

Introduction

Blame is a puzzling phenomenon. When we find ourselves on the attributing end of things, blame and its attendant practices can strike us as both practically invaluable and as a pervasive feature of our emotional lives. It seems to play an important role in holding one another responsible (both interpersonally and legally), properly valuing and defending the victims of wrongdoing, and perhaps even in sustaining the distinctly moral norms that compose our shared moral communities. It is the kind of thing that we would be hard-pressed to imagine giving up entirely.

On the other hand, when we find ourselves on the receiving end of blame, matters are quite different. With this perspectival shift, blame often takes on a darker character. As targets of blame, we are all familiar with the unpleasantness of even the most innocuous instances of blame. A coworker becomes a bit standoffish when you forget to refresh the office coffee pot, or a significant other issues a barely noticeable sigh when you tell them you will have to cancel tonight's dinner plans. No one wants to be blame's target, and the unpleasantness that goes along with such common, relatively minor infractions is just the tip of the iceberg. In many contexts, blame is not only unpleasant but also *hurts*.

These dual faces of blame give rise to a tension. Blame is both something we value – a surprisingly effective tool in our moral lives – and something we may also wish we could be rid of. Does the value of blame outweigh its corresponding harms? Or does the potential pain caused by blame give us reason to abandon at least some of its forms? In light of this tension, what ought we to *do* when it comes to blame and its attendant practices – is blame, even in its harmful guises, ever really *permissible*? And, even if we have reason to doubt that it is, does this entail that we should endeavor to *eliminate* blame from our lives, if not entirely, then at least insofar as we can?

These are the central questions of this book. In what follows, I take an emerging group of *blame curmudgeons* as my central opponents.¹ Many of these curmudgeons have offered powerful arguments against the permissibility of blame, and in favor of eliminating blame from our lives insofar as we are able.² These concerns highlight two important aspects of the curmudgeonly view that are often run together – *skeptical* arguments about permissibility, and *eliminativist* arguments about what we ought to do, practically speaking, in light of the plausibility of skeptical conclusions. I take a full blown defense of reactive blame to require a response to *both* aspects of the curmudgeonly position. A successful argument for the permissibility of reactive blame as we find it in our moral lives would be a shallow victory if it did not also address full blown eliminativist worries.

In what follows, I will offer a defense of reactive blame in two parts, roughly corresponding to these skeptical and eliminativist aspects of curmudgeonly concerns about blame. Part I focuses on the skeptical aspect, and the question of whether reactive blame is ever permissible as we find it in our moral lives. I call this question about the permissibility of reactive blame *the problem of blame*, and argue that this problem can ultimately be resolved.

In Chapter 1, I attempt to explicate the problem itself, making use of an analogy with another more familiar problem relevant to permissibility and harm – the problem of punishment. I argue that this comparison serves to highlight two clear desiderata for a normatively adequate account of blame, one concerning the value of blame and another concerning desert. In this chapter, I also argue that the problem of blame concerns the *reactive* varieties of blame in particular, offer some principled strategies for distinguishing between reactive and nonreactive varieties of blame, and discusses the role that the negative reactive attitudes play in characterizing the former.

In Chapter 2, I turn my focus to the desert-based desideratum for a normatively adequate account of reactive blame. I begin with an issue that

¹ I credit Christopher Franklin (2013) for coining this colorful way of describing the position of various skeptics about blame.

² Here, I offer a stipulative characterization of curmudgeonly views about blame. While there is now a wide array of descriptively skeptical views about free will, moral responsibility, and blame (see, e.g., Ishtiyaque Haji (2016), Neil Levy (2011), and Galen Strawson (1993)), curmudgeons are those who argue further for some prescriptive variety of eliminativism whereby we ought to eliminate blame from our lives insofar as we can. The paradigm curmudgeonly views that I have in mind as targets here are Pereboom (2001, 2013), Caruso (2012, 2015, 2020), and Waller (1990, 2011, 2015, 2020).

often plays a central role in obscuring whether the problem of blame can be resolved, namely how we ought to understand the concept of *basic desert*. Adjacent to the problem of blame, debates about free will and moral responsibility often bottom out in appeal to whether or not the account on offer can deliver basic desert of blame. However, little progress has been made in explicating precisely what basic desert of blame amounts to. I argue that once we have restricted our focus to reactive blame in particular, a clearer picture of basic desert emerges. I go on to offer an analysis of basic desert of reactive blame which I call *the fittingness account*, and argue that it can provide the first step in resolving the problem of blame.

In Chapter 3, I focus on the nature of reactive blame itself. In order to see how the fittingness account of basic desert might help to resolve the problem of the blame, we need a clearer picture of the reactive attitudes whose conditions of appropriateness this solution will ultimately depend on. In this chapter, I canvass three of the prominent views of reactive blame (P. F. Strawson's, R. Jay Wallace's, and David Shoemaker's) that I take to be most helpful in further explicating what meeting the desert-based desideratum for normative adequacy might look like. Here I argue for a cognitivist view of the reactive attitudes, and that we ought to restrict the scope of the relevant class of reactive attitudes at issue quite narrowly. With a sharper view of the reactive attitudes in hand, I then return to the fittingness account of basic desert and offer a first pass at an account of the right kind of reasons to reactively blame.

In Chapter 4, I return to the problem of blame, and argue that both the desert-based and value-based desiderata for a normatively adequate account of reactive blame can be met. First, adopting a *victim-centered* approach highlights the importance of blame for appropriately valuing other persons, and for protecting and defending them against actions and attitudes that devalue them.³ I then argue that reactive blame is the variety of blame that is uniquely suited to serve this function. Thus, the value-based desideratum for a normatively adequate account of reactive blame can be met. I then offer two arguments for thinking that the desert-based desideratum can be met. The first is a parity of reasons argument. Given epistemically relevant similarities between the negative reactive attitudes and a privileged subset of our moral judgments, we ought to extend the same privileged status to beliefs about the object of the propositional content of the negative reactive attitudes. The second argument appeals

³ See Franklin (2013).

to another similarity; this time between our emotional experiences (of which the negative reactive attitudes are a subset) and perceptual experiences. While there are also important *dissimilarities* between these two kinds of experience, explicating their nature in fact suggests that we have good reason to think some of our emotional experiences – those constitutive of the negative reactive attitudes in particular – provide indirect evidence for the existence of moral reasons that would render their content correct. Thus, we have reason to think that the desert-based desideratum for normatively adequate reactive blame can be met.

If the arguments in Part I are successful, then the problem of blame can be resolved. We have good reason to think that – contra blame skeptics – even reactive blame is both valuable and sometimes deserved in the basic sense. Reactive blame, therefore, is permissible. If in fact reactive blame is both valuable and deserved in the basic sense, it is not at all clear what further defense of permissibility skeptics might reasonably demand.

In Part II, however, I turn my sights on those still intent on holding onto the problem of blame. For those who reject my arguments for permissibility, would the fact that reactive blame is impermissible be sufficient to motivate not only skepticism, but full blown eliminativism? Addressing this prescriptive question requires a deeper dive into thorny issues regarding free will and moral responsibility. In particular, what are the methodological burdens for eliminativism in this domain, and how do theories of reference ultimately inform and influence disagreement about existence claims about free will and moral responsibility and in turn whether we ought to retain or abandon reactive blame?

In Chapter 5, I take up the first question. Here I explicate two methodological burdens for the kind of eliminativist views about free will and moral responsibility that might threaten a prescriptive preservationist view of reactive blame. The first burden is that eliminativists must *fix the skeptical spotlight*, and offer at least some comparative support for their claim that the error they identify for free will and moral responsibility that threatens blame cannot be resolved by abandoning some other assumption, belief, or feature of our concept that it is in tension with. But fixing this spotlight is not enough. The fact that we are stuck with an error still does not entail by itself that we ought to abandon free will, responsibility, and reactive blame. As countless historical and philosophical examples show, we often realize that our thinking about some target feature of the world has been deeply mistaken, yet rather than eliminate that thing from our ontological, conceptual, and practical frameworks we instead opt for preservation by way of *revision*. Eliminativists, therefore, must meet a

second methodological burden and explicitly motivate elimination over some variety of revisionist preservation. I call this second burden *the motivational challenge*, and examine two possible eliminativist strategies for meeting it. The first involves appeals to gains and losses intended to directly motivate elimination, and the second involves explicit appeal to some claim about the essence of free will and moral responsibility. What both of these strategies reveal is that their success ultimately depends on thorny issues about reference and essence.

In Chapter 6, I attempt to tackle these issues head-on by making explicit the way that theories of reference influence the plausibility of existence claims about free will and moral responsibility.⁴ I begin by canvassing some early work on the way various reference-fixing conventions might inform existence claims about free will offered by Mark Heller (1996) and Susan Hurley (2000). I then turn to one of the most systematic attempts to analyze the way that “free will” refers currently on offer, Shaun Nichols’ discretionary view. While Nichols’ account of how “free will” refers is already quite hospitable to eliminativism in allowing that eliminativists’ claims that free will does not exist are sometimes true, I also take up a further argument from Gregg Caruso that Nichols’ view actually suggests that eliminativists’ claims are *always* true.

If Caruso is right, then Nichols’ discretionary view would offer a clear path to motivating eliminativism. However, I argue that Caruso’s proposal for the target of our initial baptism of “free will” on a causal-historical account of reference is implausible. I then go on to argue that Nichols’ discretionary view in fact lays the groundwork for motivating full blown preservationism, due in large part to the role that our all things considered practical interests must play in fixing the appropriate reference-fixing convention for “free will.” So, while Heller and Hurley’s arguments show that traditional approaches to reference are not hospitable to at least some varieties of eliminativism, even Nichols’ elimination-friendly account fails to offer the resources to motivate eliminativism over preservationism. I conclude that eliminativists’ prospects for meeting the motivational challenge look grim.

I conclude in Chapter 7 first with a return to the kinds of concerns that often motivate attempts to defend descriptive skepticism and prescriptive eliminativism – those that highlight the high costs of reactive blame. While

⁴ Here, I restrict my focus to the way that “free will” refers in particular, as this is the only term in the constellation of free will, responsibility, and blame that has thus far received much attention in regard to its operative reference-fixing convention.

I take my arguments in earlier chapters to have defused the force of these arguments, I anticipate that these initial concerns about “the dark side” of free will, moral responsibility, and especially reactive blame will continue to linger among those inclined toward a curmudgeonly position. I also think that these concerns are well taken, and so in this final chapter, I attempt to address them head-on and examine what I take to be two of the *worst* potential costs of free will, responsibility, and blame: their apparent connection with a constellation of deeply troubling political beliefs, and concerns about harming the innocent undeservedly. I argue that neither of these concerns can successfully motivate any kind of brute pragmatic argument for eliminativism over preservationism. However, in the final section, I sketch the contours of just this kind of argument in favor of *preservationism*. Here I conclude on a more personal note, by emphasizing my own *victim-centered* interests in theorizing about free will, responsibility, and blame, and suggest that when we adopt a perspective that places the testimony of actual victims at the forefront, eliminativism appears to have a dark side of its own. There is in fact an *argument from empathy* that ought to be considered more explicitly in our attempts to adjudicate between eliminativists and preservationists, and it counts heavily in favor of preservation.

Before getting started, it is worth noting that while Part I remains focused exclusively on reactive blame, the discussion in Part II will often slide between talk of free will, moral responsibility, and blame. This is not ideal, as it allows for potential points of confusion and misunderstanding regarding whether or not claims made about one of these things apply equally to the other two. Here I admit that I am not entirely sure how best to address this concern. On the one hand, it is now commonplace in the literature to use “free will” to discuss the kind of control necessary for moral responsibility, and to assume that moral responsibility is the kind of thing that makes us deserving of moral praise and blame in the basic sense. I think, therefore, there is nothing especially dubious about sometimes sliding between these terms, at least for ease of exposition.

On the other hand, it always feels a bit philosophically reckless to be imprecise with one’s terms. Perhaps, then, a brief *mea culpa* will go some way toward defusing any potential initial ire. Here I can report that I take these concerns seriously, but have chosen to prioritize the value of taking a broad approach to these issues over the value of maximizing precision. When it comes to free will, my own thoughts are that dialectical shifts that narrow the conversation and prioritize precision can sometimes lose sight

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of the forest for the trees.⁵ Many of the most significant shifts in the literature have come when we take a step back, and think more carefully about whatever it is we are trying to get at with the term “free will.”⁶ It seems to me, for example, that the progress that has already been made since the titanic shift initiated by P. F. Strawson in understanding the ways that moral responsibility and blame seem to be what *grounds* our interest in free will in the first place suggests that a broader approach is worth pursuing. But the cost of trying to reconceptualize any particularly intractable philosophical issue is often some degree of imprecision. Perhaps others will be able to address these questions without sacrificing quite so much, but here the best I can do is acknowledge this cost and offer the reader a promissory note that I have done my best to minimize it.

⁵ I say this having myself weighed in on questions about Frankfurt-style-cases involving time travelers.

⁶ Here of course P. F. Strawson’s (1962) work comes to the forefront.

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PART I

The Permissibility of Blame

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