

Human relationships are the foundation for blame.

To claim that a person is *blameworthy* for an action is to claim that the action shows something about the agent's attitudes towards others that impairs the relations that others can have with him or her.

To *blame* the other person is to judge him or her to be blameworthy and to take your relationship with him or her to be modified in a way that this judgment of impaired relations holds appropriate.

NB: Not all instances of blame need to involve a change of attitudes. They can also involve reaffirming attitudes that we already hold. (As when we already take someone to be a jerk and then they again act like one.)

Three questions:

1. What is a relationship?
2. What is an impairment of a relationship?
3. What responses are made appropriate by such an impairment?

Relationships

Relationships are constituted by attitudes and dispositions, including intentions and expectations as to how the other party will act towards you, how they will feel towards you, and which considerations they are disposed to see as reasons.

Relationships often are conditional on particular interactions – for example, my relationship with my colleagues is conditional on our sharing a Faculty, teaching at the same University, etc.

But relationships can also be conditional on the attitudes of the parties involved. For example, friendship involves:

- intending to help the other party, reciprocate, trust them, spend time with them.
- being disposed to do those things.
- being disposed to feel pleasure at their successes and grief at their losses.
- being disposed to hope for their success.

Friendships can be better or worse but at least some of these attitudes need to obtain in some degree to be meaningfully able to speak of friendship at all.

Impairments

Relationships can come to an end, when attitudes change. Friends can drift apart.

Relationships can also change because of physical injury or mental trauma. For example, my friend suffers traumatic brain injury and experiences changes in mood. This may call for a readjustment of our expectations.

These changes are compatible with the norms and standards of friendship: friendship can come to an end or change in response to external factors. They do not constitute impairments.

Impairments happen when one party holds attitudes towards the other party that are ruled out by the standards of the relationship in question. For example: my friend (“friend”) makes a cruel joke at my expense, or resents my success.

The relationship may not end as a result of this but continue in impaired form. For example, I may no longer confide in you, I may see reason to be more guarded than before, etc. These responses are made appropriate by your deficient attitude.

Blame & Moral Relationship

Friendship is grounded in particular attitudes and dispositions and it's conditional on the relevant individuals having those attitudes. But not all relationships are like that. For example, parents and children.

In the same way, relationships can be grounded simply in facts about the other party. In particular, the fact that we are beings capable of understanding and responsive to reasons. Morality requires that we hold certain attitudes towards one another simply in virtue of sharing these features:

- to not harm
- to help
- to not lie or mislead
- being disposed to be pleased when we hear things are going well for other people
- to hope that things will go well for others
- More generally: concern with the justifiability of his or her actions.

These attitudes and dispositions define the moral relationship: “the kind of mutual concern that, ideally, we all have toward other rational beings.” (p. 140)

We can now spell out what exactly blame involves:

To judge individuals to be blameworthy is to judge that their conduct shows something about them that indicates this kind of impairment of their relations with others, an impairment that makes it appropriate for others to have attitudes towards them different from those that constitute the default moral relationship.

To blame someone is actually to hold modified attitudes of this kind toward him or her.

How are those attitudes modified?

- Attitudes of resentment may become appropriate.
- It may be appropriate to change how readily we interact with the other party.
- It can change our willingness to enter into more specific relations with the other party.

What about praise? Praise is not just an appraisal but also involves a modification in moral relationship in response to someone's good action. (Think about gratitude.)

Is an Impairment of Relationship Sufficient for Blame?

Wolf argues that it's not. She presents the following example: she has repeatedly missed deadlines by her editor. Missing this deadline reveals attitudes that impair relationships with others. And the editor may respond appropriately (by adjusting timelines, etc). But it's not clear that he blames her for missing the deadline.

Another problem case: exemptions. Someone's action may betray such profound deficiency in attitudes that we suspend the kinds of attitudes that make up the moral relationship. But this may constitute an instance of exempting the other agent from moral responsibility, rather than blaming them.

Is an Impairment of Relationship Necessary for Blame?

Again, Wolf argues that it's not. Think about the blaming that goes on in a close-knit family. I may be righteously angry at my partner who, once again, forgot to take out the trash. In so doing, I blame him for it. But our relationship is not impaired.

Is Judgment Central to Blame?

According to Scanlon, a judgment of blameworthiness is central to blame. Pickard argues that it is possible to blame another party while judging that one should not blame the other party: because one judges the other party as not blameworthy or because one knows that the blame will have negative consequences.

Pickard's Argument:

P1: We can blame someone "against our better judgment".

P2: But we cannot hold a belief "against our better judgment".

And so, blame cannot be (partly) constituted by such a belief.

In support of P1: the fighting couple.

"But even in the heat of the argument, both know that in truth the blame they feel towards the other is undeserved, and not good for their relationship. The point is that this knowledge does not, in the moment, moderate their emotions and their behaviour, blame included." (p. 615)

In support of P2: general considerations about the nature of belief.

"Whether or not it is ultimately impossible, it is certainly extremely rare for people genuinely to make judgements, or hold consciously accessible, personal-level beliefs, that they know they shouldn't. This form of irrationality is special to the emotions." (p. 616)

Pickard argues that we should identify blame with an emotion.

Challenge: there is no basic emotion of blame. There's resentment, anger, indignation, disappointment, contempt. And there are lots of ways to manifest and express these emotions.

What makes an instance of such an emotion an instance of blame?

According to Pickard, it cannot be a judgment that the other person is blameworthy. Instead, she suggests it's a higher-order feeling.

"What makes a hostile, negative emotion count as blame is the accompanying, second-order attitude the blamer has to it: their feeling that they are entitled to their first-order emotions because the other deserves them."

This feeling is not a judgment. It's not causally responsive to rational considerations.

Readings:

Pickard, Hanna (2013). Irrational blame. *Analysis* 73 (4):613-626.

Scanlon, Thomas (2008). *Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, Blame*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Wolf, Susan (2011). Blame, Italian Style. In Wallace, Kumar, and Freeman (eds), *Reasons and Recognition: Essays on the Philosophy of T.M. Scanlon*. Oxford University Press.