

Toward a Functionalist Account of Blame

Ryan Hubbard

Gulf Coast State College

In this paper, I argue that blame ought to be understood as a function rather than a mental state or an activity. Any plausible account of blame must satisfy two desiderata. First, it must be consistent with the intension of blame. In other words, it must get the ordinary connotations of *blame* right. I call this the *intensional desideratum*. Second, the account must be consistent with the set of instances of what we would ordinarily identify as blaming. I call this the *extensional desideratum*.¹ After discussing these desiderata in more detail, I offer an overview of different accounts of blame's nature. I then argue that non-functionalist accounts of blame fail to meet one or both desiderata. Next, I argue that functionalist accounts are better equipped to adequately meet these desiderata. It follows that we ought to explain the nature of blame in terms of its function rather than mental states or activities that putatively constitute blame.

THE DESIDERATA

Any philosophical theory that attempts to explain the nature of some phenomenon ought to take care not to misrepresent that phenomenon in its explanation. Otherwise, the theory misses its mark and is inadequate. To avoid this mistake, the account needs to be consistent with the intension of the concept representing the phenomenon. Simply put, the intension of some concept is the ordinary connotation of that concept. Specifically, the intension of C is the set of platitudes of C. By *platitudes* I mean judgments and inferences language users are disposed to make regarding C that would indicate a mastery over the use of the term C (Smith 30). For example, a platitude of praise is that it's an appropriate response to someone having done something admirable.

Like any concept, many platitudes constitute blame's intension. Much of the debate about the nature of blame is concerned with identifying the platitudes that distinguish blame from other forms of criticism. Identifying any set of platitudes is rarely an uncontroversial matter. Nevertheless, most believe that blame involves something psychological and phenomenological—there is something about what it is like to blame. This suggests that to avoid misrepresenting blame, an account ought to be psychologically and phenomenologically accurate (McGeer 163). Thus we are led toward an important platitude of blame. When we reflect on the psychological and phenomenological character of blame, we find that it is often experienced alongside a negative emotion that runs along the spectrum of anger, such as indignation or resentment. For an account of blame to be adequate, then, it must be consistent with the following platitude: *Blame paradigmatically involves a negative emotion along the spectrum of anger*. If an account of blame is not consistent with this platitude, then it misrepresents what blame is and consequently fails to meet the intensional desideratum.²

A plausible account of blame also needs to meet what I call the *extensional desideratum*. The extension of a concept is the set of things to which the concept applies. The extension of blame, then, is the set of instances that would count as blaming. Evaluating the plausibility of an account of blame often involves assessing whether the account applies to cases that we would intuitively call blaming. If a theory of blame cannot explain why a clear instance of blame counts as blame, then the theory may be inadequate. For example, if a theory states that X counts as blame if it meets necessary and sufficient conditions C, but we identify an intuitive case of blame that doesn't meet C, then the theory may be inadequate. Perhaps, it is not feasible to identify necessary and sufficient conditions for something to count as blame (Fricker). If so, then the concept *blame* may be like the concept *game*. I do not take a stand on this issue here, so I leave this possibility open. Rather, it will suit my purposes to propose that an account of blame is plausible to the extent that the account applies to the set of instances we would intuitively call blaming. This is to say an account of blame is adequate to the degree that it meets the extensional desideratum.

CONSTITUTIVE ACCOUNTS OF BLAME

Most accounts of blame attempt to identify the essence of blame with a mental state (or states) and an activity. I call these *constitutive accounts*, since they attempt to identify some content—a mental state and activity—that constitute blame. For example, some accounts claim that blame consists in belief in which one judges that a person did something bad. Functionalist approaches, however, attempt to identify the essence of blame with what it *aims to do* rather than what it is constituted by. These approaches try to explain the nature of blame in terms of its function rather than some mental state(s) and activity.

Coates and Tognazzini have categorized four general accounts of blame: cognitive, conative, Strawsonian, and functional. The first three fall under what I'm calling constitutive accounts. In the rest of this section I will argue that these three are unable to adequately meet the intensional and extensional desiderata.

Cognitive accounts emphasize the evaluative dimension of blame. Generally speaking, according to these accounts, blaming consists in a belief in which we judge that a person acted wrongly or acted in a way that displays some kind of ethical fault (Zimmerman). Accordingly, cognitive accounts see blame as essentially a private matter. Purely cognitive accounts of blame have generally fallen out of favor for a number of reasons. For my purposes, it should be fairly clear that cognitive accounts do not meet the intensional desideratum since they are not consistent with the platitude that blame paradigmatically involves having a negative emotion along the spectrum of anger. While these accounts can admit that blaming may often coincide with experiencing anger or resentment, they do not admit that blaming ever *involves* these emotions. Since experiencing negative emotions is merely incidental to blame according to cognitive accounts, they are not able to meet the intensional desideratum.

Conative accounts claim that blame is at least partly constituted by mental states involving desires, dispositions, expectations, or intentions. George Sher has developed an account that emphasizes what he takes to be the conative dimension of blame.³ According to Sher, blame consists of two things: (A) a set of dispositions to have certain attitudinal and behavioral response to (B) a belief that an agent acted badly or has a bad character and a desire that the agent had not acted badly or not have a bad character. This account is consistent with the intensional desideratum, since the belief-desire pair in (B) can show why it is appropriate to be disposed to respond with negative emotions such as anger or resentment.

Sher's account, however, doesn't fare as well with meeting the extensional desideratum. Recall that an account of blame meets this desideratum to the extent that it applies to all instances of what we would intuitively call blame. Sher's account has difficulty fulfilling this desideratum because there are instances of blaming in which the blamer fails to have the belief-desire pair cited in (B) above. Consider an example given by Angela Smith of a politician who is pleased to blame his political opponent for a scandal (Smith 35). In such cases the politician would probably not desire that his opponent not have acted badly, since his opponent acting badly is to his political advantage. Sher's theory, then, is unable to account for the full extension of blame.

According to a widely accepted view stemming from P. F. Strawson, blame consists in experiencing a negative reactive emotion, such as indignation or resentment, directed toward the person being blamed. Strawsonian accounts are appealing, in part, because their emphasis on reactive emotions captures the interpersonal character of blame. As Strawson puts it, reactive emotions aim to express "an expectation of, and demand for, the manifestation of a certain degree

of good will” (Strawson 13). Strawsonian accounts are also appealing because they get the psychological and phenomenological character of blame right. Recall that the intensional desideratum states that blame paradigmatically involves experiencing a negative emotion along the spectrum of anger. Strawsonian accounts clearly fulfill this desideratum since they claim that blame is constituted by having a negative reactive emotion.

Like conative accounts, however, Strawsonian accounts have difficulty adequately fulfilling the extensional desideratum. There are, I believe, instances of blaming in which negative reactive emotions such as resentment or indignation are not felt. Consider these examples cited by Sher: we often blame historical figures of the distant past or complete strangers we read about in the newspaper for performing wrongful actions without feeling resentment or indignation toward them. As Sher notes, “We simply do not have the emotional resources to muster even a twinge of hostility toward each of the innumerable miscreants, scoundrels, and thugs – many of them long dead – whom we blame for what we know to be their bad behavior or bad character” (Scher, *In Praise of Blame* 89). Like conative accounts, Strawsonian theories are also unable to account for the full extension of blame. If an alternate theory is able to come closer to accounting for the full extension of blame, while meeting the intensional desideratum, then this theory is preferable. Next, I argue that functionalist theories are equipped to accomplish this.

FUNCTIONALIST ACCOUNTS OF BLAME

We have seen that a problem with two prominent constitutive accounts of blame—conative and Strawsonian—is that there are cases of blame in which the mental states they claim to constitute blame are not present. And I’ve suggested that this renders them extensionally inadequate in light of a better alternative—functionalist accounts. According to functionalist accounts, blame ought to be identified with the purpose or function it serves, rather than a mental state or activity that constitutes it. As an analogy, consider how we might explain the nature or the essence of the type of thing we call a radio. One approach is to explain the nature of *radio* in terms of its constitutive parts and what it does. This may prove problematic, however, since not all radios have the same arrangement of parts and many defective radios do not do what they are supposed to. Another approach is to identify the nature of *radio* with the activity *it is supposed to perform*, that is, its function. It is important to distinguish activity from function. While X may perform an activity to fulfill its function, the function and the activity are distinct. A heart functions to circulate blood throughout the body. However, there are some defective hearts that have this function even though they fail to undertake this activity. Similarly, there are defective radios that function to receive and emit sound from radio waves, even though they are not able to perform this function. The upshot is that there is a distinction between something having a function and

something performing that function.

Recall that Strawsonian approaches meet the intensional desideratum head on, but at the cost of falling short of the extensional desideratum. Functionalist accounts can meet this desideratum indirectly by emphasizing the function of blame rather than any particular mental state that constitutes blame. This enables functionalist accounts to accommodate a variety of mental states through which blame's function is exercised. A functionalist account would be able to meet the intensional desideratum by showing how, paradigmatically, the function of blame is performed through having an emotion along the spectrum of anger while maintaining that blame's function is not necessarily exercised through such an emotion. For example, Angela Smith's account states that blame ought to be identified with protest (Smith 29). On a functionalist reading of this account, we identify blame with its function to protest the blamee's conduct. This is consistent with claiming that moral protest is paradigmatically exercised through negative emotions such as indignation or resentment. Functionalist accounts, then, are well equipped to meet the intensional desideratum.

Criticisms of particular theories of blame often implicitly invoke the extensional desideratum by attempting to give a counterexample to the theory under consideration. For example, Angela Smith's case in which blame lacks the desire that an agent had not acted badly provides an objection to Sher's account of blame. Constitutive accounts tend to be problematic because they are plagued by counterexamples. Functionalist accounts can avoid this problem.

As we saw, functionalist accounts can accommodate a variety of mental states that could serve as blame's function. A functionalist account, then, could apply to all instances of what we would intuitively count as blame. Each instance having some specific function *F* makes it the case that it counts as blame, even if instances involve different mental states.

That something *x* has some function *F* means that it is supposed to perform some task—it has a particular purpose. Activity and function are conceptually tied. Accordingly, functionalist accounts of blame emphasize the activity that blame is supposed to undertake to achieve a purpose. As I noted above, however, it is important to distinguish the function of a thing from its activity. If functionalist accounts were to identify the nature of blame with some activity, these accounts would run into the same problem constitutive accounts face with meeting the extensional desideratum: for every proposed activity that blame is identified with, one could cite a clear case of blame in which this activity is not performed. However, functionalist accounts state that *X* counts as blame if and only if it has some function *F*. This is consistent with the claim that there are instances that count as blame in which the activity of carrying out *F* is not undertaken. In other words, blame having some function *F* doesn't require that all instances of blame carry out *F*.

Speech-acts can serve as a helpful analogy. Take declarations. A declaration

is a kind of speech-act that functions to make it the case whatever is being declared. Sam's utterance, "I now pronounce you husband and wife," is a declaration that functions to make it the case that two people are married. As it happens, however, Sam has no legal authority to perform a marriage. Thus, even though Sam utters a declaration, this particular occurrence of declaring is unable to perform the function of making it the case what is being declared. Sam's declaration falls flat. This suggests that there are declarations that occur, which do not perform their function even though they are identified in terms of their function.

Functionalism accounts of blame can be similarly understood. These accounts state that blame—as a kind of thing—ought to be identified with and explained in terms of some function F. Accordingly, all instances of blame would have this function while not necessarily performing F just as all instances of uttering a declaration have a declarative function while not necessarily carrying it out.

Since functionalism accounts can accommodate (1) a variety of mental states through which blame performs its function and (2) the fact that some instances of blame do not perform its function, these accounts can apply to all instances we would intuitively count as blame. Since this is not the case for constitutive accounts, functionalism accounts are better able to meet the extensional desideratum.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I argue that blame ought to be identified with its function rather than mental states and activity that constitute it. I argue this by showing that the constitutive accounts of blame – cognitive, conative, and Strawsonian – are unable to satisfy both desiderata that any account of blame ought to meet. I then show that functionalism accounts are better suited to meet both desiderata. It follows that functionalism accounts of blame's nature are more promising than constitutive accounts.

NOTES

1. I draw this use of extensional and intensional conditions from Southwood (8-9).
2. There are, of course, other important platitudes that an account of blame needs to be consistent with and explain. For example, a theory of blame must also account for the unique significance of blame as a form of criticism. For my purposes, I suggest that in order for a theory of blame to account for blame's intention, it is necessary for the theory to be consistent with the single platitude described above. If a theory fails on this account, then that is all I need to show that it does not meet the intensional desideratum.
3. T. M. Scanlon has also developed what can be considered a conative account. For Scanlon, blame consists in the modification of one's relationship—which includes expectations and intentions – to the person who is judged blameworthy (Scanlon 128). Sher objects, claiming that Scanlon is unable to account for blaming people with whom we have

no relationship (Scher, “Wrongdoing and Relationships”). This suggests that Scanlon’s account has difficulty meeting the extensional desideratum.

WORKS CITED

- Coates, D. Justin and Neal A. Tognazzini “The Contours of Blame,” in *Blame: It’s Nature and Norms*, edited by D. Justin Coates and Neal A. Tognazzini, Oxford UP, 2013, pp. 3-26.
- McGeer, Victoria, “Civilizing Blame,” in *Blame: It’s Nature and Norms* edited by D. Justin Coates and Neal A. Tognazzini, Oxford UP, 2013, pp. 162-188.
- Miranda Fricker, “What’s the Point of Blame? A Paradigm Based Explanation,” *Nous* 50.1 (2016): 165- 183
- Scanlon, Tim, *Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, Blame*, Harvard UP, 2008.
- Sher, George, “Wrongdoing and Relationships: The Problem of the Stranger,” in *Blame: It’s Nature and Norms* edited D Justin Coates and Neal A Tognazzini, Oxford UP, 2013, 49-65.
- , *In Praise of Blame*, Oxford UP, 2006.
- Smith, Michael, *The Moral Problem*, Bllackwell, 1994.
- Smith, Angela, “Moral Blame and Moral Protest” in *Blame: It’s Nature and Norms* ed. D. Justin Coates and Neal A. Tognazzini, Oxford UP, 2013, 27-48.
- Southwood, Nicholas, *Contractualism and the Foundations of Morality*, Oxford UP, 2010.
- Strawson, P.F., “Freedom and Resentment,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48 (1962): 1-25
- Zimmerman, Michael, *An Essay on Moral Responsibility*, Rowman and Littlefield, 1988.

