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**Speaker: Julia Driver, The University of Texas at Austin
Paper: The Point of Blame is Epistemic**



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The Point of Blame is Epistemic

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I will be arguing for the following account of blame, which I refer to as the Instructional Model of Blame, (IM), which holds that the point of blame, of *holding accountable*, is epistemic on analogy with teaching. The point of blame is to *transmit, maintain, and reinforce* moral knowledge.¹ Moral knowledge includes knowledge of the correct moral reasons, and their weight and relations, along with knowledge of facts that the agent *should* have known. In the paradigm case, blame serves to *correct* the wrongdoer.

I argue that this account has advantages over other paradigm-based accounts that focus on the communicative function of blame. In particular, the Instructional Model will be able to give a natural account of cases that communication-based paradigms struggle with and need to treat as peripheral or derivative: private blame and self-blame.

To begin let's consider an extended blaming exchange based upon a passage from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

¹ For the purposes of this paper I will speak in terms of knowledge rather than understanding. I view understanding as reducible to knowledge, but nothing in particular hangs on the distinction as far as this paper is concerned. I also think that "understanding" risks some confusion because it seems to be a term of art in the moral epistemology literature. There is a very natural use of "understanding" in which "I understand what he is saying and it is completely false" can be true.

Elizabeth and Darcy: Elizabeth Bennett and Mr. Darcy, find themselves in a relationship characterized by mutual misunderstanding partly the result of each of their flaws: Darcy is arrogant and his sense of superiority leads him to treat Elizabeth, whose social status is far below his, insultingly. Elizabeth herself had formed a very unflattering view of Darcy early on and was too receptive to a one-sided information that cast his character into even a worse light. She blamed him for interfering in her sister's marriage and for harming one of his childhood friends. He blamed her for not taking up his perspective and for believing the worst of him on the basis of too little evidence. Fortunately they have occasion to work through the misunderstandings and to reflect on their faults. Elizabeth comes to understand that she did misjudge Darcy on the basis of unreliable testimony. Darcy comes to see that his paternalistic interference was unwarranted. They end up on the same page in the end, and their relationship is strengthened.²

This has the hallmarks of what many people regard as paradigmatic of a good blaming exchange. Blame is an apt response to poor quality of the will, and Elizabeth and Darcy are both attributing defects in practical reasoning to each other. Their exchange exhibits features different accounts of blame take to be either *essential* to blame, or, more weakly, *paradigmatic* of it. On a relationship centric account of blame, Elizabeth's blaming Darcy for treating her insultingly, for example, marks the fact that he acted in a relationship impairing manner and a subsequent adjustment of her attitudes on that basis. Communication based accounts would also view this case as a paradigm in that

they are communicating with each other, Elizabeth is *demanding* better consideration from Darcy, for example, she is *accusing* him of having acted badly and is *inviting* him to explain himself. Darcy, in

² Based on events in the plot of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

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turn, tries to provide that explanation but also accuses Elizabeth of epistemic negligence herself. In contrast, the account I argue for here treats the paradigm as involving epistemic correction. Elizabeth points out that Darcy's pride and arrogance have led him to harm others, Darcy points out that Elizabeth's epistemic negligence has caused her to misjudge him as well as others. The acceptance of the correction is what begins the restoration of their relationship.

The Instructional Model

I am situating this view with other approaches to blame which are paradigm-based. There have been a number of influential accounts of blame developed over the past couple of decades and yet all have been subject to compelling counterexamples. This has led some to hold that a *unified* account of blame is not possible, even restricting ourselves to accountability blame.³ Others have responded that this pessimistic conclusion is too quick. We need not limit ourselves to conceptual analysis, to coming up with necessary and sufficient conditions for accountability blame. We can also consider a paradigm-based approach. The advantage of this approach is that the goal is to understand our blaming practices in light of a *paradigm* so that even cases which

seem like counterexamples, if we were in the business of conceptual analysis, can be understood relative to the paradigm. For example, Miranda Fricker has presented a paradigm-based account in which she argues that holding accountable is paradigmatically *communicative*.⁴ The paradigm is identified by asking ourselves what problem blame solves. For Fricker, the problem it solves is normative alignment. Blame brings people to a shared moral understanding. On her communicative model this centrally involves accusing the wrongdoer of fault, the illocutionary point of the blame is the feeling

³ See, for example, Elinor Mason's *Ways to be Blameworthy*, Oxford University Press, 2019. ⁴ "What's the Point of Blame? A Paradigm Based Explanation," *Nous*, 50:1, 2016, 165-183.

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of remorse generated in the wrongdoer which marks the alignment with the blamer. It isn't *just* that the blamer and blamee will come to agree, for example, on what the right course of action is, they also agree on things like the reasons that justify actions, and presumably also things like the relative weight and significance of those reasons. Moral alignment is of course quite important as a means of minimizing conflict and creating community. In **Elizabeth and Darcy** we have a successful blaming exchange on Fricker's account because they are brought into alignment, they end up agreeing that Darcy's behavior was high-handed and inappropriate and that Elizabeth had not considered all the evidence at her disposal. On the model I propose, by contrast, they both stand corrected, and while alignment is important, the alignment itself simply drops out of their improved epistemic states.

The paradigm-based approach has revived communication models which previously had

been plagued by fairly serious counterexamples. For example, very many writers have noted that most instances of blaming are private, not expressed at all even when we allow for a very capacious category of “expression” to include things like lifted eyebrows and the incredulous stare. For example, George Sher noticed that blame itself must be kept separate from any expression of blame as part of his critique of the utilitarian accounts of blame offered by writers such as J.J.C. Smart, who regarded blame as functioning as a kind of deterrent to bad behavior.

...we can blame a person without his even being aware of it. Far from always being public, as deterrent punishment necessarily is, the blame that we direct at wrongdoers can be kept entirely private....This does not mean that blaming someone cannot affect his behavior, but it does mean that the blame itself must be distinct from any utterance or action through which it is expressed.

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To blame someone is one thing, to communicate one's blame, another.⁵

But more recent accounts which analyze blame as communicative grant all of this. Miranda Fricker, mentioned earlier, develops a communication model that treats things like private blame as derivative or peripheral. The Instructional Model will be able to give a natural more direct account of the cases that these theorists treat as peripheral.

Like Fricker, though, I approach paradigm selection by asking a similar question. What

is blame supposed to fix? Blame corrects people who are exhibiting poor quality of the will in some way. That poor quality of the will may involve genuine moral ignorance, or it may involve ignorance of morally relevant facts that the wrongdoer ought to know. Of course, there are other downstream aims, normative alignment being one of them, making sure people change their behavior being another. But these are downstream from the improved epistemic states. In **Elizabeth and Darcy**, Darcy reflects on his arrogance and entitlement and concludes that he did, indeed, behave quite badly. He has gained insight. This insight led him to change his behavior. And changing the behavior as a result of the greater insight is changing it for the right reasons.

Sometimes blaming behavior is not *used* this way. For example, a person might use blame as a purely coercive tactic, just to get the other person to stop behavior that they disapprove of for some reason. Darcy might try to brow-beat Elizabeth into acquiescing to his judgement, for example. This is defective – and the analogous style of teaching would be defective as well. A teacher who simply tries to brow-beat a student into accepting an answer hasn't done a proper job of teaching. To appeal to Strawson, using expressions of blame not to persuade but to harass is the treat the

⁵ *In Praise of Blame*, Oxford University Press, 2006, 74.

person blamed like an object rather than a participant: "...to see him...as something...to be managed or handled or cured or trained."⁶ Of course, as Strawson himself also noted, we can also have good reason to adopt the objective stance towards another person, even when we do regard the person as in full possession of

all agential capacities. But in these cases, when we use the language of blame to “manage” someone we aren’t properly blaming them, as when one uses the language of promising to issue a threat.

The Instructional model relies on an analogy between blaming and teaching. When we think about what teachers do in a classroom, we typically think of them passing along information. The teacher asserts something like:

(1) The capital of Idaho is Boise.

This assertion expresses their belief with the aim of getting others, the students, to believe it. The teacher *stands behind* their utterance, and the assertion is also a form of *assurance* for the audience.⁷ A sincere teacher is trying to improve the epistemic states of the students. But the simple transmission of knowledge is not the only task of the teacher. Teachers also correct mistakes. If a student writes in an exam book that the capital of Idaho is Pocatello, the teacher corrects that. If all goes well, the student takes the correction on board, changes his mind, retracts the previous answer, and so forth. Holding someone accountable for their wrongdoing is correcting them via the transmission of moral knowledge. So, the correction aims at changing the student’s *beliefs* rather than simply correcting the

⁶“Freedom and Resentment,” *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1963, 48: 187-211. ⁷ At this juncture in the account I am not committing to any particular account of the *fundamental* nature of assertion beyond the very basic understanding of an assertion as a kind of utterance which makes representations and has a truth value.

utterance itself. One might correct an utterance, for example, by pointing out that there was a spelling or grammatical error. Maybe the student spelled “Pocatello” incorrectly, for example – but that kind of correction, simply of the utterance itself, doesn’t aim to correct the belief that Pocatello is the capital of Idaho. Correcting their belief involves changing their representations of the world. The alignment is alignment on reality. Of course, with shared knowledge there will be normative alignment between individuals as well.

It is probably more accurate to say that what the sincere blamer is doing on this model is *attempting* to correct. This model allows for the observation that sometimes it is the student who instructs the teacher, so the *blamer* may be the one in need of correction. Suppose the teacher has claimed that St. Louis is the capital of Missouri and tries to correct a student who has claimed that it is Jefferson City. The student is correct, and the student now is in a position to correct the instructor. So the Instructional Model is not committed to holding that the initial blamer, so to speak, turns out to be the actual instructor. In **Elizabeth and Darcy**, for example, Darcy challenges a portion of Elizabeth’s blame – he had not, in fact, harmed his childhood acquaintance and had, in fact, treated him with a great deal of forbearance. In blaming Elizabeth for epistemic negligence he is correcting her and correcting the record.

Again, as part of the blaming exchange, we want more than a verdict, we also want to understand the reasons. Consider the state capital example again. Many people think that St. Louis is the capital of Missouri because it is the largest and most prominent city in Missouri. But, of course, that’s not what determines whether or not a city is a state

capital. Likewise, when someone has acted badly and they are blamed for it, simply passing along the belief that the person has acted badly isn't enough, there must also be some appreciation of the reasons. The best blaming exchange, just like the best

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instructional exchange, involves transmitting those reasons. When Darcy proposed to Elizabeth in such a way as to highlight her social inferiority and imply that he was thereby doing her a great favor by condescending to propose to her, he acted very badly and he acted badly *because* he was insulting her and failing to treat her with respect. Correcting a student involves doing more than pointing out that they were wrong, they need to understand why they were wrong.

One potential worry about this account is that it doesn't seem to involve a sanctioning element. Many accounts of blame pick out a particular way in which blame *sanctions*. Indeed, that is supposed to mark the difference between simply judging someone blameworthy and actually blaming them. A sanction is punitive. Gary Watson views sanctioning as characteristic of accountability blame as opposed to attributability blame.⁸ This is because holding someone to a set of demands via hostile reactive attitudes such as anger and resentment involves inflicting a harm upon them. It is also the feature of blame that is thought to require special justification. The sanctioning element in blame is due to its being "disagreeable" and involving "dispositions to treat others in generally unwelcome ways".⁹ If anger and outrage, for example, are directed towards someone they are very likely to find it disagreeable. If friendships and collaborations are ended, that treatment is likely to be most unwelcome. If one *simply* points out that the behavior was wrong, for example, some have argued that is not

sufficient for blame. When Elizabeth angrily confronts Darcy about his arrogance, then the anger works as a way of inflicting a kind of punishment upon him above and beyond any judgement

⁸ Gary Watson, "Two Faces of Responsibility," *Philosophical Topics*, 1996. Roughly, we hold someone accountable, and thus subject to accountability blame, when we hold them to a set of demands and expectations (where "demands" and "expectations" are treated synonymously). Attributability blame, on the other hand, is focused on whether or not the behavior can be properly attributed to them, whether or not it is, so to speak, reflective of their values and commitments. According to Watson these come apart, as when we think someone might not be apt for accountability blame in virtue of lacking certain capacities. A psychopath, for example, may be incapable of grasping *moral* reasons, and it may also be the case that their bad behavior is a genuine expression of their values, their "true" self. My own view is that there isn't such a sharp distinction here.

⁹ Ibid, 238-239.

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she has made and transmitted to him. On my account holding accountable need not involve a hostile reactive attitude directed towards the wrongdoer. Such attitudes *may* be present, indeed, perhaps they typically are present. Other writers on moral responsibility also hold that blame is not necessarily accompanied by hostile reactive attitudes. They may believe that blame can be dispassionate, for example, or some reactive attitudes are much less hostile, and can even be very subtle, involving something like condemnatory disappointment.¹⁰ T. M. Scanlon and George Sher both offer accounts of blame which don't require negative affect.¹¹ For Scanlon, the blame involves an adjustment of attitude towards the wrongdoer. Sher regards blame as consisting in a judgement that the blamee has acted badly, or displayed poor quality of the will, along with the desire that this not be the case.¹² Critics of Scanlon have argued that even an adjustment of attitude should be thought of as a sanction.¹³ Elizabeth thinks less well of Darcy after the disastrous proposal, their relationship has been impaired, and even if she never expressed herself the loss of her good opinion is a kind of sanction. I don't intend to weigh in on the issue here of what constitutes a

genuine sanction but simply bring it up to note that on my view one might wonder where the sanctioning element is located at all. On the Instructional Model blame is constituted by *correction* of the mistake but correcting *all by itself* is not sanctioning in the strong sense. The sanctioning analog on the Instructional model might involve deducting points, forcing a retest, etc. It's worth noting, though, that an Instructional Model could be developed in which sanctioning is a core feature of blame.

¹⁰ Daniel Telech and Leora Katz, "Condemnatory Disappointment," *Ethics*, 2022, 132: 851-880. ¹¹ T. M. Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions*; George Sher, *In Praise of Blame*, ¹² I will not be discussing Sher's account in detail here. My primary worry here is the one can blame in the absence of a desire that the person had not acted badly or displayed poor quality of the will, as when a mother blames a teacher for being biased in favor of her child but then is also appreciative of that bias. ¹³ See, for example, Dana Kay Nelkin, "Desert, Fairness, and Resentment," *Philosophical Explorations*, 2013, 16 (2).

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Whether or not we want to count things like attitude adjustment or correction as sanctioning responses themselves, it is generally accepted that one function of blame is to sanction, but it is also noted that this isn't the only function. Other philosophers have pointed out other useful purposes of blame: to *signal* something – and there are differing theories as to what exactly is being signaled by blame.¹⁴ Signaling may be expressed, as when the blamer signals to others that norms will be upheld and wrongdoing recognized and not tolerated, but it may not be, as in cases in which a person reminds herself of something. Some accounts of blame have leaned very heavily on this signaling function. This also highlights a feature of blame: that it can be aimed, in a way, at third parties. Angela Smith, for example, argues that blame is a way of challenging wrongdoing, a form of protest against wrongdoing:

What distinguishes moral blame of persons from the sort of regret or sadness we might feel over natural disasters is that the former embodies a disposition to repudiate, to take some kind of stand against, a certain presumption implicit in the wrongdoer's behavior: the presumption that he or she has the right to treat others in objectionable ways.¹⁵

She is clear that this need not be expressed. Other writers, for example, have noted that importance of internal protest against wrongdoing as a means of maintaining dignity. And this segways into another function of blame. Blame also serves to reinforce and maintain moral knowledge and commitment to norms. One way this is accomplished is through what Adam Poviarchy calls

¹⁴ See Adam Poviarchy, "Signalling, Sanctioning, and Sensitizing: How to Uphold Norms with Blame," *Synthese*, 2026, 207: 135.

¹⁵ "Moral Blame and Moral Protest," in *Blame: Its Nature and Norms*, ed. D. Justin Coates and Neal Tognazzini, 2012, Oxford University Press, 36.

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"sensitization". Sensitization is the process of internalizing norms. A given instance of blame can do all three: when Elizabeth expresses anger at being insulted she can be thought of as sanctioning Darcy, protesting or otherwise signaling disapproval of his mistreatment, as well as reinforcing her own understanding of her worth.

One of the problems mentioned earlier for communication models is the problem of private blame, which these models must treat as peripheral. Miranda Fricker, for example, argues that private blame in which someone never expresses the blame is

nevertheless *apt* for communication – and it should be understood in those terms.

Other acts are essentially expressive, such as warning and arguing, and they can be private as well. This is because there are situations in which it is better to not express the blame (or the warning or to argue) all things considered. What reactions would not be communicative? A reaction like shock or bewilderment. If Elizabeth were simply to react with shock to Darcy's proposal she is not addressing anyone or *accusing* Darcy. But blame, on her view, accusatory and, unlike shock, an accusation is addressed to someone. Similarly with self-blame. Self-blame can certainly be expressed, it is just that it is not *directed at* someone *else*. However, she notes that when a person is aptly blamed, remorse is the appropriate attitude, and it's heart is self blame. When someone else blames me, and I take it on board, I will be blaming myself.¹⁶

Michael McKenna also regards private blame as derivative. In his *Conversation and Responsibility* he runs an analogy between blaming and conversing.¹⁷ *Actions* have meaning in the sense that actions offer us evidence as to an agent's reasons for acting. These reasons are a reflection of the agent's quality of will. The blamer responds to this meaning via – paradigmatically – expressed blame, by

¹⁶ Fricker's discussion of self-blame is curious in that she seems to be making a purely developmental or historical point: taking blame on board *leads to* self-blame. This is not a conceptual priority claim, however.¹⁷ See especially Chapter 4.

addressing the wrongdoer and in such a way as to invite a response. Given appropriate uptake, the response will be apology and amends, or, if the person blamed denies wrongdoing, an explanation or excuse. So how to account for private blame? When one blames privately there is still implicit address. The private blame corresponds to what

one *would* say in the paradigmatic blaming exchange. Others have pointed out the problem with this move. Specifically, there is very likely going to be a disconnect between what I express internally when blaming someone and what I would say to them face-to-face. For example, my unexpressed blame might be especially forceful if the person is not actually in front of me. Or it might be less forceful.

At first, it might look like the Instructional Model will have similar problems because a correction also seems like something apt for expression. How can the teacher correct the student without issuing an utterance of some kind or other? But the heart of the Instructional Model is that the proper function of blame is to improve epistemic states. That includes one's own epistemic states. Thus, when a person blames herself there are at least two possibilities: the blame takes the form of a *realization* that she has acted badly, *or* the blame follows that realization. In *Pride and Prejudice* once Elizabeth realizes how badly she has misjudged Darcy she experiences a bout of self-excoriation: "How despicably I have acted!" she cried "I, who have prided myself on my discernment!...How humiliating is this discovery! yet, how just a humiliation...Till this moment I never knew myself."¹⁸ There is a realization that she has acted badly by being epistemically negligent. That is acquiring knowledge, though one might press me on whether that truly counts as moral knowledge since Elizabeth was already fully cognizant of epistemic norms. But assuming that this realization of her own poor behavior isn't the right sort of knowledge, there is still epistemic value in reinforcing and maintaining knowledge. When a person blames herself, she is not informing herself of anything new.

¹⁸ *Pride and Prejudice*, New York: New American Library, 1961, 176.

But she may be reminding herself, emphasizing the significance of the norms she has neglected. Maintaining moral knowledge is valuable in itself, but it also matters because the knowledge helps us in difficult circumstances. It is sometimes difficult to have confidence that one is right about what morality demands or recommends. History and literature are filled with examples of people who suffer a moral crisis because of self-interest, social pressures, various authorities telling them that they are wrong, or even under the pressure of torture. In the case of Elizabeth's self-blame, she is reinforcing what she already knew, since she had blamed others for the same lack of awareness. is still marked by feelings of remorse and still inclines the individual towards self-correction.

The same holds for private blame. To use another example from *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth had long blamed her father for his behavior as a husband, for his "...continual breach of conjugal obligation and decorum which, in exposing his wife to the contempt of her own children, was highly reprehensible."¹⁹ However, she never expressed the blame partly out of gratitude for the fact that her father was affectionate to *her*. When blame is not addressed to the blamee and not even meant to be addressed to the blamee, it still serves to shore up our capacities for moral judgment. Early sentimentalists, such as Adam Smith, noted that our capacity to make reliable moral judgments is something built up over time through very many acts of judgment – approval or disapproval – and building up a kind of moral experience over time. The vast majority of these exercises in judgment will be private, and ought to be private. But they are crucial in building up and reinforcing our moral understanding.

Another application of the Instructional Model is the application to apology. Apology is one of the things that the blamer welcomes and is called for if the knowledge has been transmitted. What

¹⁹ Ibid, 200.

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would the best sort of apology look like on this model? A proper apology indicates that the blame has been taken up, that the wrongdoer has learned something. This doesn't necessarily mean that the blamee needs to agree with everything. In fact, for purposes of displaying comprehension, we might have a better apology when the "student" disagrees about some aspect of the blame. They may agree with the verdict, for example, but then also *disagree* with some of the reasoning. One might agree that what one did was wrong but think that the reaction was too extreme. Hostile reactive attitudes frequently accompany blame, and strong emotions might lead someone to make overly dramatic claims. Going back to the Elizabeth and Darcy case, Darcy might agree that the proposal was uncivil and yet also believe that Elizabeth overreacted and that once she was made aware of all the facts, she would at least feel less insulted.

One might agree that the blamee acted badly but not fully buy into the explanation. Maybe one of the principles cited is too strong, for example. Suppose that Alice has lied to William about running an errand for him, claiming that she did in fact do the grocery shopping when she actually had not. If William's blame includes the following rationale, "It is always wrong to lie!" it would be reasonable for her to take issue with *that*. She can agree that what she did was wrong, but challenge the reason brought to

bear by William. Indeed, lying is frequently wrong, but the principle he cites is too strong. The apology thus might include a criticism of the rationale for the blame. This is valuable because the blamee demonstrates that they are *working with you* to move in the right direction. Further, the apologizer might also agree with the blamer's explanation and then *add to it*. Again, this demonstrates comprehension. William might blame Alice for the lying since it is a form of manipulation, and that might be the reason he gives when he blames her for lying. And, she can add to it. She might point out that, not only is lying manipulative, it is also harmful.

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Noting different ways correction works can help solve potential problems for the Instructional Model. For example, a critic might point out that we often blame people even when we know that they *already* know that what they did was a serious norm violation. This is the problem of *redundant blame*. First, it is worth pointing out that even if the blamee knows that what they did was wrong, the blame might not actually be redundant since they might be mistaken about reasons. There are at least two ways in which a person can be mistaken about their reasons. They might be mistaken about what reasons actually bear on the justification of the action in question. For example, two people, Amy and Robert, might agree that eating animals is wrong, so they agree on the verdict, but disagree on why it is wrong. Amy may believe it is wrong because it harms an animal whereas Robert may believe it is wrong because it is intemperate. While it may be both harmful *and* intemperate, if Amy blames Robert for eating a hamburger she needs to set him straight on the reasons as well. Even though Robert may believe that it is wrong he is lacking awareness of one set of considerations that

affect the justification of the action. Thus, Amy's blame would not be redundant.

Second, even if there is agreement on the reasons in play in the justification of the action, there can be disagreement on how to *weigh* those reasons. Amy may weigh harm much more than intemperance, and Robert the reverse.

Another way in which the blame may not actually be redundant has to do with the intended audience. When Amy blames Robert for eating the hamburger and expresses it, she may know full well that Robert knows that it is wrong and knows exactly why it is wrong as well. But there may be circumstances in which she can improve the epistemic states of others by expressing the blame. The audience might be wider than Robert. Linguists note that the audience of an utterance can be broken down according to different roles.²⁰ There is the addressee, that is, the person to whom the

²⁰ See James D. McCawley, "Participant Roles, Frames, and Speech Acts," *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 1999, 22: 595-619.

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utterance is addressed, in our case, the person who is being blamed; there is the "ratified recipient," that is, an officially sanctioned partner or participant in the conversation; there is the intended recipient, that is, those who are included in the group that the speaker intends to address (this can include eavesdroppers, though eavesdroppers do not count as ratified recipients); and just plain recipient, or anyone privy to the utterance regardless of what the speaker intends. All of these roles can be instantiated in one person, but they can also come apart. Blame can improve the epistemic states of other audience members beyond the addressee, or the blamee. For example, Samantha may be eating lunch with Robert, when Amy addresses Robert, she also holds herself accountable for communicating with Samantha, and maybe

Samantha can be informed in ways that Robert can't be. There also may be non-ratified recipients, people who are eavesdropping. Amy does not hold herself accountable for what they happen to hear, but she may nevertheless intend to transmit moral knowledge to them as well.

Sometimes, of course, redundant blame will strike us as infelicitous. But other times it seems entirely appropriate, as some iterated blame exchanges illustrate. For example, I might know that the blamee knows that what they were doing was wrong as well as the right reasons that underlie the judgement

of wrongdoing, but I might not know that the blamee knows that I know. Sometimes when we blame people, we use the locution "You know very well that what you did was wrong!" What it takes to know something is a bit slippery because how we make belief attributions itself is slippery. One distinction that is relevant is the distinction between occurrent and dispositional belief. When I remonstrate with a person using this locution, I may be trying to get them to realize something that they have shoved aside in their practical deliberations. Or I may be pointing out that they are weak willed and did not weigh the moral reasons as they should have and so acted irrationally. We also

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sometimes say "You ought to have known that was wrong!" where we are picking out a reason why the knowledge is lacking, too. The person was negligent in their epistemic duties.

Consider the following:

Amanda and Rose: Amanda has heard from her friends at work that her friend Rose has been criticizing her behind her back. Amanda feels betrayed, and after work she approaches Rose and blames her for disloyalty and dishonesty. Rose does not admit fault and instead attempts to undermine the credibility of Amanda's other friends. Amanda knows full well that Rose is aware of the fact that what she has done is wrong and why it is wrong, but she wants Rose to also know that *she*, Amanda, knows about the wrongdoing.

Here the blame is establishing a kind of joint knowledge of the wrongdoing. Further, this case involves the wrongdoer attempting to undermine that joint knowledge by dissembling and seeking to undermine the testimony. Pressing the blame reveals to Rose that Amanda is not buying it and retains knowledge of Rose's wrongdoing.

We can expand on this case and imagine Rose to be quite obstinate. The example then becomes a case in which the blamee (Rose) refuses to acknowledge wrongdoing even though they know they are wrong and they know the blamer (Amanda) knows they are wrong and that the blamer (Amanda) knows that they, the blamee (Rose), know that they are wrong. Therefore, we need to add a wrinkle to our response to the redundant blame objection. This is because the blamer might be trying to achieve a state of *common knowledge*. Common knowledge is distinct from mutual

knowledge. Add another friend of Amanda's to the mix, Martin. After carefully observing her behavior, Martin knows that Rose is a disloyal friend. He and Amanda both know, then, that Rose is disloyal. That is mutual knowledge. Common knowledge requires that they both know that each other knows that Rose is disloyal and that they each know that the other knows that they know. That's being on the same page in a deeper sense. To spell it out more clearly, there is common knowledge of Rose's disloyalty between Amanda and Martin when:

1. both Amanda and Martin know that Rose is disloyal.
2. Amanda knows that Martin knows and Martin knows that Amanda knows.
3. they each know that the other knows that they know, etc.

It has been widely acknowledged in the epistemology literature, common knowledge is extremely important for social beings. It is required for us to properly coordinate our activities. It is common knowledge that underwrites what we normatively expect from each other. It would be unreasonable for me to expect you to leave your shoes at the door if I didn't know that you were aware of social conventions.

Jennifer Nagel points out that we also seem to have an intrinsic desire for common knowledge, because with common knowledge comes mutual understanding.²¹ One piece of evidence she provides is the result of an experiment in which experimenter is studying how children at a very young age make use of imperatives. The experimenter has crafted a game in which children were asked to put some desirable object into some corresponding opening. In the case of balls, they would

need to put the balls into boxes with four holes. If there were four toy balls, the children

²¹ In *Recognizing Knowledge: Intuitive and Reflective Epistemology*, manuscript, p. 154.

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would be given three and the fourth would be on a shelf behind the experimenter. Seeing that they needed the fourth object the child would point to the ball on the shelf. Sometimes the experimenter would behave correctly and hand the ball over to the child with a remark acknowledging that the child wanted the ball. But sometimes they would simulate a “happy accident” by saying something like “Oh, you want the paper” while handing over the desired object, the ball. At 18 months close to half of the children would stop the game and point again to the ball, repeatedly naming it even though they already had it. The study’s authors noted that by the age of 30 months the percentage was 3 out of four. It mattered to them to be understood, to be in the same page, so to speak, even though practically speaking they were always getting what they wanted.²²

Correcting Need Not be Demanding

When a teacher corrects a student, the teacher *may* also be demanding that the student perform better. On my view, however, demanding is not a necessary feature of blame and needn’t be a feature of the paradigm. The point of correction is to improve the blamee epistemically. Given a full understanding of moral norms, given facts about human nature, it is then expected of the blamee that when blame is taken on board they will live up to what morality requires. But this view is not committed to blame issuing in demands for compliance. Some writers will disagree, arguing that the primary

purpose of blame is to issue a demand to the wrongdoer. Demands do not directly convey any information at all. They are neither true nor false.

²² Study conducted by Grosse, Behne, et. al., 2010.

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As Coleen Macnamara has pointed out, intuitions about the demanding nature of blame are associated with the hostile reactive attitudes that accompany it, such as anger and outrage.²³ There are two ways the language of “demands” enters into blame. First, blame is often taken to be an apt response to wrongdoing understood as violating a moral obligation, a moral *demand*. Second, and because of this, the form that blame takes is itself demanding, the reactive attitude of anger demands compliance with demanding norms. This view of how blame functions is most commonly attributed to Stephen Darwall and R. Jay Wallace.²⁴ For example, Darwall argues that blame is *only* apt in the case of wrongdoing where that is understood as failure to meet a moral demand. But the above argument breaks down if we think that blame can be apt even when no demand has been violated. This is supported by recent work on reactive attitudes. Work on condemnatory disappointment was mentioned earlier. Condemnatory disappointment is felt in light of a failure of normative hope. Telech and Katz write: “Normative hope is hope invested in an agent; it is essentially agent-directed, as it is for some agent to meet, or aspire toward, the attainment of some normative standard or ideal.”²⁵ Especially in personal relationships, some norms are significant but not demanding. Telech and Katz discuss cases in which a person may feel “let down” by a friend or family member, who has not acted as one would have hoped. In some cases

these failures can be apt for blame, when a serious relationship norm is violated. I have elsewhere also written about counterexamples to the strong claim that blame is only apt in cases of wrongdoing.²⁶ Some actions exhibit poor quality of the will without failing to meet a demand. For example, no one is morally entitled to another person's kidney. But if one brother fails to donate a kidney to another, resulting

²³ "Taking Demands Out of Blame," in *Blame: Its Nature and Norms*, ed. D. Justin Coates and Neal Tognazzini, 2012, Oxford University Press, 141-161. ²⁴ See Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint*, Harvard University Press, 2009 and R. Jay Wallace, *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments*, Harvard University Press, 1998. ²⁵ "Condemnatory Disappointment," 862. ²⁶ See "The Suberogatory," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 1992 and "Blame and the Suberogatory," Lindley Lecture, University of Kansas, 2023.

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in the death of the ill brother, that nevertheless seems as though it could be blameworthy in virtue of being relationship impairing behavior that exhibits poor quality of the will where that is understood as, for example, exhibiting failure of adequate care and concern as opposed to failure of duty. One way to spell this out is in terms of the language of normative expectations. There are moral failures that lie between failures of duty and failures of hopes. It isn't merely that one might hope that one's brother donate a kidney, one *expects* if of a good brother. Strawson himself viewed the personal reactive attitudes as responses to failures to meet "demands and expectations," and seemed to treat those as synonymous. But recent literature has noted that we can draw a distinction between the two.²⁷

The upshot for the account of blame, however, lies in implication that blame need not issue in a demand since some norms, even very serious ones, are not *demandable*. In addition to cases like the kidney case in which no moral entitlement exists, there are

other cases in which a demand would be self-defeating. One might *expect* one's partner to remember one's anniversary, for example, because that seems like an expression of care and concern, of valuing the relationship. For this very reason, demanding that they remember the anniversary is self-defeating: compliance might still express *something* value, but it wouldn't be the same thing.²⁸

²⁷ In addition to my work, see Rima Basu's "The Ethics of Expectations," in *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*, ed. Mark Timmons, 2023, 149-169. ²⁸ For more on demandability see Romy Eskens' "Expressive Duties are Enforceable and Demandable," *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*, ed. Mark Timmons, 2024, 14, 203-226.

Other Potential Problems for the Account

One worry might be that this account of blame is not ecumenical enough. For example, moral nihilists, as well as expressivists of various stripes, will reject this account of blame, but it is for the same reason that they claim testimony cannot transmit moral knowledge. There *is no* moral knowledge. Firstly, I believe these views are false and am happy to add one more nail to each coffin. Secondly, they can be made to accommodate the phenomenon using various maneuvers they make use of elsewhere. For example, they can just claim, plausibly, that our blaming practices are part of the myth of morality.

What about Sceptics? Sceptics are not committed to the view that there is no moral truth, and thus, no moral knowledge. Instead they are committed to rejecting the justification condition. There may be truths, we just aren't in a position to know them. To begin we need to distinguish two kinds of scepticism. Sometimes a person expresses scepticism in a very limited way, and basically this is just a form of doubt. So, when I say "I'm sceptical that you actually did the dishes" I'm not making any claim about a wholesale lack to justification for any beliefs about dishwashing or the world. I concede there would be ways to get justification. This kind of scepticism, depending of course on the circumstance, is healthy. There will be situations we face when, as responsible agents, we need to view things with a certain degree of doubt.

So that's not the kind of sceptic to consider. The type of sceptic believes that there is no justification for any knowledge claims. So knowledge of the correct moral reasons and morally relevant facts is impossible. There is no way to know the nature of morality nor make any

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judgement about when people have been epistemically negligent, since we cannot reach judgements about the justification of those beliefs.

But this kind of sceptic has been responded to very effectively throughout the history of Philosophy. Maybe there's a kind of ultimate or incredibly demanding sort of justification that we cannot achieve. However, if we view knowledge attributions as sensitive to

pragmatics, to our interests, then we can still make knowledge claims. Taking a leaf from Hume, do we see anyone, even a sceptic, leaving by the window instead of the door? We have a pretty good sense of what works. There is the realm of philosophical doubt and the realm of the world in which we live. To live properly we cannot stay in the world of doubt. This is evinced by looking at how avowed sceptics behave. If a teacher comes into the classroom and says, “Anyone who is a sceptic gets an “F”!” the sceptics will object and they will view themselves as having the justified belief that such a policy is unfair, and the professor is violating professional norms. They might say to the professor, “You know that’s wrong!”

One also might raise the objection that this theory of blame requires that we reject the principle of charity. Just to be clear, there are two ways people use “the principle of charity.” Sometimes it picks out the purely epistemic, so that we are required to view others favorably in terms of the epistemic status of their beliefs. Sometimes, though, it is used to indicate what we morally owe others, so the idea being that we owe it to others to at least initially try to view their behavior in the best possible?, reasonable?, way.²⁹ I think that the moral version is not a problem since it conforms with the advice, “well, we need to give them the benefit of the doubt” which seems like good advice given our own

²⁹ There are other moral uses of “the principle of charity.” For example, Aaron Garrett points out that Joseph Butler would use “the principle of charity” to mean “love thy neighbor as thyself,” however, this usage is not relevant to the discussion here.

fallibility. And it also seems to be interpreted as a pretty weak constraint. But the first version is potentially a problem. Here is some quick background. The epistemic version of the principle of charity developed in the course of discussions on radical translation

which began with W.V.O. Quine.³⁰ The first use of “the principle of charity” to coin the epistemic sense was first suggested by Neil Wilson who wanted a procedure by which it pays to determine a referent of a term by looking at how many statements are made true given the choice.³¹ Quine expanded on this, but his use of “the principle of charity” was limited to blatant logical fallacies or contradictions. If one is speaking to someone else who uses a different language that one is trying to translate, and they say something that is clearly contradictory, the best approach to translation is to change your translation manual rather than adopt the view that the other person is illogical. It was Donald Davidson who turned the principle into a requirement of rationality. It is hard to pin down exactly what Davidson means. He clearly rejects the view that the principle requires we view the beliefs of others as true and seems to settle on the view that we should maximize agreement [by attributing true (by our own lights) beliefs to others]. None of *these* versions pose a problem for my view. However, Timothy Williamson has the view that “the principle of charity” enjoins us to attribute actual *knowledge* to those we are interacting with.³²

Isn't this an anomaly for my view? Williamson would seem to be committed to the view that one should, rationally, be attributing knowledge to everyone, even those we take to be wrongdoers. And that does seem, at first, to be a problem. First, I want to point out the principles of charity can potentially pose a problem for many other views of blame. Secondly, Williamson's view holds that even though the principle of charity is true the judgements one makes on the basis of the principle

³⁰ *Word and Object*, MIT Press, 1960. ³¹ “Substances Without Substrata,” *The Review of Metaphysics*, 1959, 12: 521-539. ³² *Philosophy of Philosophy*, Blackwell, 2007. See especially Chapter 8.

are defeasible. Presumably, in the vast majority of cases in which we are expressing blame to a wrongdoer that sort of attribution of moral knowledge would seem irrational in the circumstances. And, in situations where we don't have enough evidence before us to support the judgement of wrongdoing, it does seem right to try to get that evidence. In cases where we cannot get more evidence, then I think it is a pragmatic question about whether something like "give them the benefit of the doubt" is *prudent*.³³

There remains what I take to be the most serious problem. We can imagine a scenario in which the blamer blames the blamee knowing full well the blamee already knows that what they did was wrong as well as all of the reasons that it is wrong, common knowledge has been established, and there is no audience present that lacks that knowledge, and the blamer has already reached maximal certainty and their knowledge is completely unshakable. I think at this point we are talking about mere a conceptual possibility. If the blamee still acts badly, it seems that the blame still has a point.

First, in this case, where the wrongdoer is stipulated as knowing not only what the moral reasons are but their appropriate weight, I would really question whether it is possible for someone to be like this and continue to act badly. Even if one disagrees with the thesis that moral reasons are overriding, it is generally commonly accepted that moral reasons have great weight. This fully

³³ Another worry about the version of the principle of charity which holds we try to optimize knowledge

attributions is that it only seems plausible when it comes to adult human beings.

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recalcitrant person doesn't seem to really grasp moral reasons.³⁴ One might object at this point that I am assuming that there are external moral reasons. Yes, I am.³⁵

But, secondly, I also think that in real life we simply won't be justified in believing that the person who we are blaming is fully recalcitrant and that the blame has no reinforcement function. But even assuming that we can be so justified, recall that like Fricker and McKenna, the model that I am developing is also paradigm-based. This example would then be treated as peripheral. It is still the case that the blame would transmit moral knowledge to someone who lacked it.

Another possibility would be to adjust the paradigm so that it is understood as having a point at the level of the practice. So far, the model that I have been describing has been assuming that individual acts of blaming have the point of improving epistemic states, and not just the epistemic states of the

blamed. Thus, redundant blame, private blame, self-blame can all be understood as ways in which blame generates an epistemic payoff since that payoff is not restricted to the person blamed. But to accommodate the really recalcitrant case above we could try a two-level approach that distinguishes the level of the practice from that of individual action.

On this way of spelling out the account we need to distinguish the function of the practice of blaming from the point of a single act of blaming. The point of the practice

is to transmit and reinforce moral knowledge even if a single act of blaming doesn't not have this point. And, in fact,

³⁴ In virtually all of the real cases I could find that resemble this kind of exchange the blamee is making the claim that "morality just doesn't matter, yes, what I am doing is wrong, but I am stronger than you so it just doesn't matter, there's nothing you can do about it"! These cases aren't perfect because it seems highly likely that the blamee isn't grasping morality, rather, the blamee is just changing the subject.

³⁵ In the past I have written in support of Humean views, but I also have an idiosyncratic reading of Hume as a constructivist about morality (though, gratifyingly, not as idiosyncratic as it used to be). See my "Contingency and Constructivism" in *Reading Parfit*, ed. by Simon Kirchin, Routledge, 2017, 172-188.

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this seems like the most promising way to fully develop the account. If the account is spelled out this way, then the problem of the recalcitrant knower is a problem at a different level. Consider an analogy with a system of punishment. We might justify the practice of punishment by noting its deterrent effects. That is why we have such a system in place. That can be the correct account for why the system itself is justified even if it turns out that there are individual acts of punishment that do not deter.

We can draw an analogy with Rawls' imaginary institution of *telishment*.³⁶ Suppose that we were to offer up an explicitly utilitarian rationale for punishment. Suppose that on this basis people were allowed to condemn the innocent whenever they thought that utility would be promoted. It is pretty easy to see that *on utilitarian grounds* this would be awful. People would be living in fear of condemnation unrelated to any actual wrongdoing. So even on utilitarian grounds we have good reason to not punish the innocent. How is this relevant to blame? We can imagine a practice of blaming that recommended withholding blame in cases in which we think or judge the wrongdoer knows they were wrong, etc. and to blame only when we think it would be epistemically beneficial. This would ill serve the epistemic point. People might not be very reliable

judgers. It would incentivize claims of knowledge. The important signaling function of blame would be undermined. Instead, to preserve the epistemic point of the *practice* individual acts of blaming themselves need not be aimed at improvements in epistemic states of individuals.

³⁶ *A Theory of Justice*, Harvard University Press,

Conclusion

This paper has sketched an account of blame which is knowledge focused. It attempts to present an account which can easily and naturally accommodate “peripheral” cases that other accounts have found problematic. However, the major advantage of this account is that it offers a way to hopefully provide a unified account of our blaming practices by highlighting something that is itself intrinsically good. Knowledge is valuable and our lives are made better by it.

