DISCUSSION NOTE

HOW NOT TO DEFEND MORAL BLAME

BY ANDREAS LEONHARD MENGES

How Not to Defend Moral Blame
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AT FIRST SIGHT, MORAL BLAME is an unpleasant thing. No one likes being blamed and few people like experiencing the negative emotions associated with blaming others. Therefore, some suggest a radical reform of our everyday moral life: We should replace our tendency to blame wrongdoers with a tendency to criticize them in a less harmful and more productive way.[1] The blameless fight for the good by Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi may exemplify this alternative.[2]

Many philosophers, however, think that such a reform would be bad. In this discussion note, I will focus on R. Jay Wallace's (1994, ch. 3; 2011) claim that our tendency to blame wrongdoers stands in relation to some important good such that we would necessarily lose this good if we stopped blaming each other. He argues that blaming wrongdoers expresses one's commitment to morality in a special way and that no other response could serve this function. I will show that there are forms of moral sadness in our psychological repertoire that differ from blame but have the same expressive dimension that blame is supposed to have. Thus, I will suggest that the question of whether we should try to get rid of our tendency to blame is still open.

1. Wallace on the Value of Blame

According to a widely accepted depiction, blaming a person consists in experiencing certain emotions. To blame an agent for wronging me is to experience resentment; to blame her for wronging someone else is to experience indignation.[3] Why are these emotions valuable? Here's Wallace's first answer:

> In expressing these emotions, then, we are … demonstrating our commitment to certain moral standards, as regulative of social life. Once this point is grasped, blame … can be seen to have a positive, perhaps irreplaceable contribution to make to the constitution and maintenance of moral communities: by giving voice to the reactive emotions, these responses help to articulate, and thereby to affirm and deepen, our commitment to a set of common moral obligations (Wallace 1994: 69).

Note first that Wallace defends the expression of the blame emotions – that is, public blame. His thesis is that public blame is valuable because it helps to constitute a moral community by expressing our commitment to

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[1] The claim is, of course, that we should replace our tendency to blame wrongdoers *for their blameworthy behavior* with some alternative. I will assume this qualification throughout the paper.

[2] Watson (1987) describes Gandhi and King as historical figures who confronted their oppressors without blaming them in an objectionable way.

[3] According to this account, self-blame consists of experiencing guilt. I will not address self-blame here.

basic moral norms. But a similar point applies to private blame – that is, the mere experience of the blame emotions. A person who feels resentment as a response to a wrongdoing realizes that and how much she cares about the violated norm, which can help to deepen her commitment to morality.[4]

This defense fails because there are other emotions that can play this positive role. When we are sad about the fact that someone has violated a moral norm, our emotional experience reflects that we care about this norm. We experience her morally objectionable behavior as a loss that can deepen our commitment to morality. Thus, blame is not necessary for reflecting and deepening our commitment to morality because sadness can do the same thing. This is what I call the *sadness challenge*.[5] According to the sadness challenge, the tendency to blame may be an effective means of achieving some good (here: a moral community), but it is not necessary for achieving that good.

Recently, Wallace (2011) responded to this line of argument by contending that the blame emotions are *more fitting* responses to moral wrongdoings than sadness. He argues that they have a representational content that picks out moral wrongs in a way that sadness cannot. Morality is, for Wallace, the system of norms that prescribes how people should behave toward each other in order to make valuable relationships possible, which are the central moral value. According to him, it is part of experiencing resentment and indignation to think that another person behaved in a way that is incompatible with this value. And this is obviously not true for sadness, since I can be sad about the breakdown of my clock.[6]

Wallace concludes that the blame emotions have a structure that "uniquely answers" (2011: 369) the relational structure of moral values and norms: "In this way, the tendency to blame can be seen to be a peculiarly appropriate way of taking to heart the values around which morality is structured" (2011: 369). If we get rid of this tendency, we lose, according to Wallace, this special way of caring about morality. In what follows, I will argue that this is false.

2. Refining the Sadness Challenge

According to most authors, resentment and indignation are cognitively elaborated forms of anger.[7] In experiencing anger, we represent that someone has insulted or threatened us or another person. In experiencing the blame emotions, we represent that the wrongdoer has insulted or threatened someone in a morally relevant way. Roughly, resentment is anger about the perceived fact that someone has morally wronged me, and indignation is anger about the perceived fact that someone has

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[4] For similar accounts, see McKenna (2012, ch. 7) and McGeer (2013).

[5] Pereboom (2007; 2009) and Scanlon (2008, ch. 4) suggest that sadness can fulfill some of the functions of resentment and indignation.

[6] See Franklin (2013) for a similar view.

[7] See for example Pereboom (2007; 2013), Wolf (2011), McKenna (2012, ch. 3) and McGeer (2013).

morally wronged someone else.

The blame critic can now argue that sadness should be construed as the analogue to anger. Thus, the alternative to the blame emotions must be forms of sadness that are cognitively shaped in the way in which resentment and indignation are cognitively shaped forms of anger. Let me suggest names for cognitive elaborations of sadness that are analogous to resentment and indignation. Call the first *self-wronged sadness*. Part of experiencing it is the representation that there is a loss because someone has wronged me. Call the second *other-wronged sadness*, part of which is the representation that there is a loss because someone has wronged someone else.

The refined sadness challenge is the thesis that self- and other-wronged sadness can serve many of the valuable functions that resentment and indignation serve, even though they differ significantly from them. They differ in content because they represent the wrongdoing in terms of a loss, instead of an insult or threat, and they differ in phenomenology because sadness feels different from anger.

Let us see how this bears on Wallace's defense of blame. What makes resentment and indignation peculiarly appropriate responses to wrongdoings is, according to him, their relational structure. A moral norm tells us how to behave toward people in order to make valuable relationships possible. Part of experiencing resentment is, according to Wallace, the representation that a person did not behave that way toward me. But self-wronged sadness can have the same relational structure. Assuming a Wallaceian account of moral wrongdoing, self-wronged sadness involves the representation that another person behaved in a way toward me that is incompatible with a valuable relationship. Self-wronged sadness is the kind of sadness befitting the victim of a moral wrongdoing, like resentment is the kind of anger befitting the victim of a moral wrongdoing. And the same applies to other-wronged sadness and indignation. Therefore, self- and other-wronged sadness are as fitting responses to moral wrongdoings as are the blame emotions.

3. Defending the Refined Sadness Challenge

The blame defender will doubt that self- and other-wronged sadness can adequately represent moral wrongdoings and capture their special significance. In this section I will defend the blame critic's position against two groups of objections.

The first group can be summarized as the claim that there is no self- and other-wronged sadness in our psychological repertoire. This objection can take different forms. One is that we simply do not feel these kinds of sadness. But consider statements like, "It makes me sad that people do not give to the needy in the Third World." If the sentence is true, the speaker is naturally interpreted as being sad about the fact that people do not do what morality requires them to do for other people; this is analogous to indignation. Now think about more personal relationships. When a person whom I considered to be my friend reveals

to others what I shared with her in confidence, I feel sad.[8] One thing I am sad about is that she wronged me; this is analogous to resentment. It seems obvious that we sometimes feel these emotions.

Some might also consider it problematic that there are no English words for the kinds of sadness I am referring to. But consider the case of schadenfreude. It is very likely that the English-speaking world felt schadenfreude before it adopted the word from German. Similarly, we feel self- and other-wronged sadness even if we do not have a word for it.

Another form of the objection that we do not have self- and other-wronged sadness in our repertoire is this: The blame critic has identified moral *objects* of sadness, but it does not seem to follow that there are corresponding *kinds* of moral sadness. You might, for example, be sad about the poor showing of your nation's athletes in the Olympics. But does this show that there is some kind of sports-loss sadness?[9] Similarly, does the fact that one can be sad about wrongdoings show that there is self- and other-wronged sadness in the same sense in which there is resentment and indignation?

Answering this question requires a theory about how cognitively elaborated emotions relate to their corresponding basic emotions. This relation is a matter of dispute because it is unclear how exactly schadenfreude relates to joy and how exactly indignation relates to anger. Here, we can also ask whether these emotions are kinds of emotions over and above joy and anger with specific objects.

There is at least one prominent position in the philosophy of emotions that suggests that self- and other-wronged sadness are kinds of emotions in the same sense in which resentment and indignation are kinds of emotions.[10] According to this picture, basic emotions such as anger and sadness are different emotions and have different objects by virtue of being reliably caused by different elicitors. Anger represents an insult or threat partly because it is reliably elicited by insults and threats; sadness represents a loss partly because it is reliably elicited by losses. And these different causal stories partly explain why anger and sadness are different emotions.

Here, we are primarily interested in cognitively elaborated emotions. According to the theory under discussion, an elaborated emotion like indignation represents its object partly because it is reliably caused by a specific subset of the typical elicitors of the corresponding basic emotion – that is, anger. And the same story about reliable causes partly explains why the elaborated emotion is an emotion on its own and not just the basic emotion with a certain object. Thus, indignation is reliably caused by specific kinds of threats and insults – namely by a person's insulting or threatening another person in a morally relevant way. And something similar is true for other-wronged sadness: It is reliably caused by specific kinds of losses – namely by a person's causing another person a loss in a morally relevant way. According to this theory of emotions, such a story

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[8] This example is inspired by Scanlon (2008, ch. 4).

[9] I thank an anonymous referee for suggesting this example.

[10] For the following, see Prinz (2004, chs. 3 and 4; 2007, ch. 2).

about reliable causes partly explains the representational content of other-wronged sadness and the fact that it is an emotion on its own.

Now one could object that wrongdoings do not reliably cause sadness such that there is no self- and other-wronged sadness. But, as I have said above, this is just implausible. We do feel sad when a friend wrongs us and we do feel sad when others do not give to the needy even though they could afford it. Therefore, this theory of emotions suggests that self- and other-wronged sadness, resentment and indignation are all in the same sense kinds of emotions.

The second group of objections against the refined sadness challenge that I will discuss can be summarized as the claim that self- and other-wronged sadness do not have a dimension of condemnation. But condemnation seems to be part of what makes the blame emotions especially fitting responses to wrongdoings.[11]

Note that we can have two different things in mind when we talk about condemnation. First, condemnation could be some negative moral evaluation. Where exactly does this dimension of condemnation come from in resentment and indignation? It does not come from merely experiencing anger because a father can be angry that his baby cries all night without morally evaluating her crying. More plausibly, this dimension of condemnation comes from the cognitive element that makes for the difference between mere anger and the blame emotions: In experiencing resentment and indignation, we necessarily represent that a moral norm that we accept has been violated. But the same is true for self- and other-wronged sadness. Therefore, these kinds of sadness plausibly do have the morally evaluative dimension of condemnation.

Second, condemnation can be thought of as something more than a negative evaluation. When you are angry, resentful or indignant, you want to teach the person you are angry at a lesson, or make him feel bad about what she or he has done.[12] Let me call this the confrontational dimension of blame. Self- and other-wronged sadness do not have this confrontational dimension, and this may explain why these kinds of sadness feel so different from the blame emotions. Now the blame defender might claim that this is an important and valuable difference between the blame emotions and these kinds of sadness such that blame is defended.

This would be too hasty for two reasons. First, the confrontational dimension is not necessarily connected with the blame emotions. One can desire to teach a person a lesson and one can want her to feel bad about what she has done without being angry at her. One can even have the desire to confront a person *as if* one were angry at her and do it without, in fact, being angry at her. Thus, it is possible to condemn a wrongdoer in this more-than-evaluative sense without blaming her. The blame critic could, therefore, reformulate her position as the claim that in most cases one can replace the blame emotions with self- or other-wronged sadness, and in some cases one needs to add the desire to teach

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[11] Franklin (2013) stresses blame's dimension of condemnation.
[12] I am grateful to an anonymous referee for this formulation.

the wrongdoer a lesson or the desire that she feel bad about what she did. Since this is possible without getting angry, the blame critic could still hold to her main point that we can stop blaming wrongdoers without necessarily losing anything valuable.

But there is a second and, I think, more important reason why the blame critic should not accept the claim that blame is valuable because of its confrontational dimension. The critic's starting point is that blame seems to be a harmful and unproductive response to moral wrongdoings. And it is quite plausible that the confrontational dimension of blame is one of those features that makes blame harmful and unproductive. It motivates blamers to confront wrongdoers in a harsh and aggressive way that often provokes responses of deviance instead of understanding and change for the good. Those who believe that Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi are models for a better way of responding to wrongdoings are likely to reject blame in part because of its confrontational dimension. They believe that one should fight for the right and the good in a vigorous but peaceful way. Therefore, merely claiming that blame's confrontational dimension is valuable is not an acceptable reply to the blame critic's challenge.

To sum up, self- and other-wronged sadness are part of our psychological repertoire and they do have the dimension of condemnation that we obviously want a response to wrongdoings to have. Thus, I suggest that self- and other-wronged sadness can adequately represent wrongdoings and capture their special significance.

4. Conclusion

I argued that Wallace cannot adequately counter the refined sadness challenge. One thing that is, plausibly, valuable about blame is that the blaming person authentically reflects her commitment to morality. But it is not necessary to blame a wrongdoer in order to do so. Certain forms of moral sadness can serve the same function. I defended the thesis that forms of sadness can play many of the valuable roles that blame is supposed to play against important objections. Even though I cannot argue for this here, I believe that the refined sadness challenge generalizes to different attempts to defend moral blame. Therefore, I believe that it is possible to replace our tendency to blame with a non-blaming alternative without necessarily losing anything valuable, and that the question of whether we should try to do so is still open.[13]

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