 indiscretion, you may be entitled to some annoyance but not to weeks of seething fury.[16]

Wrongdoing generally 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 thus 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 *qua* colleague.

Let's call the way in which a given instance of wrongdoing gives rise to reparative rights and duties and modifies existing feeling and relationship

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[13] 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)

[14] 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].)

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

[16] 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.

norms its *normative footprint*. Normative footprints vary in shape and size: some are mere blips in the normative landscape, others profoundly reshape it. The size of any given normative footprint 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.[17] Even a forgotten chore will typically entitle the wronged party to a quick apology.

In leaving a normative footprint, wrongdoing can *create* moral relationships where there were none before. It does so not only in the sense that the wrongdoer may have irrevocably inserted herself into her victim's biography but also by creating normative ties that bind wrongdoer and wronged party together. For example, as a result of the wrongdoing, the wronged party finds herself in possession of an (unwelcome) set of claim-rights against the perpetrator.[18]

The fact that wrongdoing gives rise to systematic and characteristic changes in the normative landscape makes it similar to the normative powers of promise and consent. 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.

Normative powers are intentional activities that, by their very nature, alter the normative landscape – the matrix of rights, duties, and permissions in which we are embedded – in systematic and characteristic ways. When we change the normative landscape by promising or consenting, we do so intentionally. And we promise and consent *in order* to alter which rights and obligations are in play. Thus, Owen argues 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."[19] By promising 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 make it permissible for you to hold a pair of scissors to my forehead, waiving my right to the contrary.

In contrast, a wrongdoer does not generally intend to bring about the relevant normative consequences. Quite on the contrary, the normative consequences of her wrong are typically unwelcome to her. And wrongdoing can be both intentional and unintentional. For these reasons, we may hesitate

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[17] 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.

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

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

to classify wrongdoing as a normative power in its own right. Still, it is similar to a normative power in that it generates a distinctive normative footprint – much like promises generate promissory duties and consent generates permissions.

Normative Footprints and Communicative Practices

It is important for us to know the layout of 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.

As moral agents we care about doing the right thing and avoiding wrongdoing. We care about not wronging others and about fulfilling our moral obligations both for its own sake as well as instrumentally. The normative consequences of wrongdoing are both typically unpleasant and potentially costly: we become liable to complaint, sanctions, and compensation.

All this means that we have an interest to know the normative lay of the land. For to abide by our obligations and respect others' rights, we need to know what those obligations and rights are. Equally, to know what we can demand from others and when our rights are being infringed, we need to have a grip on what they are. Only if we have epistemic access to those normative considerations can they guide our practical deliberation and action.[20]

Second, our rights and duties are partly constitutive of our relationships with others.[21] Our friends are those in whom we may trust and on whom we may rely for help. Likewise, we owe our friends help, support, and loyalty. One of the things loyalty requires of us is to stand up for our friends when their rights are being infringed. If your friend is being treated badly by someone – a mutual acquaintance, an ex-boyfriend – this bears on your duties towards her. (For example, it may make it impermissible for you to invite said acquaintance to your birthday party.) To keep track of our friendships and what those friendships demand of us, we thus need to be able to keep track of the normative landscape and how it changes.

In light of this, we might expect that for activities that systematically modify the normative landscape, there will be associated communicative practices to make these modifications public.

Both promise 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" we render the relevant changes in obligations public. Some philosophers have argued that these speech acts do not merely serve an epistemic function: promises and consent are *essentially* communicative. Thus, they argue that I have only made a promise if I have

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[20] 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.

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

communicated my intention to place myself under the relevant obligation and that I have only consented to a course of action if I have communicated my intention to waive a particular right.[22] The communicative speech act is constitutive of making a promise or giving consent. Others maintain that communication is not necessary; the relevant speech act merely gives us evidence about the promise made or consent given.[23]

I will not weigh in on this dispute here. What matters for my purposes is the consensus that communication is important with respect to consent and promises precisely because promises and consent modify our rights and duties in characteristic ways and we have a general interest in knowing how rights and duties get modified.

As we have seen, wrongdoing also systematically reshapes the normative landscape in distinctive ways. And so, we should likewise expect there to be an associated communicative practice that makes these normative changes public: a communicative practice that aims to facilitate shared knowledge about a wrong's normative footprint.

In fact, when it comes to wrongdoing, the need for such a communicative practice is particularly pressing. That's because 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 clear to the wronged party that she's been wronged or what she is owed as a result. A communicative practice is thus in the interest of both wrongdoer and wronged party.

4. The Hypothesis: blame serves an epistemic function

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. The point of blame is to make public the changes in normative landscape brought about by wrongdoing.

Clarifying the hypothesis

Before we test the hypothesis, let me clarify it. First, to say that the function or point of blame is to facilitate shared knowledge is to make a claim about the constitutive aim of the practice *as a whole.* It is to say that this aim is (partly) what makes our blaming practice a *blaming practice.* It is not a claim 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.[24]

This is parallel to other claims about constitutive aims in philosophy. For example, to say that belief is a mental state which constitutively aims at

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

[23] See Hurd [1996], Alexander [1996].

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

knowledge is not to say that a mental state is a belief only when it is formed with the intention of knowing. People believe things for many, sometimes epistemically nefarious, reasons.

Finally, to say that our blaming practice has a constitutive function is not to say that it has only one, unique function. As Fricker observes, "[b]lame's diversity is manifest".[25] The epistemic function account is intended as a catholic account of our very diverse practice. This means that different sub-types may well 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 any practice that is part of our *blaming* practice serves the epistemic function. *Qua* sub-type of blame it may serve additional functions. Thus, for example, second-personal, affect-laden ways of blaming may, in addition to the epistemic function, aim to instill remorse in the wrongdoer.[26]

Putting the hypothesis to work
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. 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 done. Those 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!").

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, whether through outright assertion, presupposition, or expression of feelings. Moreover, in our practice these speech acts are usually only openings to further exchange, in which both parties can offer additional considerations, clarify circumstances, explain motivations that can change our perception of the wrong done or what is owed as a result of it.

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[25] Fricker [2016], p. 166.

[26] Fricker [2016].

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 could be 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. At the same time, second-personal blame 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. We would thus expect that, on the epistemic function account, a blaming speech act is not merely a communicative one-off but will often be an opening to a conversation, where both parties have opportunity to weigh in and arrive at a shared understanding of the kind of wrong done and the specific normative fall out that results from it. This fits with our actual moral practice, where a blaming communication is generally the first move in an exchange about the nature and consequences of the wrong.

Can the epistemic function account explain the existence of private blame – blame that remains unvoiced? 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?!"

Even private blame can serve an epistemic function. 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.

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 beeen 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 can help us figure that out. Our friend may confirm our impression, or provide some perspective,

drawing our attention to mitigating considerations that, in our initial upset, we did not take into account. Or she may help us see that the wrong's normative footprint is much more extensive than we initially thought: that we are fully within our rights to withdraw our 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 navigating 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.[27]

One challenge for the epistemic function might appear to be the existence and prevalence of self-directed blame. For we commonly blame not only one another but also ourselves for misdeeds. Just like other-directed blame, however, self-directed blame, too, can serve an epistemic function. By articulating – whether to myself or to another party – my misstep, I might get a better grip on its normative fallout. Or the other party can serve as a corrective. She may, for example, point out that I'm being unduly harsh on myself.

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 such an entitlement without getting angry – cooly, levelheadedly. And in other cases there may 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.

This chimes with the observation that our blaming practice encompasses both "hot" and "detached" interactions. On the epistemic function account this is to be expected. Importantly, the epistemic function account accommodates "hot" blame without privileging it: it does not see it as explanatorily prior in any way.[28] 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 emotional detachment.

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[27] 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. In this way, understanding the wrongdoing and consequent reparative duties of past actors can have direct implications for what our own present moral obligations are.

[28] 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.

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.[29] What is supposed to be distinctive of 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.
>
> 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 blameworthiness 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 you merely saying she's *to* blame for their fallout?
>
> Tess: ???

If there was a practice of attributing or 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 she (or someone else) is to blame for X just is a way of blaming her for X.

Likewise there is 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 because I have done wrong?"

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

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

thus the task of assessing the extent to which an account of blame captures what prototypically stings when blame is manifest.[30]

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.[31]

And McGeer argues that there is no way to account for blame's unpleasantness without pointing to its underlying psychology: in particular, the role of negative emotions:

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 experience *as* punitive by those to whom it's directed.[32]

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 requires 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 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

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[30] Pickard [2013], p. 619.

[31] Fricker [2016], p. 171.

[32] McGeer [2013], p. 166.

excuse."[33]

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 telling the other party something about the context of our action that will convince them that the normative fallout of our wrongdoing is smaller than initially supposed. To make an excuse – on behalf of ourselves or someone else – is to *negotiate* about the size of the normative footprint.

This leaves space for our practice of offering an explanation without making an excuse. 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 justification may thus be the same as that of an 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 wrong constituted merely a *pro tanto* wrong, not an *all things considered* wrong: you did smack your colleague on the neck 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

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[33] Baron [2007], p. 29.

nature of her 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 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 it is done for the right reasons – 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.

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 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

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

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.

6. Conclusion

We have an interest in knowing the lay of the normative land. According to the epistemic function account, the constitutive aim of our blaming practice is to facilitate shared knowledge about the normative footprint of wrongdoing. Blame thus serves our need to know how the normative landscape has changed as a result of a wrong done. I have argued that this hypothesis allows us to "reverse-engineer" central features of our own 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, or they can make those changes visible to the broader community.

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. But this is not to say that the epistemic function account gives us a blank cheque for

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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].

blaming, vindicating all the ways in which we engage in it. We may well blame in ways that are counterproductive, undercutting the aim of shared knowledge. We can blame in a way that is more likely to spark defiance and denial on the part of the wrongdoer than appreciation of the normative consequences of her wrong.[36] Insofar as these ways of engaging in our blaming practice undermine 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 does not sanction all the ways in which we blame each other – on the contrary, it provides us with a framework for critique.

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[36] Thus, 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.

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