



NYU | LAW

New York University School of Law



**October 30th, 2025, from 4-7 pm
Lester Pollock Room, FH, 9th Floor**

Colloquium in Legal, Political, and Social Philosophy

**Conducted by
Liam Murphy and Samuel Scheffler**

**Speaker: Miranda Fricker, NYU
Paper: Minimalist Blame
From Normative Function to Core Definition**



Colloquium Website: <http://www.law.nyu.edu/node/22315>

This paper is a DRAFT of one of three lectures: 'Moral Pressures: Bending Time, Shaping Wills'

Minimalist Blame: From Normative Function to Core Definition

Methods: Horses for Courses

For the illumination of a concept or practice, we do well to remember that philosophy has a number of methods at its disposal. In the philosophy of value, in particular, we are increasingly accustomed to different approaches being adopted with satisfying results. While there remains a certain methodological default of conceptual analysis—whether to descriptive or revisionist purpose¹—it is common to find other approaches being used. These might include the depiction of a central or paradigm case, understood variously as the normatively ideal case, and/or the functionally basic case, or simply the most clear and definitive case. There can also be various forms of genealogical approach, whether historical, fictional, or some combination of the two.

Naturally, we should choose the tools to suit the task, though it is worth noting that these methodological options are not generally exclusive of one another, so that we should be wary of methodological partisanship. When, in a discussion of punishment, Nietzsche declared that ‘all concepts in which an entire process is semiotically concentrated elude definition; only that which has no history is definable’ (Nietzsche 1989, 2 §13 p. 80), I understand him to be giving vivid expression to a polemically uncompromising methodological claim. Namely, that historically oriented genealogy should altogether replace the misguided business of strict definition when it comes to culturally evolving normative ideas and practices. As is so often the case with Nietzsche, one may be exhilarated by the spirit of the claim, without agreeing with the letter. Nietzsche was nothing if not uncompromising; but there is room for other views of the relation between the enterprise of conceptual analysis and the proper awareness of cultural-historical contingency. Some concepts or practices may show themselves to us most fully if approached from more than one angle at a time. In particular, as concerns my own project regarding blame, I find that a paradigm-based approach with a focus on its normative function—the proper point and purpose of blaming—looks the best route towards arriving at a normatively and

¹ See, for instance, Tim Scanlon’s revisionist account of blame (Scanlon 2008).

explanatorily well-founded set of necessary and sufficient conditions. That, at any rate, is what I aim to substantiate in this lecture.

The Disunity Contention and the Idea of Synchronic Genealogy

Let's consider the familiar question, 'What *is* blame?'. This question presupposes another question, but one rarely asked, 'Is blame sufficiently unified to be susceptible to strict analysis?' Do its current forms, taken together, contain a unifying essence of necessary and sufficient conditions?² I believe the sensible answer to this second question is 'Probably not...'. We have strong reason to suspect that there is no non-revisionist strict definition available, no set of necessary and sufficient conditions to capture blame as we actually conceptualize it. If we look at our existing conceptual and moral-responsive practices, even quite locally, we seem to be confronted with a real disunity. The problem is not so much with necessity, for perhaps we can readily find a necessary condition—that blame is a disapprobatory response to wrongdoing, for instance. The problem is rather with sufficiency, for the chances of finding a set that is also sufficient to capture all of the concepts of blame that people actually hold and live by look slim. People do really seem to operate with markedly different concepts, not merely in the sense of some people being committed to this or that added feature (an affective component, for instance), but in the analytically challenging sense of possessing concepts with different essences. For some, blame is essentially constituted by an emotional response, theorizable as a 'reactive attitude or feeling' such as indignation, anger or a related hostile or punishing emotion; while for others it need not involve emotion at all. For some, blame is assumed to be essentially retributive, even vengeful; while other blamers will recognize no such retributive logic as necessary to blame.

Further dimensions of plurality include those concerning the *directional structure* of the attitude. First, there is the question of blame's subject and object. It can be second-personal (I blame you/You blame me), or third-personal blame (I blame her/him/them/They blame me), and it can be reflexive, as in self-blame. All of these rather different psychological formations can, in addition, take either spontaneous or deliberated form, arriving instantaneously or only after careful reflection. Second, there is the broader directional issue that blame can be conceived as

² Fricker 2016.

backward-looking, as a purely retributive conception will have it; or as forward-looking, as a consequentialist conception will have it; or, more commonly, as both backward- and forward-looking, as most conceptions will have it, picturing blame as focusing on the deed done, but always with a view to inviting a response that indicates a way of moving forwards.

Still further plurality is introduced if we entertain different *domains* of blame. Besides moral blame, there seems, for instance, to be genuine epistemic blame ('How could you be so stupid?'), sporting blame ('The fans blamed the goalie'), and aesthetic blame ('They blamed the plummeting ratings on his appalling dress sense'). It is not obvious, given most accounts of moral blame, how far the concepts of blame operative in these other domains can be said to be the same one. And finally, there is significant plurality in our ideas about blame's place in moral life—roughly speaking, whether it is a psychological toxin or not. As regards the blamer, sometimes blame is considered so intrinsically destructive to one's wellbeing that we are recommended to make every effort to live without it—as per the message of many a life-coaching manual. And yet there are also those who mindfully, deliberately hold on to their blame as a solemn lifelong marker of past wrongs and an orientation for the future (Améry 1980). Correlatively, as regards the toxicity to the person blamed, some people experience the prospect of being blamed as something psychically threatening and dreadful, while others find it to be an entirely normal and, though difficult, essentially non-harmful part of healthy interpersonal ethical relations—'Badly done, indeed!' as Mr Knightley candidly says to the eponymous Emma in Jane Austen's novel, after her thoughtlessly cruel witticism at Miss Bates' expense while picnicking on Box Hill.

One final observation of plurality concerns what sort of *object* blame is commonly directed at. We do seem to blame not only agents but also non-agents for causing bad things: 'They blamed the accident on the poor lighting', 'She blamed the fence for getting in the way'. What is going on here? Is this really blame, or are we merely anthropomorphizing? A playful dose of anthropomorphism can certainly come in ('I think this racket's got it in for me!'). But it would strain plausibility to insist that *none* of this blame-talk involves real blame, given how literally we seem to say such things. Eugene Chislenko has called this the Two Uses problem: 'Why is "blame" used to describe both interpersonal reactions and mere causal attributions, such as

blaming faulty brakes for a car crash?’ (Chislenko 2024 p. 80). If we take seriously that some genuine form of blaming may be going on here, this represents yet another dimension of plurality within blame, ramping up the challenge of finding an inclusive definition.

All this plurality—of psychological form, interpersonal structure, temporal direction, ethical (non-)toxicity, normative domain, and even the sort of object to which blame is directed—motivates the *Disunity Contention*. This contention asserts a simple observation (or so it seems to me, and I am not alone³) that the actual forms of blaming that go on, even within a relatively local moral culture, are notably disunified. Though analytically confounding, this is not remotely surprising, for the reasons that motivated Nietzsche’s uncompromising assertion. Certainly, in the case of moral blame, we should expect our sensibility to be on the move, reshaping under this or that cultural pressure—moral, political, religious, familial, personal, psychological. And there is moreover no special reason to assume that these forces affect everyone evenly. Some religions and political movements encourage a punishing brand of blame, perhaps self-righteous, perhaps openly vengeful, while other religions and politics encourage the opposite; some moral upbringings leave a person scarred with passive-aggressive emotional punishment, and an uneasy sense of being a bad person, while other upbringings instil a robust sense that nobody’s perfect, and that’s okay. These different yet co-existing strains in a culture may help explain why ‘blame’ really can mean different things to different people. Nietzsche’s assertion comes in a discussion of punishment, but the claim itself is far more general: some concepts have no essence because they are shape-shifting concentrations of semiotic residues left by a history of heterogeneous social processes and aims. Their internal structure is to a significant degree amorphous, even somewhat indeterminate, permitting variations of use and meaning from context to context. This idea seems very plausibly to apply to blame, not only diachronically but synchronically too, through the different cultural and social pressures that are differentially exerted on different people at a time within a culture. This diachronic and synchronic genealogical conception pictures blame as something layered and morphing. It seems to me to offer an explanation why,

³ See Fricker 2016, p. 167. In his recent book on blame and praise, which frames them together as an integrated functional system of *norm maintenance* (p. 25), Shoemaker is partly motivated by the same observation: ‘There is, then, a serious unity problem’ (Shoemaker 2024; p. xx). Chislenko is another writer motivated by the disunity among forms of blame, and he includes non-agential blame in his account, bringing it together with agential blame by reference to their common factor: attention to something as a source of bad (Chislenko 2025).

philosophically speaking, we're still not sure what blame is, and we're still not sure what we want from it.

Given this lived disunity among forms blame and blaming, it is no surprise that the philosophical literature effectively puts the same plurality on display for us in the form of apparently competing accounts. To be clear, I do not take this theoretical plurality itself as direct evidence for the Disunity Contention, for substantial differences among philosophical views is the disciplinary norm, even when there is a perfectly unified object of analysis in common. Rather, *given* the Disunity Contention, I take the philosophical disunity to reflect the empirical reality. In reflecting the plurality of our various operative concepts of blame, the philosophy of blame inadvertently botanizes the different varieties as a biproduct of collective business-as-usual. A quick review will echo the perplexing multiplicity we are concerned with: blame as angry (Wolf 2011; Owens 2012; Nussbaum 2016); blame as protest against the wrong done (Smith 2013; Pereboom 2023); blame as a rupture to a relationship (Scanlon 2008); blaming as cultivating another's moral agency (McGeer & Pettit 2015; Vargas 2013); blame as retributive (Nietzsche 1989; Bennett 2008; Duff 2001); blame as a reactive attitude (Strawson 1974; Darwall 2006; Wallace 1994; McGeer 2011); blame as symbolically expressive (Bennett 2013); blame as communicative (McKenna 2012 & 2013; Fricker 2016; Macnamara 2015); blame as aiming for moral cognitive *entente* (McGeer 2013; Fricker 2016; Sliwa 2019); blaming as showing off our normative prowess (Shoemaker & Vargas 2019)—to name but a few schools of thought and authors who have given theoretical expression to one or more form that blaming can take.

Because of the routine assumption that there is a sufficiently unified phenomenon out there for our philosophical accounts to answer to, these different accounts are typically understood as competing accounts of some single, unified thing. But the Disunity Contention renders them largely non-competing, since the Disunity Contention allows that most of the well-reasoned views rehearsed in this rich literature capture at least one or more real and common practice of blaming that is part of our motley inheritance. We learn from all of them, not just for the usual reason that we can learn from other people's views, but for the more literal-minded reason that they are all capturing some sort of blame that is real.

What method recommends itself in a situation where no strict definition of blame can expect to command universal assent, even in principle, because the object of definition is itself disunified? A descriptive strategy might be to adopt a family resemblance model, and simply explore the resemblances among the siblings and cousins, perhaps drawing some observations about concentrations of similarity, and perhaps picking a focal case. Alternatively, an appealingly assertive strategy is self-conscious revisionism. Scanlon, for instance, has offered an explicitly revisionist definition of blame according to which it comprises two elements: a judgement of blameworthiness, and a rupture in the relationship with the blamed party that reflects the deterioration of moral relation inherent in the bad action (Scanlon 2008). Such a strategy calls out for an explanation of what it is that recommends the new form of blame over existing forms, what good it would do if we could culturally grow out of other kinds of blaming and instead live exclusively by the recommended ‘revised’ one. An alternative revisionist strategy, and one that assumes the genealogical conception of blame as something layered and amorphous, might go directly to the normative issue, asking what form of blame (if any) plays a positive normative role in our shared moral life. It might then represent that kind of blame as paradigmatic in the sense that its positive function can be looked for in other kinds of blame, serving as a measure of their value, other things equal. I have called this ‘paradigm-based explanation’, and the approach is encapsulated in the question: What is the point of blame? (Fricker 2016).⁴

‘It was badly done, indeed!’: *Communicative Blame* as a Practice Aimed at Shared Normative Understanding

In order to lead us to the real business of the day, which is to defend a minimalist definition of blame, I will need to say a little more about the normative paradigm of blame that I call Communicative Blame (Fricker 2016). Its point or function is to bring the wrongdoer to understand the moral significance of their action – appreciating it to a contextually appropriate degree in remorseful understanding. This state of appreciation of the moral significance of what one has done I call ‘remorse’ (after Gaita 2004).⁵ The general idea that a remorseful grasp of one’s wrongful act is at least part of the goal of blame is hardly controversial, for many have

⁴ See Fricker 2016.

⁵ For Gaita, remorse should be central to our moral philosophy because the domain of intelligible remorse determines the domain of what could count for us as wrongdoing. He characterizes it as ‘a pained, bewildered—or...incredulous—realization of the full meaning of what one has done’ (Gaita 2004 p. xxi), see also ch. 4.

advanced similar or overlapping versions, if often embedded in further claims about blame that do not belong to the present conception. An early expression of the basic idea can be found, for example, in Adam Smith (1785):

The object...which resentment is chiefly intent upon, is not so much to make our enemy feel pain in his turn, as to make him conscious that he feels it upon account of his past conduct, to make him repent of that conduct, and to make him sensible, that the person whom he injured did not deserve to be treated in that manner...(Smith, 2009 [1759]; Part II, Sect. III, Ch. I; p. 115).

My own version of the claim is more overtly normative than Smith's apparently descriptive one, since I take it that blame very often does *not* take this communicative and understanding-oriented form, but rather that it should. Moreover, in advancing Communicative Blame as the paradigm case, the claim is that our practices of blame only earn their normative keep insofar as they are conducive, at the level of the practice, to the generation of mutual moral understanding between the blame-related parties. If a given style of blame—perhaps a vengeful one, or on the flipside a hopelessly unassertive one—is not even aiming to achieve this transformative end, then what good does it do? We would do better to move beyond that kind of blaming.

Communicative Blame is non-retributive, and indeed imposes nothing recognizable as a *harm* on the wrongdoer at all. It aims to impose only the psychologically negative tariff that is intrinsic to moral understanding, namely remorse. Remorse can be superficially or deeply painful, fleeting or enduring. It may be a significant form of suffering, but it cannot be a form of *harm* to apprehend moral facts concerning one's own conduct, or indeed any other moral fact. Seeing moral reality for what it is, cannot be a harm to you—it is what it is, as the saying goes—indeed it will often be positively valuable. At any rate, if someone communicates a judgement of fault to me regarding my behaviour, where the manner of their communication is conducive to bringing me to understand the real significance of my actions, then regardless of whether the result is valuable to me or not, and regardless of whether the remorse I come to is significantly painful or not, it cannot be a harm done to me by the blamer. Consequently, while Communicative Blame has a backward-looking aspect (to the bad action) as well as a forward-looking aspect (to the

hoped-for moral understanding), it does not need to justify itself in relation to ideas of ‘basic desert’ or anything else wheeled in to legitimize the imposition of a harm (McKenna 2019; Pereboom 2023).

There are, however, a range of potential harms in the offing, which need avoiding. If you wrong me and I communicate my blame to you, it might be that I have an exaggerated or otherwise ill-judged perception of the significance of what you did. Wronged parties have authority, and should be listened to, but they are not infallible. This is why Victoria McGeer is right to emphasize the dialogical nature of appropriate blaming (McGeer 2013). Such normatively desirable dialogue effectively expands what is already an internal feature of blaming on any communicative conception, as is succinctly captured in Darwall’s idea that blame comes with an RSVP (Darwall 2006), or Walker’s idea that the reactive attitudes have a pattern of ‘call-and-response’ (Walker 2006 p. 135).⁶ My conception of Communicative Blame takes McGeer’s cue in incorporating this expanded dialogical obligation in the form of Communicated Blame. The point of blame is not achieved if the wounded party insists too much on the particular response they expect or hope for—a response that would simply reflect back to them their perception of the wrong they have suffered. If there is to be an achievement of anything resembling mutual moral *understanding*, then each must be somewhat open to the other’s perspective.

Communicative Blame is a basic interpersonal mechanism through which we reaffirm and/or construct shared interpersonal moral understandings. It therefore has a vital, morally positive function in sustaining and ever-recreating our shared moral world. It may be contingently accompanied by all sorts of attitudes and feelings, but in itself it requires only sufficient spike to arrest the wrongdoer’s attention. (I will say something more below about what I take that to be.) When Mr Knightley accuses Emma of having cruelly and thoughtlessly humiliated her long-time friend, Miss Bates, he engages Communicative Blame in a dialogical and, at least in my reading, proportionately measured manner, fit for the proper purpose of arresting her moral attention and bringing her to see, in remorse, the significance of her conduct. His approach and their exchange is explicitly dialogical, and its first form is in the outraged interrogative: “How could you be so

⁶ Coleen Macnamara explores this call-and-response structure in a paper whose title memorably performs the general idea—“Screw you!” & “thank you” (Macnamara 2013).

unfeeling to Miss Bates? How could you be so insolent in your wit to a woman of her character, age, and situation?—Emma, I had not thought it possible”. This has some effect, but apparently not enough, since Emma, though sorry, still makes light of what she has done: ‘Emma recollected, blushed, was sorry, but tried to laugh it off. “Nay, how could I help saying what I did? Nobody could have helped it. It was not so very bad. I dare say she did not understand me”’ (Austen 1994 p. 302). And so he persists in moral conversation with her about the normatively salient facts of the situation. Their exchange involves his acknowledging the truth of certain defensive representations that Emma makes in reply, yet insisting that she not pretend things are other than they are:

“I assure you she did. She felt your full meaning. She has talked of it since. I wish you could have heard how she talked of it – with what candour and generosity. I wish you could have heard her honouring your forbearance, in being able to pay her such attentions, as she was for ever receiving from yourself and your father, when her society must be so irksome.”

“Oh!’ cried Emma, ‘I know there is not a better creature in the world; but you must allow, that what is good and what is ridiculous are most unfortunately blended in her.”

“They are blended,’ said he, ‘I acknowledge; and, were she prosperous, I could allow much for the occasional prevalence of the ridiculous over the good. Were she a woman of fortune, I would leave every harmless absurdity to take its chance; I would not quarrel with you for any liberties of manner. Were she your equal in situation – but, Emma, consider how far this is from being the case. She is poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to; and if she live to old age must probably sink more. Her situation should secure your compassion. It was badly done, indeed! You, whom she had known from an infant, whom she had seen grow up from a period when her notice was an honour – to have you now, in thoughtless spirits, and the pride of the moment, laugh at her, humble her – and before her niece, too – and before others, many of whom (certainly *some*) would be entirely guided by your treatment of her. This is not pleasant to you, Emma – and it is very far from pleasant to me; but I must, I will – I tell you truths while I can; satisfied with proving myself your friend by very faithful counsel, and trusting that

you will some time or other do me greater justice than you can do now” (Austen 1994 pp. 302-3).

There is no motivational purism in Communicative Blame. Knightley surely has many a complicating feeling mixed into what he is doing here in admonishing Emma so candidly and pointedly. Besides his concern for Miss Bates and his clear intention to make Emma see the cruelty in her conduct, he is doubtless partially motivated by a number of non-moral or moral-adjacent emotions all bound up in his moral displeasure: that he is nascently in love with Emma, perhaps, and is peeved at her earlier flirtations with Mr Churchill; that, for this very reason, he is especially outraged that Emma should do herself such an injustice before everyone at the picnic; that he is not only a friend but a friend who is significantly older than she, and so feels added license to judge, and to communicate his judgement, for he is not all condescension in regarding her as not yet fully morally mature. These complicating factors are important. Communicative Blame is a mere abstracted model of normatively valuable human blaming, and in any real human interaction it will be emotionally and situationally fleshed out so that some of the added emotions and purposes support the practice’s aim, while others may compromise it somewhat.

Still, without ducking any of this emotional complexity, I find in Knightley’s reprimand of Emma a powerful exemplar of Communicative Blame. The point of the practice in which he is engaged, in his personal expressive style and with his own motives and complicated feelings, is surely achieved. By the end of the conversation, Emma is no longer in her first state of ‘Sorry but, seriously, how could I help it? I mean, you know what she’s like’. Instead, by the end she is in a state of full appreciation of the moral significance of what she has done, and the remorse she feels *inter alia* is indeed painful, doubtless all the more so because she has caused Knightley in particular to think ill of her, whom perhaps she nascently loves. Again, the return to the interrogative is characteristic of the transformative energy of remorse produced in dialogical exchange. In asking herself ‘How could I?’ she affirms her capacity to be better than that, which is precisely what Knightley’s admonitions presuppose. She is, then, in my terms, appropriately remorseful in her dialogically enlightened grasp of the significance of her unworthy *bon mot*:

She was vexed beyond what could have been expressed – almost beyond what she could conceal. Never had she felt so agitated, mortified, grieved, at any circumstances in her life. She was forcibly struck. The truth of his representation there was no denying. She felt it at her heart. How could she have been so brutal, so cruel to Miss Bates! (Austen 1994 p. 304).

This is a turning point in Emma's story. Her remorse is real, though, as with Knightley, this interpretation requires no moral psychological purism regarding the emotions, attitudes and feelings that are involved in the swirl of Emma's young heart and mind. She is gravely sorry for how she has treated Miss Bates, and ashamed of how she acted before her friends and especially Mr Knightley—but all in her own personal and complicated way. The passage continues with Emma's internal dialogue, now notably more focused on herself and Knightley's opinion of her: 'How could she have exposed herself to such ill opinion in any one she valued! And how suffer him to leave her without saying one word of gratitude, of concurrence, of common kindness!' (Austen 1994, p. 304). Austen infuses every moment with these complexities of feeling, our mixtures of remorse and wounded pride, self and other, generosity and vanity, matters of the conscience and matters of the heart, so that her narrative miraculously sustains many perspectives at once. But towards the end of the passage, she brings to this already complex recounting an added dart of her signature irony, gently puncturing Emma's moral moment of truth by reminding us of the charming self-centeredness of youth, the author inhabiting the sweet drama of Emma's troubled conscience: 'Time did not compose her. As she reflected more, she seemed but to feel it more. She never had been so depressed' (Austen 1994 p. 304).

This moral confrontation between Emma and Knightley serves, I hope, to richly dramatize Communicative Blame in a concrete interpersonal form, so that it is clear how the philosophical paradigm of normatively valuable blame might actually play out between people in a particular relationship and culture. With this in mind, we can now see that advancing Communicative Blame is not a means to leaving all calls for definition behind. Not at all, for the model brings with it its own definitional burden: What *is* it that is communicated in Communicative Blame? This question returns us to the business of strict definition, but now with an object that promises to be manageably singular and unified, as furnished by the normative-functional approach.

Having identified Communicative Blame as our normatively recommended paradigm, plucked from the plural and amorphous formations that make up the total landscape of blame, we are now in a position to approach anew the question of *what blame is*.

Minimalist Blame

What is communicated in Communicative Blame? I have already observed that we seem to blame each other as agents in domains beyond the moral—we go in for epistemic blame, sporting blame, perhaps also aesthetic blame. And I suggested it would be desirable to have an account that could make sense of the fact that, on the face of it, we seem also to blame non-agential objects such as slow laptops, blunt knives, and bad weather—British train companies have been known to blame extended delays on ‘the wrong kind of snow’. To be sure, non-agential blame is importantly different from agential blame, since, as all agree, non-agents are capable only of causal responsibility and not any kind of normative responsibility. But so long as ‘a bad workman blames his tools’ it will be desirable to understand how he does it—though without losing sight of how that differs from blaming his workmates.⁷ All this may seem to promise a reintroduction of a disorganized pluralism, but in fact quite the opposite is the case. I will argue for a minimalist definition of the agential blame that is communicated in Communicative Blame, and it will become clear that this minimalism has the significant advantage that it can easily account for (what we might call) the *portability* of blame through different forms: different emotional states (resentment, indignation, sadness, disappointment, anger...); across different domains of blame (ethical, epistemic, sporting, aesthetic...); and ultimately it will make clear what is going on in non-agential forms of blame too.

Here is a first approximation of the minimalist definition of the blame that is communicated in Communicative Blame (in respect of an act, omission, motive, disposition, belief, intention, thought, attitude, or feeling):

⁷ I am in sympathy with Chislenko’s incorporation of (what I am calling) non-agential blame into his account of blame simpliciter (Chislenko 2025). However, I depart from his approach in holding that a satisfying account of agential blame requires explaining both what it has in common with non-agential blame *and* what is distinctive about it. Minimalism does both.

a judgement that (explicitly or implicitly) finds fault with agent A for some (specified or unspecified) fault F

If, for example, you blame your friend for their selfish behaviour, then you judge her to have displayed the *fault of selfishness*. If your partner blames you for ruining the whole evening by flying off the handle at the slightest thing, then they judge you to have been at fault for flying off the handle at the slightest thing, a fault which may or may not have a specific focus or familiar shorter name, like ‘over-sensitive’ or ‘intemperate’. Faults with clearly determinate profiles and/or that are storied vices (‘selfish’, ‘cruel’) will tend to have handy labels; others may not. ‘Controlling’ or ‘passive-aggressive’ are relatively new labels for age-old faults that may have been harder to pinpoint in other terms. At any rate, according to this first approximation, the blame in Communicative Blame is a *fault-finding judgement*.

But what is a fault-finding judgement? If it is a plain *judgement of fault*, then in itself it may seem to be little more than a bare evaluative observation that blame is in order, other things equal. It may seem, in other words, like I have suggested that blame (the blame in Communicative Blame) is constituted by a *judgement of the agent’s blameworthiness for F*. But as many have concluded, a judgement of blameworthiness is surely less than blame:

‘[I]t is generally agreed that blaming someone for something goes beyond simply judging or believing *that* she is blameworthy for it. After all, it seems perfectly legitimate to say things like “I know he is blameworthy for doing X, but I just can’t bring myself to blame him for it,” suggesting that blame involves something that goes beyond the simple judgment of blameworthiness”’ (Smith p. 29, quoting Cohen 1977).

Where judging someone blameworthy for F really is the bare evaluative observation, the mere registering, that they are worthy of blame in respect of F, then minimalism will agree that this is not blaming. I would emphasize, however, that we should consider such a bare registering of fault, a moral perception so attitudinally neutral as to not even limn the border of blame itself, to be a rare bird indeed. How, after all, might it show itself in moral life? Perhaps in a situation in which someone, in a style of perfect calm and reasonability, informs you that they find you to be

blameworthy for your selfish behaviour, but insists they are not blaming you for it ('I'm not blaming you but...'). It seems to me, frankly, that they are kidding themselves, or messing with your head; or, more charitably, perhaps they just mean something like, 'I sort of blame you for your selfishness, but I'm not angry and I don't hold it against you in any way—I just think you should know'.

'I'm not blaming you but...' will tend to be a passive-aggressive form of blame. Self-denying, sublimated blame—'backdoor' blame.⁸ Blame that is implicit and disavowed, but very often all the more pungent for its dishonesty. The mere fact that they're telling you this fact, thereby directing your attention to what they see as the fault in your behaviour, betrays what is really going on. The disavowed blame is in fact delivered loud and clear, if under cover of plausible deniability. Genuine sightings of the bare judgement of blameworthiness will have to be made elsewhere in moral life. The most promising place to look is in situations where a person is simply taking in the moral environment, interpreting what's going on. Perhaps she sees someone on the bus fail to offer their seat to a fellow passenger who manifestly needs it more than them, and without thinking about it or dwelling on it or doing anything about it (let's imagine she herself is standing elsewhere in the crowded bus and is trying to read her book) she automatically perceives that person as at fault for their inconsiderate behaviour. This seems the closest we can get to a judgement of blameworthiness that might qualify as a bare judgement of fault that is attitudinally neutral. Our observant bus passenger, let's allow, makes a moral judgement of blameworthiness and yet does not blame. She has simply noticed, in passing, a moral fact.

What, then, is the added feature that would convert such a bare judgement of blameworthiness into actually *blaming* someone for a fault F? The literature provides a range of contenders. Perhaps what is missing is that a bare judgement of blameworthiness lacks the anger or otherwise hostile affect that is (so the thought goes) necessary for blame? But this cannot be right, so long as there can be dispassionate blame. And there clearly can be dispassionate blame. If a judge is not capable of dispassionate blame, then she cannot do her job; if members of a jury are not capable of dispassionate blame, then they cannot perform their function. But many do perform these functions. Or, if you doubt that judges or jurors really blame those they condemn

⁸ I model 'backdoor blame' on Rae Langton's idea of 'backdoor testimony' (see Fricker 2018).

after establishing their guilt, then consider another sort of example. Someone learns from their newsfeed that the King of a country far from their own is guilty of corruption and profiteering, causing the institutions of state to deteriorate, ultimately spiralling into structural corruption, while the Prime Minister seemed to do little to stop him. If you ask her, Whom do you blame for the country spiralling into structural corruption, the Prime Minister or the King? and she duly replies, ‘Oh, I blame the King—the Prime Minister did her best but she lacked the power’, then she blames the King for the structural corruption, and quite dispassionately. There can be dispassionate blame. This claim is entirely compatible with the idea that some range of angry, indignant, or resentful wounded feelings may well be statistically typical, perhaps psychologically and developmentally basic, and remain characteristic of mature blame—indeed I believe that such feelings are all of these things. The claim is simply that none of these salient attitudes and feelings is necessary for the blame that is communicated in Communicative Blame. That is why the blame that is communicated in Communicative Blame does not require affective loading, though it can run with all sorts of affective load so long as they do not detract too much from its normative purpose.⁹

The second prime candidate for the added ingredient that converts a bare judgement of blameworthiness into blame is *protest* (Smith 2013; Pereboom 2023).¹⁰ This is a view which can take the form of a functional claim, as it does in Pereboom’s treatment, but which, if taken as a definitional or constitutive claim, as it seems to be in Smith’s argument¹¹, I believe cannot be right. One concern, discussed by Chislenko (2019) is that while there can clearly be uncommunicated and unexpressed blame, it is dubious that there can be unexpressed protest. Chislenko defends the protest account on this score by making use of Coleen Macnamara’s analogy of an unsent email as an example of something that is intrinsically communicative and yet might, on occasion, go uncommunicated (Macnamara 2015). The thought regarding protest is that, like emails, some protests might wind up in the unsent Outbox of protestation, but that they

⁹ I will say more about this later, and how it squares with past work on blame. See note 11 below.

¹⁰ Smith draws on Hieronymi’s conception of resentment as protest (Hieronymi 2001).

¹¹ ‘To morally blame another, in my view, is to register in some significant way one’s moral protest of that agent’s treatment of oneself or others. Such protest need not be outwardly expressed in any way, and it need not take the form of a Strawsonian reactive attitude. But what unites all of the behavioral and attitudinal responses we are inclined to categorize as instance of blame, I will argue, is that they share this element of moral protest’ (Smith 2013 p. 29).

do not thereby fail to be protests any more than an unsent email fails to be an email. Thus, one might think, we can make ready sense of an unexpressed, or inner protest. Or so it is argued.

I wholly agree with the generic point concerning candidate intrinsically communicative items in general, that the possibility of non-expression (accidental or deliberate) does not prove them to be other than intrinsically communicative. Indeed, this is an important point for my account of blame's proper function being that of Communicative Blame, for even in a world where we had all succeeded in becoming largely exclusively Communicative Blamers, we would still need to keep it to ourselves much of the time, for all sorts of reasons, such as it's none of our business, or it would be hypocritical, or speaking out will do more harm than good, or it just doesn't seem worth it, and so on. Communicative Blamers will keep their blame-judgements to themselves just as much as anyone else. Still, I think we have reason to doubt that the generic point does apply specially to the case of protest in particular. Unlike emails, and unlike Communicative Blame, the very idea of something's constituting a *protest* on an occasion requires expression on that occasion. Protest is not merely the sort of thing whose proper function is expressive; a protest requires expression to *be* a protest.

But what about inner protests? Are they not protests? What we call 'inner protest' is, to be sure, a real attitude or set of attitudes and feelings that would motivate, and find expression in, an actual protest. They can be important. For instance, it can be important to know of someone else, or perhaps of oneself, that even though it was too dangerous to actually protest, they/you still inwardly held firm in the relevant commitments. However, it does not follow from any of this—and would be a strained departure from normal meaning—that the inward steadfast commitment itself *constituted* a protest. No, the protest was the thing it was too dangerous to do; so instead you simply held firm on the relevant inner attitudes. The most natural thing to say about a protest that goes unexpressed is that it is a protest that doesn't happen. And a protest that doesn't happen is not a protest. If you are due to meet a friend on the corner to join the protest and she messages to say she's actually decided to protest inwardly at home instead, because—rest assured—her head is simply buzzing with outraged protestation, then you will have little patience with her equivocation. Evidently, she's not protesting today. An unexpressed protest is no more a protest than an unexpressed declaration of loyalty is a declaration of loyalty. The declaration part is

decisive. Such things as inner protests and unexpressed declarations of loyalty can be supremely important in the interpretation of human affairs and in the question of what people are disposed to do. But they are not the same things as their expressed forms. If you are sympathetic with this line of argument, then you have reason to think that to blame is not necessarily to protest. Unexpressed blame is blame; but it is no kind of protest.

Be that as it may, the chief reason I find it clear that blaming isn't the same thing as protesting is that the two things have different direct objects. We protest the *deed*—perhaps, the unlawful declaration of war, the court's unjust decision, or the cruel joke made by the host. But we blame the *agent*—the government, the court, the host. Blaming and protesting have importantly different intentional structures in this regard. This is precisely why they often go together, dovetailing perfectly in cases where what is being protested is a blameworthy action. Blaming out loud is typically an excellent way of simultaneously protesting the bad deed to whomever may be listening. I believe we should say, chiming with any functionally minded protest theorist, that one of communicated blame's important moral and political functions is indeed to protest bad action. But serving that function is possible only because *in expressing blame* I may protest the wrong done—rather as *in* warning my friend that it is way colder outside than it looks, I may also show my friendly concern for their wellbeing. This simply exemplifies one of the multiplying wonders of actions in general—in leaping up to flick the switch, our heroine may get the power back on, scare off the assassin, save the day, and secure the admiration of her rival all in a momentary flick of the finger. Similarly, in communicating blame to the politician for championing an ill-thought-through policy, someone may do many other things into the bargain: stick up for the under-paid, exercise their right to free speech, show themselves to be an actively responsible citizen, aggravate the gathering crowd, set a fine example of respectful dissent, get filmed on a phone and become a poisonous meme, and so on. In blaming, then, certainly we may protest too. And protesting is surely an important positive moral function of expressed blame quite generally. We can imagine someone literally asking 'How did he protest the host's cruel joke?', where the answer is 'He called her out—blaming her right there, in front of everyone!'. But this does not make blaming the same thing as protesting. The direct object of the blame is the agent; the direct object of the protest is their deed.

The Active Accusatory Stance

If neither the element of affect, nor the element of protest constitutes the added ingredient that converts a bare judgement of blameworthiness into actual blame, what *does*? Let's focus on the very idea of a *fault-finding judgement*. The idea of fault-finding clearly suggests at least some nascent attitude of disapprobation towards the wrongdoer in respect of the thing identified as a fault—some attitudinal spike that would be missing in a bare judgement of blameworthiness. The warning I sounded to the effect that such a thoroughly neutral judgement is a rare bird indeed (though many a blame-filled buzzard may impersonate it) came from the fact that if, for instance, you communicate to someone that you consider them blameworthy in respect of a fault, then this is already tantamount to blaming them for it, albeit a form of blame that disavows itself. It's too late for the disclaimer, for something blamey that is nascent in the judgement is made salient in the communication. What explains this? I believe it is that, in most contexts, the expression of the judgement of fault draws attention to the fault-finding content and thereby *activates*—perhaps unintentionally—the nascent *accusatory* attitude within the very idea of a normative fault. Active or engaged accusation is a mode of fault-finding that is charged with accusatory force. This active accusatory charge, I contend, is what is essential to blame, and absent from a bare judgement of blameworthiness.

A bare judgement of blameworthiness will surely remain incipiently accusatory, insofar as most faults are inherently accusatory in some degree. But in a bare judgement of blameworthiness the accusatory attitude is not activated, at least *pro tem*—it may be unstable in this regard, always susceptible to (re-)activation. When it is non-activated, there is no normative engagement, no RSVP (Darwall 2006). In order to best capture this distinction between normative engagement and disengagement, I would like to adapt a potent phrase from Monique Wonderly who, in a paper on moral pride, introduces the idea of 'affective holding engagement' in relation to blame. Such affective engagement is characterized as 'an emotional stance that treats its target as an active subject in one or more of one's substantive normative projects' (Wonderly 2023 p. 280).¹² Since the present argument concerns not affect but rather *active accusatory attitude* as the added ingredient that will distinguish a bare judgement of blameworthiness from actual blaming, we

¹² Wonderly goes on to further explain substantive normative engagement in terms of 'the maintenance and promotion of values' whose force and function depends on uptake from others (Wonderly 2023 p. 281).

may capture this in the duly adapted notion of *accusatory holding engagement*. On the proposed minimalist picture, the blamer as such engages the blamee in accusatory holding—either out loud or in silent judgement. Accusatory holding engagement makes salient the fault-finding content and, so to speak, opens a normative case to be answered. If the blame is communicated, then an honest RSVP is issued; if it stays silent, then the person held in the accusatory engagement may or may not be aware. If they do not sense it, and remain entirely oblivious, then the active accusatory attitude may be largely a waste of energy, since it is not put to positive transformative purpose. It certainly cannot aim at generating shared moral understanding.

Accusatory holding engagement creates a sense of unfinished normative business that can sometimes go on a long time—a lifetime even—and it may go through many modulations of activation and de-activation. A vivid reminder of a past wrong may reactivate an unresolved yet dormant accusatory holding engagement from long ago. Hence the essential instability of bare judgements of blameworthiness vis-à-vis their transmutation into actual blaming through the activation of the accusatory attitude. But when the accusatory attitude is inactive, staying passive and disengaged so that there is no accusatory holding in the air, no accusatory charge between the two parties, that is when a judgement of fault can take the form of a bare judgement of blameworthiness.

Accusatory holding engagement can take many forms, ranging on a continuum from mild criticism to serious interpersonal censure, depending on how gravely the fault is judged. Forms of accusatory holding engagement also vary according to whether the accusatory attitude is focused on a specific fault in conduct that may even be understood as fleeting and out of character (‘That’s not like you...’) or whether, at the other extreme, the accusatory attitude is something that suffuses an entire relationship, insinuating itself as the malignant presupposition to every exchange. The evaluative and responsive dispositions that underpin these continua of accusatory holding engagement are multiple, and may be helpfully corralled into the theoretical yet psychologically realistic idea of an *Active Accusatory Stance*. The presence of this stance is something to which most people are highly attuned, viscerally sensing when they are being made its object, however implicitly, and no matter how much mind-bending plausible deniability may be enlisted by the blamer (‘I’m not blaming you, I just think that you always...’). The result can

be a deeply troubled confusion and ambiguity with plenty of hard-to-process negative feeling about oneself; but regarding the Active Accusatory Stance itself, we can generally sense its presence, however disavowed or disguised it may be.

These considerations put us in a position to offer a more specified version of the proposed minimalist definition of blame:

a judgement that is made from the Active Accusatory Stance and (explicitly or implicitly) finds fault with agent A for some (specified or unspecified) fault F

The label ‘Active Accusatory Stance’, names a complex of broadly accusatory dispositions that surround a fault-finding judgement, expressed or not. That is why, if you express the judgement out loud, you almost inevitably (*pace* special contexts) also express the accusatory attitudes belonging to the dispositions from which you judge.

Still, there can always be special circumstances—notably, those of fully exonerating excuse. In circumstances where it is understood that you find the person to be fully excused, and where you stably relate to them in that way, you may be able to tell them, without even inadvertent implicit accusation, that you found their behaviour cruel, but that you totally understand where it was coming from, given what they’ve told you about their past. There need be no passive-aggressive edge here; your attitude and your communication may be simply characterized by straightforward understanding and sincerity between intimates, driven not by a sublimated urge to pathologize them, or any secret relish of the moral upper-hand, but simply by the need to find a shared understanding of what went on, and perhaps to make the relationship work. Some therapeutic practices aim at this too, and a discursive space in which people can speak truthfully about difficult things in a way that is (so far as possible) free from active accusation—free, that is, from blame—can be a miraculous unlocking of emotional blockages in how a person understands themselves, or how romantic partners relate to one another.¹³ In such spaces, it is

¹³ This therapeutic model is what Hanna Pickard builds on in her work on ‘responsibility without blame’, and what is proposed as a model for punishment in the criminal justice system in papers co-authored with Nicola Lacey. See, for instance, Lacey and Pickard (2013).

perhaps possible, with the help of a skilled practitioner, to largely draw back from the accusatory mode, and open-heartedly explore the interpersonal terrain with eyes ethically open *inter alia* to blameworthiness, yet without actually blaming. The therapeutic environment is a hospitable one for our rare bird, and according to the proposed minimalist picture, this is because it succeeds in deactivating the accusatory force of fault-finding judgement to a sufficient degree. It may do so, if it remains clear-eyed, by relegating the accusatory judgement of fault to a position of mere presupposition to other things being said and explored, thereby drawing attention *away* from it, yet without pretending it doesn't exist. This of course leaves the accusatory force implicit in the conversation, and yet in a context of trust and a shared will to understand entrenched negative dynamics, the conversation can stay honest, and passive-aggressive energies are kept at bay. This is the mirror image of the case previously considered where, by contrast, a presupposition of accusatory fault was surreptitiously introduced into an ostensibly independent conversation, resulting in passive-aggressive blame. We might see that manoeuvre as drawing attention to the fault ushered *in* through the backdoor, whereas in the therapeutic case, the decentering of the fault as such draws attention away from it, sending it *out* of the backdoor. While the introduction of the first presupposition had an activating effect on the nascent accusatory charge, the relegation of blame to off-stage presupposition in the second has a deactivating one.

The dispositions that comprise the Active Accusatory Stance will reflect the fact that blame displays two closely related functional roles in responding to wrongs done. We might label these roles 'pointing the finger' and 'wagging the finger' respectively. *Pointing the finger* is an answer to the question 'Who is to blame?' in relation to some bad outcome (*whodunnit?*). It is primarily a causal question, so that it concentrates accusatory attention on the *finding* aspect of finding fault—in blaming an individual, we literally *locate* the practically expressed fault in a specific agent ('It was my/your/their fault'). *Wagging the finger*, by contrast, presupposes or sidesteps the question of *Who*, instead focusing its disapprobation on the *What*. We might say it concentrates accusatory attention on the *fault* aspect of finding fault. This can sometimes be done on its own, when it is not yet known who the guilty party is—'Whoever did this has betrayed us all!'—so that the finger is, so to speak, wagging without pointing. The Active Accusatory Stance, then, has something of a dual aspect, because blame does these twin jobs. Blaming involves a causal idea ('Who did it?') and a censuring idea ('What they did was wrong'), and although the two ideas

can come apart, they belong together as an integrated moral response to a wrong done. The dispositions that make up the Active Accusatory Stance, therefore, will naturally include those that belong with both sorts of response. These will include such various and opposite dispositions as the disposition to confront the culprit ('It was *you*, wasn't it?'), and the disposition to avoid them; the disposition to give them a piece of your mind, and the disposition to stop talking to them; the disposition to question them and find out more (How *could* you?) as well as to others (What was she *thinking*?), and the dispositions to freeze them out or never speak of it. Quite which dispositions are activated in any given instance will depend on the circumstances and the personalities involved.

The Active Accusatory Stance will surely also contain a range of emotional or affective dispositions to feel certain accusatory forms of anger, indignation, resentment, sadness, demoralization, disappointment or hurt feelings; perhaps to avoid the culprit in future, in some cases to warn others about their behaviour, to hope, perhaps, that they are sorry. In a given moral culture, such as our own, with a disunity of highly non-ideal blaming practices, it may also contain all sorts of punishing or vengeful retributive dispositions into the bargain. Perhaps a degree of such feeling is humanly inevitable, and perhaps some significant residue of them in moral life would not necessarily be a bad thing; but we have a choice of articulating a moral culture that aims to largely train us out of such vengeful responses, or, alternatively, one that continues to reinforce, reward, and institutionalize them. So, in the spirit of the former option, let us stick to the positive normative brief, and observe that insofar as we may succeed in blaming largely in the style of Communicative Blame, then the Active Accusatory Stance will notably include dispositions relating to blame's proper purpose, namely, the generation of shared moral understandings—the disposition to hear someone out, for instance, and to extend sympathetic understanding to the excusing circumstances that should govern our degree of blame and its focus. Such dispositions on the margins of the Active Accusatory Stance are reinforced by normative connections to dispositions that clearly belong to different, though neighbouring, stances, such as those of apology and forgiveness—the disposition to accept apology, to be flexible about what counts as a sufficient one, to be open to a possible change of heart, or at least to let bygones be bygones.

The Active Accusatory Stance is also supported by a different set of neighbouring dispositions with which there are close normative relations. These dispositions concern other blame-adjacent things which, as we have already considered, one might be doing *in* blaming: sticking up for yourself or for whomever was wronged; protesting the wrong by speaking out; maybe actively modifying the relationship with the wrongdoer by giving them the cold shoulder, or, alternatively, getting in their face as a proper part of functional-loving-relationship-as-normal.¹⁴ Each of these important nearby things have been argued variously by fellow theorists of blame to be constitutive. By contrast, minimalism locates the blame itself in the business of accusation of fault, but still finds a place for all of these blame-adjacent phenomena as important by-products that provide other dimensions to our response to wrongdoing.

The list of dispositions that I offer here to clothe the naked idea of an Active Accusatory Stance is not intended to provide an *independent* explanation of what makes the Active Accusatory Stance accusatory. The account rather presupposes that we already have sufficient handle on that idea, notably from the phenomenology of being blamed, for which I suggested above we have a finely tuned social sense. The outline I have drawn here of the Active Accusatory Stance is somewhat vague and unstable—as it should be, since it reflects the real vagueness and instability of our accusatory attitudes and the question of their activation. Vague and unstable as it is, the engagement of the Active Accusatory Stance is what converts simple fault-finding into blame. The attitudes flowing from its dispositions create the accusatory holding engagement that is distinctive of blaming.

The Force of Blame Is the Force of Accusation

We have arrived at the definitive aspect, which I have not yet addressed head-on, and that is the question of blame's force. The distinctive sting of blame is taken by many theorists, quite rightly, as a distinguishing feature, so that a key desideratum of any account of blame is that it should be able to account for it. As Pamela Hieronymi helpfully remarks: 'Blame, unlike mere description, carries a characteristic depth, force, or sting' (Hieronymi 2004 p. 117). One of the strongest

¹⁴ I allude to Susan Wolf's critical engagement with Scanlon, in which she gives an affirming defense of the normality and not-necessarily-rupturing-to-relationships nature of angry blame in 'Blame Italian Style' (Wolf 2011; Scanlon 2008), though I would note that she is not offering angry blame as a constitutive account of blame in general.

considerations in favour the minimalism I propose here is that the idea of a judgement of fault made from the Active Accusatory Stance delivers us the sting of blame ready-made from the other arguments that already recommend it. Like Hieronymi, I locate the source of blame's force not in any affective aspect but rather in the judgement. However, whereas she locates it in the content that the blamee failed to show proper regard to others, where this is understood as going deep because it concerns a defect in the blamee's moral agency, I locate the source of the sting in the accusatory force of being found fault with from the Active Accusatory Stance. (This will stand my minimalism in good stead when we turn specifically to non-moral domains of blame.)

According to minimalism, the distinctive sting of blame, which is *ex hypothesi* absent in a bare judgement of blameworthiness, is introduced by the very added element we have identified as converting it into blame. The definitive force of blame is none other than the force of accusation. That is why even wholly dispassionate blame still exerts the force of blame. Accusation stings all on its own, either a little or a lot, shallowly or deeply, depending on the context and content of the accusation. It moreover can sting even if you do not feel remorse because, for instance, you regard the accusation to be false. When, on the other hand, you recognize the accusation to be true, its sting is augmented and transformed by that recognition—as it was for Emma ('The truth of his representation there was no denying. She felt it at her heart. How could she have been so brutal, so cruel to Miss Bates! (Austen 1994 p. 304)). In such cases the sting of accusation combines with the remorse to which it gives rise. Often this combination is difficult and takes time to resolve itself, given the natural tensions between the impulse to defend oneself and the recognition of the authority of the accusation. In Communicative Blame it is this accusatory attitudinal spike in the judgement of fault that minimally serves to arrest the blamee's attention, as it does in Knightley's Communicative Blame directed at Emma. Even in the absence of affective enhancement, the accusatory attitude spikes the fault-finding judgement, focusing attention on the accusation's content.¹⁵

¹⁵ In 'What's the Point of Blame' (Fricker 2016) where I already passingly characterize Communicative Blame as an 'accusation of fault', I assumed that this accusation needed to be spiked with feeling so as to get the wrongdoer's attention (p. 171 and passim). But I no longer think the attention-getting spike need take affective form—though of course it often may, as it certainly does with Mr Knightley and Emma, for instance. The essential accusatory force supplied attitudinally may often be affectively supplemented with this or that feeling, but Communicative Blame can operate without it, and may sometimes need to, as when a fully dispassionate judgement is called for.

The force of accusation is also what differentiates blaming from non-blaming forms of fault-finding, such as constructive criticism, for instance. If I am in a cooking class and my teacher tells me I always put too much salt in my pasta sauces, then he is not thereby blaming me for my excessive seasoning habit. If he is a decent teacher, he will be helping me become a better cook through constructive criticism. If on the other hand, as some chefs are famously wont to do, he tells me I am over-seasoning in a manner that carries accusatory force because his judgement is in some way (quietly or loudly, politely or profanely) infused with accusatory attitude, then he is blaming me—his fault-finding judgement is issued from the Active Accusatory Stance. (Perhaps this would be culinary blame, a sub-domain, I suppose of aesthetic blame.)

All in all, these considerations come together to make a fairly rounded case for the minimalist proposal that whenever a bare judgement of blameworthiness, or a sheer constructive criticism, acquires (intentionally or otherwise) attitudinal content deriving from the Active Accusatory Stance, its nascent accusatory force is activated so that the mere fault-finding judgement is converted into blame. In addition, however, there are four significant theoretical advantages concerning what I shall call the remarkable *portability* of blame that minimalism explains and entails.

Wider Theoretical Advantages of Minimalism

(i) Portability Across Emotions

A number of authors have rightly emphasized that blame can take many different emotional forms. Canonically, it can take the form of anger, or other hostile feeling, and (*pace* Nussbaum 2016) these may or may not be retributive in structure (Blustein 2014, ch. 1). Blame may also take quite different emotional or affective forms, such as disappointment, or sorrow (Fricker 2019, p. 248 fn.12), or demoralization, or hurt feelings (Shoemaker 2024). Strawson, very plausibly, points to indignation as perhaps the most basic and typical forms of blame. But we should notice that indignation is in fact an emotion that may be stoutly felt without constituting blame at all. Consider the disappointed English holiday-maker who has taken her children to the South coast in July for the third year in a row, and every year: cold and rainy. We may naturally imagine her as thoroughly indignant at the repeated unseasonably awful weather. How so? Minimalism offers a simple answer. Given that blame can, if minimal in form, be no more than

an accusatory judgement of fault, this sort of normative judgement may or may not be part of the cognitive content of any given state of indignation. If I am blame-indignant at the fact that you have lied to me about something important, then part of the content of my indignation here is, precisely, an accusatory judgement of fault ('You lying toad!'). Alternatively, if I am non-blamingly indignant about the awful weather, then my indignation contains no such moral-cognitive content ('Three summers in a row—outrageous!').

(ii) Domain Portability: Moral, Epistemic, Aesthetic, Sporting...

The second kind of portability enjoyed by minimalism is across different domains of blame. The current debates about epistemic blame are, from a minimalist point of view, encumbered by a sense of obligation to theories of moral blame that require some considerable cargo beyond the minimalist requirements. The cargo has perhaps most prominently taken either the form of the belief-desire pair account offered by George Sher; or, alternatively, the relationship modification model advanced by Scanlon. But whatever view one takes of moral blame, these views do not easily recommend themselves in the epistemic domain, where it takes a considerable stretch to make it seem like telling someone they're at fault for being careless in their calculations requires a desire that they hadn't been so careless, or a rupture in an epistemic relationship... Of course, it can be done. But if minimalism is right, then there is no obligation to these forms of blame, and theorists of epistemic blame are free to travel lighter.

Two different prominent approaches are advanced by Jessica Brown and Cameron Boulton respectively, Brown taking her cue from Sher, and Boulton taking his from Scanlon. Sher's account of moral blame represents blame as a belief-desire pair: 'a pair whose components are, first, the familiar belief that the person in question has acted badly or has a bad character, but also, second, a corresponding desire that that person *not* have acted badly or *not* have a bad character' (Sher 2006 p. 14). But a decisive difficulty here is that blamers need not desire that the culprit had not acted badly or did not have the bad character, for sometimes we are glad that people act badly—for instance when their doing so has some downstream consequences that we value sufficiently highly. Imagine your spouse has a lamentable grasp of probabilities, and is prone to bizarre spates of wishful thinking. They spend money you can't afford to buy 1000 lottery tickets, forming an idiotically confident belief in a big win. But...they do win! You still

epistemically blame them ('You idiot! How could you think 1000 tickets gave you a good chance of winning?'), but you do not have a desire that they should not have formed the bad belief ('Let's book a luxury holiday!').¹⁶

Boult raises an independent line of objection to Sher's account in relation to Brown's use of it in the epistemic domain, which he attributes to Smith (Smith 2013), and which concerns cases of possessing the belief-desire pair and yet not blaming—a loving and compassionate mother believes her son has done something terribly wrong and desperately desires that he had not, yet does not blame him one bit. As an alternative model for epistemic blame, Boult prefers the relationship modification account of moral blame, developed for moral blame by Scanlon. This requires arguing, in the broad, that moments of epistemic blame involve a rupture to an epistemic relationship, perhaps a specific relationship such as a relationship of interpersonal epistemic trust, or, more attenuatedly, there can be an appeal (as Scanlon does in the moral domain) to the idea of a 'general epistemic relationship', even to people one is not epistemically depending on (Boult 2020). It is a cogent approach; but it requires a great deal of elaboration that is unnecessary to capture minimal epistemic blame. Epistemic blame need not have anything much to do with epistemic relationships (though of course it can do, which is why it is interesting to explore that territory even if it goes beyond what is necessary). On minimalism, epistemic blame may involve nothing more than a judgement of epistemic fault from the Active Accusatory Stance: 'It was your fault the experiment failed—you were careless in the calculations'. If we're in the business of definition, there is no need for more.

We should acknowledge of course that epistemic blame *can* be loaded up with all this cargo, and more—with a desire-that-not, with a relationship modification, and indeed with more besides, such as hostile passions, and the whole shooting match. Sporting blame is often highly affectively loaded ('You just stood there in the goal like a lemon!'), and the fans bitterly desire that not, and perhaps they cool their support for the team considerably. But such additional layers of content are entirely contingent, and surplus to requirement when it comes to the blaming itself. The accusatory judgement of fault would be sufficient. Minimalism about blame moves far more easily between domains than either the belief-desire model or the relationship modification

¹⁶ For other versions of this objection to Sher's account, see Fricker 2016 p. 182 n 11.

model, or a model that requires specific affect. Minimalism offers no more and no less than the materials that are required to make sense of blame in its everyday form, in all its explicit and inexplicit guises.

(iii) Portability Across Persons: Self-blame

Where self-blame fits in to an account of blame is often found puzzling, with many accounts identifying it with guilt (for instance, Carlsson 2015, 2017; and Clarke 2016). Carlsson understands guilt as ‘a special kind of suffering: the pain of recognizing what you have done’ (Carlsson 2017 p. 91). This what I am calling ‘remorse’ (preferring to use ‘guilt’ for a wider set of responses to one’s own bad actions capacious enough to include not only remorse but also agent-regret—feeling guilty for something bad one has done, even if through no fault of one’s own). But, as we saw above, the force of blame is that of accusation, and the natural thing to say about self-blame is that it is self-accusation. Accusation stings, but that sting is not the same thing as remorse. It *prompts* remorse in relation to the wrong done, and so remorse is felt *after*, and because of, the accusatory force of blame. It therefore cannot be correct to identify self-blame with guilt.¹⁷ Minimalism makes all this simple: I find fault with myself from the Active Accusatory Stance. I mentally point and wag my finger at myself for the fault in my behaviour; my judgement that I was at fault stings as the force of blame makes itself reflexively felt, and prompts remorse in relation to the action it shaped.

(iv) Portability to Non-agential Objects

How, finally, does minimalism help with our apparently literal blame of non-agential objects such as the blunt knife, the slow laptop, or the wrong kind of snow? For those inclined to allow that there is such a thing as non-agential blame, then this is not at all surprising if seen from a minimalist point of view, where minimalism is to be understood as belonging to the genealogical conception described at the outset. If agential blaming is accusatory fault-finding, then it

¹⁷ In this sense I agree with Shoemaker that guilt is a *response* to being blamed (Shoemaker 2024 p. 127). However, in my own picture, guilt need not always be a response to being *blamed*, as agent-regret may be reasonably conceived as a form of guilt-feeling (in *Shame and Necessity*, Williams says agent-regret ‘can be psychologically and structurally a manifestation of guilt’ (Williams 1993, p. 93). On this picture, remorse (for blameworthy action) and agent-regret (for non-blameworthy action), and indeed forms of shame for either, are all differently inflected members of the same family of normative-emotional response to realizing that one has done something bad. Guilt, or guilt-feeling, seems a good word for that broad class, *pace* some writers’ inclination to draw a hard line between guilt and shame.

incorporates within its content the more simple form of fault-finding—the kind not done from the Active Accusatory Stance. Indeed, that was our first approximate formulation of minimalism, subsequently augmented so as to capture *inter alia* the accusatory force of blame for agents. But non-agential objects are of course not proper objects of accusation—they do not act and they could not feel its force. It is only the simple fault-finding elements of blaming that could intelligibly be operative in any non-agential blaming. Slow laptops and blunt knives can be the cause of bad things (my frustration, my cut finger), and when they are, we find fault with them. This fault-finding, insofar as it is to be taken literally, is simple, and non-accusatory (except in anthropomorphic play). Here, in this derivative account of non-agential blame, I take minimalism to overlap with Chislenko’s general account of blame as attention to something as a source of bad (Chislenko 2025). But, for minimalism, it is important that agential blame is more than that, for it must include the signature force of accusation that is appropriate only to agents.

The starting conception of the concept of blame that informs my minimalism is a genealogical one, according to which we should expect blame’s content to be composed of shifting layers of semiotic residue from different kinds of use, purpose, and meaning enacted over cultural space and historical time. Blaming an object—any object—for *bad things caused* naturally features as a central, inner layer deep in our concept of blame, even while specifically agential blame dominates the concept with its many further layers of content that relate to accusatory holding engagements, appropriate only to agents. Non-agential objects and agents both cause bad things to happen, and so this common idea has its place at the core of our concept. But obviously, only agents are responsible for what they do, and only agents can be held in accusatory engagements that call on them to answer for themselves in acknowledgement of what they’ve done. I find this idea that there are different layerings of content contained in our minimalist concept of blame to offer an instructively inclusive picture of how non-agential blame is related to, though crucially different from, agential blame.

Conclusion

Starting with blame’s positive normative function in Communicative Blame, and following the clue to the minimalist definition of blame that it implies, we find a form of blame that is free of retributivism or any idea of imposing harm. Minimalism seems to me not only to present a

satisfying account of what blame is—or at least what it is in Communicative Blame—but it also has significant explanatory power in relation to blame’s notable portability across different emotional states, different domains, and even different sorts of object. I have not so far offered it as a revisionist account of blame, beyond the normative recommendation that our blame should take the form of Communicative Blame, and that Communicative Blame requires only an honest and dialogically open accusatory fault-finding—an accusatory holding engagement. However, we may now observe that these strategies ultimately come to the same thing: if Communicative Blame models the normatively valuable form of blaming, then the kind of blame we should strive to live by, and should actively aim to crystallize as our concept of blame, is the minimalist one. That concept—blame as fault-finding from the Active Accusatory Stance—is effectively proposed as our revised concept that we would, perhaps, do well to live by.

Bibliography

Améry, Jean (1980; first published 1966) ‘Resentments’ pp. 62-81 in *At The Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a survivor on Auschwitz and its realities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press)

Austen, Jane (1994) *Emma* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions)

Bennett, Christopher (2008) *The Apology Ritual: A Philosophical Theory of Punishment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

Bennett, Christopher (2013) ‘The Expressive Function of Blame’ in D. Justin Coates and Neal A. Tognazzini (eds.) *Blame: Its Nature and Norms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Boult, Cameron (2021) 'There is a distinctively epistemic kind of blame' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 103: 518-534

Boult, Cameron (2021) 'The Significance of Epistemic Blame' *Erkenntnis* 88(2): 807-828

Boult, Cameron (2024) *Epistemic Blame* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Blustein Jeffrey M. (2014) *Forgiveness and Remembrance: Remembering Wrongdoing in Personal and Public Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Brown, Jessica (2020) 'What Is Epistemic Blame?' *Nous* 54(2): 389-407

Carlsson, Andreas Brekke (2015) 'Blameworthiness as Deserved Guilt', *The Journal of Ethics* 21: 89-115

Carlsson, Andreas Brekke (2019) 'Shame and Attributability' *Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility* 6: 112-39

Chislenko, Eugene 2019 'Blame and Protest' *The Journal of Ethics* 23: 163-181)

Chislenko, Eugene (2025) 'Blame As Attention' *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 106: 80-93

Clarke, Randolphe (2016) 'Moral Responsibility, Guilt, and Retributivism' *The Journal of Philosophy* 20: 121-37

Cohen, Stephen 'Distinctions Among Blame Concepts' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (1977) 38: 149-66

Craig, Edward (1987) 'The Practical Explication of Knowledge' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 87: 211-226

- Craig, Edward (1990) *Knowledge and the State of Nature: An Essay in Conceptual Synthesis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press)
- Darwall, Stephen (2006) *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press)
- Duff, Antony (2001) *Punishment, Communication, and Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- Fricker, Miranda (2016) 'What's the Point of Blame? A Paradigm Based Explanation', *NOÛS*, 50 (1): 165-183
- Fricker, Miranda (2018) 'Ambivalence About Forgiveness' *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 84: 161-185
- Fricker, Miranda (2019) 'Forgiveness: An Ordered Pluralism' *Australasian Philosophical Review* 3/3: 241-260
- Gaita, Raimond (2004) *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* (London: Routledge)
- Hieronymi, Pamela (2001) 'Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 62(3): 529-555
- Lacey, Nicola & Pickard, Hanna (2013) 'From the Consulting Room to the Court Room? Taking the Clinical Model of Responsibility Without Blame Into the Legal Realm', *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 33(1):1-29
- Macnamara, Coleen (2013) "'Screw you!' & 'thank you'" *Philosophical Studies* 165: 893-914
- Macnamara, Coleen (2015) 'Reactive Attitudes as Communicative Entities' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* Vol. XC No. 3: 546-569

- McGeer, Victoria (2011) 'Co-reactive attitudes and the making of moral community' in *Emotions, Imagination and Moral Reasoning* eds. R. Langdon and C. MacKenzie (London: Psychology Press)
- McGeer, Victoria (2013) 'Civilizing Blame' in D. Justin Coates and Neal A. Tognazzini (eds.) *Blame: Its Nature and Norms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- McGeer, Victoria & Pettit, Philip (2015) 'The Hard Problem of Responsibility' in *Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility: Vol 3* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- McKenna, Michael (2012) *Conversation and Responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- McKenna, Michael (2013) 'Directed Blame and Conversation', in D. Justin Coates and Neal A. Tognazzini eds. *Blame: Its Nature and Norms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- McKenna, Michael (2019) 'Basically Deserved Blame and Its Value' *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 15(3): 255-282
- Nietzsche, Friedrich (1989) *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books)
- Nussbaum, Martha C. (2016) *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- Owens, David (2012) *Shaping the Normative Landscape* Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Pereboom, Derk (2023) *Wrongdoing & The Moral Emotions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- Scanlon, T. M. (2008) *Moral Dimensions* (Camb. MA: Harvard)

Shoemaker, David & Vargas, Manuel (2019) 'Moral Torch Fishing: A Signaling Theory of Blame' *Noûs* 55(3): 581-602

Shoemaker, David (2024) *The Architecture of Blame and Praise: An Interdisciplinary Investigation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Sliwa, Paulina (2019) 'Reverse-Engineering Blame' *Philosophical Perspectives* 33(1): 200-219

Smith, Angela M. (2013) 'Moral Blame and Moral Protest' in D. Justin Coates and Neal A. Tognazzini (eds.) *Blame: Its Nature and Norms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Strawson, P. F. (1974) 'Freedom and Resentment', in *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (London: Methuen)

Vargas, Manuel (2013) *Building Better Beings: A Theory of Moral Responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Walker, Margaret Urban (2006) *Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations After Wrongdoing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

Wallace, R. Jay (1994) *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press)

Williams, Bernard (1993) *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press)

Williams, Bernard (2002) *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press)

Wolf, Susan (2011) 'Blame Italian Style', essay 14 in *Reasons and Recognition: Essays on the Philosophy of T. M. Scanlon*, eds. Wallace, R. Jay, Kumar, Rahul & Freeman, Samuel (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Wonderly, Monique (2023) 'On Moral Pride As Taking Responsibility for the Good' *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 51(3): 265-293