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Perspectivalism and Blaming

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PERSPECTIVALISM

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ABSTRACT

Using the combination of two views of blame from T. M. Scanlon and J. J. C. Smart, I will support my thesis *perspectivalism*, that blame from the perspective of a third party is fundamentally different than blame from the perspective of an injured party. By presenting examples that illustrate common beliefs concerning hypocrites and cases involving moral luck, I will give reasons as to why perspectivalism has strong explanatory value, and also provide motivation for considering blame as a complex topic requiring a pluralist theory. In doing this, I will show that two statements about hypocrites are true if we accept perspectivalism. First, as many philosophers have noted, hypocrites lose their standing to blame from a third party perspective. Second, with my new understanding of blaming as the injured party, I will conclude that hypocrites retain their standing to blame in the injured perspective in virtue of their relationship to the wrong doing. In the case of the moral luck examples, I will illustrate the complexity that comes from having two types of blame. Ultimately, I will argue that a correct general theory of blame must consider the position of the blamer relative to an instance of wrongdoing, using the explanatory value of the hypocrite cases, without taking a stand on a specific theory of blame.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a grocery store owner watching in surprise and shock as a thief steals a can of soup and exits the store. It seems right to say that the owner has both the epistemic justification for their belief that they have been wronged, and also the moral standing to blame the thief for that wrong.

Now imagine a second scenario, in which an individual is walking down the street and is carelessly knocked to the ground. To that individual's surprise, their bag has gone missing, along with the person who knocked them down. Again, it seems right to say that the individual on the street has both the epistemic justification for their belief that they have been wronged, and the moral standing to blame the thief for wronging them.

But what if I told you that the thief from the first scenario is the victim in the second? Assuming that they had no permissible excuse for their actions in the initial instance, would it not seem absurd for them to feel anger about being a victim of theft when they were, just the other day, stealing from the grocery store? By becoming upset when their bag was stolen, the thief in the original scenario fits the description of a "garden-variety hypocrite," an individual who "unrepentantly engages in the very activity they're blaming others for" (Coates 2016, 19). We tend to respond to these types of blamers with the comments like "Look who's talking," because of the perceived inconsistency that exists between their actions and expressed blame.

This claim against the hypocrite's standing to blame is a common view shared by many philosophers; for more examples, see Dworkin 2000, Cohen 2012, Wallace 2011.

Perspectivalism
That blame from the perspective of a third party is fundamentally different than blame from the perspective of an injured party.

In spite of the intuitiveness of this response, in this paper I will argue that the common views on hypocrisy correctly interpret the moral standing of the hypocrite as a third party blamer, but fail to recognize the key difference between blaming from a third party perspective and blaming from the perspective of an injured party. I will argue that there is a morally relevant feature of being a member of an injured party that allows the standing of even a hypocritical victim to remain intact; that where an individual is placed relative to an instance of wrongdoing makes a difference to whether their own faults are relevant to their standing to blame. I shall refer to this view as *perspectivalism*.

1. OUR TWO TYPES OF BLAME

The topic of this paper hinges on the claim that blame from the perspective of a person who is not directly—or is indirectly—harmed in the given circumstances, or *third party blamer*, differs crucially from blame that comes from the perspective of a person who has been directly wronged, known as *injured party blamer*. The motivation for this

thesis came from conflicting intuitions that T.M Scanlon and J. J. C. Smart both posit correct theories of blame. For the purpose of my conclusion, I will illustrate how they can be combined to support the theory of perspectivalism. I do not argue in favor of either of Smart's or Scanlon's views; for the sake of this paper I will assume they are correct, as my goal is to show that, for the case of the hypocrite, perspectivalism has both consistency and explanatory power, and shows complexity in the cases involving moral luck.

First, Smart's cognitive theory of blame boils down to placing, not necessarily emotionally, an evaluation that the performer of some action has done something morally wrong in performing said action, and implies they're responsible for the action. This is not to say that emotions do not accompany third party blame, but rather that this type of blame is sufficient in and of itself, without considering emotional aspects. Similar to how an art piece is graded as being good or bad, to blame someone is to place a negative evaluation on that person's action. But unlike the grading of art, the latter type of evaluation implies the individual has a moral responsibility for their action.

For Scanlon,

...to claim that a person is blameworthy for an action is to claim that that action shows something about the agent's attitudes toward others that impairs the relations that others can have with him or her. To blame a 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 to be appropriate. (Scanlon 2008, 125)

Smart argues that blame is a dispassionate and clearheaded response to action, but he acknowledges that most people do not praise or blame in this dispassionate way. Utilizing Scanlon's view of blame, we can find motivations as to why it's not usual to blame dispassionately. As Scanlon suggests, relationships are "constituted by certain attitudes and dispositions" among which "intentions and expectations about how the parties will act toward one another" are most important (Scanlon 2008, 131). To impair the relationship is to damage the expectations of how each party will interact with each other. To blame, then, is to register that damage has been done to the relationship and the subsequent need for modification.

Now, here we see that Scanlon's objection to Smart's understanding of blame is that the latter failed to recognize the sense of force behind blame, or the specific damage done to the injured party, which comes from the issue of treating all blame as being identical. However, if we take perspectivalism to be true, there is no need to require that third party blaming have the same sense of force as does injured party blaming. This means we could grant that third party blaming is, at a minimum, a dispassionate evaluation of wrongdoing that

implies responsibility, while acknowledging that direct harm done to an injured party allows for reactionary blame, which takes into account Scanlon's concept of the force of blame.

Going forward, I will rely on Smart's theory to represent third party blame, and Scanlon's view to represent injured party blame, which will demonstrate the consistency and explanatory power that perspectivalism has in the case of the hypocrite.

2. HYPOCRITICAL BLAME

Imagine the thief who stole the can of soup is later arrested for stealing jewels from a jewelry store, and is sent to prison. Once there, the thief finds that a few personal items are missing. After investigating, the thief comes to the epistemically sound and justified conclusion that the guards have been stealing the items. Enraged by this conclusion, the thief blames the guards for committing this wrong.

The value of this example lies in its ability to illustrate how the victim may appropriately blame the guards, in spite of having unrepentantly engaged in precisely the same sorts of behavior they now blame the guards for. And even though the thief would lose the standing to blame the guards for stealing from other inmates, since that thief has committed a similar act before and is likely to reoffend, they still have the standing to react specifically to the wrongs of which they are the injured party.

Scanlon's view would acknowledge that guards owe inmates specific types of interactions, and that these obligations are grounded in the expectations that guards and inmates may reasonably have of each other, in virtue of the nature of their relationship in the moral community. By stealing from this individual, the guards have modified the relationship between the two parties in a negative way and have thereby impaired the original relationship. The inmate's response of blaming is not simply an acknowledgement of the guards' wrongdoing, but also a reactionary response to the guards' failure to fulfill

the expectation of the relationship. This would account for why, had the guards returned the missing items, the inmates would most likely not respond with abandoning their blame.

Now, imagine this same inmate is not the injured party, but rather a third party blamer. It seems that in this circumstance, the guards could respond to their blame with the comment "Look who's talking." Here, such a response is sufficient to highlight the inmate's loss of the moral standing to blame. Since the inmate has no other areas they can criticize, and given that they have not personally suffered harm to any relationship, the inmate's blame now seems to be inappropriate.

Of course, there are circumstances wherein the injured party could involve more individuals than just the direct victim. Another inmate, who is emotionally close to the party by virtue of their intimate relationship, has cause to be a part of the injured party. Moreover, when the warden finds out about the actions of the prison guards, their blame could be considered as that of an injured party, given the expectations regarding the relationship between the warden and the guards.

In comparison, everyone watching the news of the prison guards being caught and arrested for stealing from the inmate, would be blaming from a

third party perspective. Since they are not family members of the guards or of the inmate, their blame would simply be acknowledging the fault in the guard's actions, and implying that the guards are responsible for those wrongdoings. It seems that perspectivalism, using the respective theories of Scanlon and Smart, supports the existence of these two distinct functions of blame.

3. ADDITIONAL COMPLEXITIES CONCERNING MORAL LUCK

Imagine now that, on one unfortunate night, a morally conscious person is driving down a residential street. This individual is a good driver, who takes into account the safety of others and does their

Moral Community

In this paper, "moral community" is used to reference how a hypothetical community, bound by an identical moral theory of right action, would evaluate specific events. It is not required, within this essay, to confirm the exact theory of right action, as it relies on basic responses given in the domain of moral responsibility.

Unblameworthy

An evaluation that a moral individual is not responsible or fitting of blame for a given event or act. This paper pushes against the claim that an unblameworthy agent by the moral community is identically unblameworthy by the injured party.

Moral Luck

Area within ethics, which studies the influence of factors that are out of an agent's control in relation to whether that agent can be an object of moral judgement specific to a variety of different categories (actions, character disposition, casual events, circumstantial events, etc.).

best to follow all driving restrictions. On this occasion, even as the driver is paying close attention to their surroundings, a small child runs out into the street, and the driver is unable to stop in time to avoid a collision. Society and the moral community will write this off as an unavoidable accident and hold no one at fault; but what about the child's parents? Can these individuals still blame the driver for the loss of their child, when the moral community finds the driver to be unblameworthy?

My thesis of blame, which combines specifically the views of Scanlon and Smart, would allow for the parents of the deceased child to—in fact—appropriately blame the driver under these exact circumstances. It is true that the driver is not responsible for the child running into the street, nor for the subsequent harm to that child, but the parents are still left with a loss. Even though the driver did not mean for this horrible event to happen, that individual is still the direct cause of the child's death. This is a strong example for many reasons. First, it is honest about the ways in which our society operates, and it has explanatory power; sadly, there are parents who have experienced such tragic events, and there are also people that are involved in such tragic accidents despite being safe drivers. Second, I have the internal motivation to protect the driver from the blame of the parents because I could easily find myself in a similar position. On the other hand, I could just as easily be in the position of the parents, who have lost a loved one. Because both motivations are present, this serves as an intuitive example for the distinction between the blame from the perspective of an injured party versus that of a third party, and gives more reason to believe the two kinds of blame are fundamentally different. Speaking from the third party perspective and as a member of the moral community, I would say that the driver is not responsible for the death of the child because the event was out of their control, and there are no actions of the driver to be criticized; the tragic outcome is merely the result of moral luck. However, if I was speaking from the perspective of the injured party, I would need to acknowledge the loss, and the resulting modification to the relationship of the members. It

is a reactionary expression from the perspective of the parents, but this example as whole, shows the complexity of both perspectives. Although the consequences that result from cases that are influenced by moral luck are controversial, and so my point can be similarly seen as controversial, it is worthwhile to consider the complexity of two different perspectives of blame.

4. CONCLUSION

It seems that our intuitions about blame support the conclusion that some people have greater claims to blaming than others; perhaps this a result of injured party blamers blaming in this very distinct way, specifically in cases concerning where the hypocrite has the standing to blame as the injured party. Smart and Scanlon both offer insight into distinct modes of blame. Of course, other theories of blame may not fit so perfectly with the theory of perspectivalism as those offered by Smart and Scanlon, being that one is a cognitive theory of blame and the other conative. For example, it is not clear to me that emotional theories of blame could accurately fit into this framework. Putting this concern aside, my hope is that, even if one rejects Scanlon's and/or Smart's view, the reader will still be left with motivation to see that there are different types of blame. It is intuitive that victims of events have a different experience than bystanders, whose perspective is that of the third party. Should it not be the case that their reactionary blame would also be different? Ultimately, the ways in which I've examined both the hypocrite cases and the cases involving moral luck provide motivations to question how philosophy of blame has somehow avoided studying pluralistic theories thus far.

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