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Perspectivalism and Blaming

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Abstract

Using the combination of two views of blame (T. M. Scanlon and J. J. C Smart), I will argue in favor of a thesis I refer to as perspectivalism; that blame from the perspective of a third party is fundamentally a different sort of thing than blame from the perspective of an injured party. Using both examples that focus on hypocrites and moral luck cases, I will attempt to give reasons to why perspectivalism has strong explanatory value. Focusing on cases that involve hypocrites, I will attempt to show that two statements about hypocrites are true if we accept perspectivalism. First, that as many philosophers have noted, hypocrites lose their standing to blame from a third party perspective. Second, utilizing my new understanding of blaming as the injured party, I will conclude that hypocrites retain their standing to blame in virtue of their relationship to the wrong doing. In the case of the moral luck examples, I will give an example that shows the complexity that the two types of blame described. Ultimately, I will be arguing that a correct general theory of blame must take into consideration the blamer's placement relative to an instance of wrongdoing using the explanatory value of the hypocrite cases.

Introduction

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

Imagine again on a completely different day, there was a woman walking down the street who is carelessly knocked down by a thief who steals her purse. Again, it seems right to say that the woman on the street has both the epistemic justification for her belief that she has been wronged and the moral standing to blame the thief for wronging her.

But what if I told you that the thief in the first story is in fact the victim in the second story? Additionally, suppose that the thief in the first story had no permissible excuse

for her actions. Would it not seem absurd for her to get angry as the victim of stealing when she, just the other day, was willingly stealing from the grocery store? The thief in the original story seems to fit the description of the “garden-variety hypocrite”—a person who “unrepentantly engages in the very activity they’re blaming others for.”¹ A hypocrite loses the standing to blame others for the very action they themselves engage in. We tend to respond to these types of blamers with “look who’s talking” because of the perceived inconsistency that exists between their actions and expressed blame.²

In spite of the intuitiveness of this response, in this paper I will argue that perhaps the common view of hypocrites does get correct the moral standing of a hypocrite as a third party blamer, but misses the key difference between blaming from a third party perspective and blaming from the perspective of a victim. I will argue that there is a morally relevant feature of being a member of an injured party that allows the standing of even a hypocritical victim to remain intact. I hope to support the suggestion that where you are placed relative to an instance of wrongdoing makes a difference to whether your own faults are relevant to your standing to blame. I shall for the duration of this paper refer to this view as *perspectivalism*.

1. Our Two Types of Blame

The topic of this paper hinges on the claim that blame from the perspective of a person who is uninvolved is crucially different from blame that comes from the perspective of a person who has directly been wronged. The original motivation for holding this view came from conflicting intuitions that both T.M Scanlon and J. J. C. Smart are correct about their views on blame. For the purpose of my conclusion, I will attempt to provide motivations as to why they combine to support perspectivalism. In order to do so, I will grant both Scanlon and Smart their views with some additional comments. My main goal is to show that perspectivalism has consistency and explanatory power for the case of hypocrite, not to argue in favor of either of Smart’s or Scanlon’s views, but instead grant them their views for the sake of the paper.

First, Smart’s cognitive theory of blame boils down to placing, not necessarily emotionally,³ an evaluation that the performer of some action has done something morally wrong in performing said action and implies their⁴ responsibility for it. Similar to ‘grading’ an art piece as good or bad, to blame someone is to place a negative

¹ Coates 2016; pg 19

² This claim against the Hypocrite’s standing to blame is a common view shared by many philosophers; for some see Dworkin 2000, Cohen 2012, Wallace 2011.

³ I do not argue that emotions don’t accompany blame in a third party perspective, but rather that this type of blame is sufficient without it.

⁴ ‘their’ will be used as an alternative pronoun for singular use in this specific paper.

evaluation on that person's action. But unlike 'grading', this type of evaluation implies moral responsibility for their action.

Second, Scanlon's view is:

[T]o claim that a person is blameworthy for an action is to claim that that action shows something about the agent's attitudes toward others that impairs the relations that others can have with him or her. To blame a person is to judge him or her to be blameworthy and to take your relationship with him or her to be modified in a way that this judgment of impaired relations holds to be appropriate."⁵

Smart has argued that blame is a dispassionate and clear-headed response to action, but he additionally acknowledges that most people don't praise or blame in this dispassionate way. By looking at T. M Scanlon's view of blame, I think we can find the motivations as to why it is often not the case that we blame dispassionately. As Scanlon understands relationships as "constituted by certain attitudes and dispositions" among which "intentions and expectations about how the parties will act toward one another"⁶ are most important, to impair the relationship is to "weaken or destroy" it. To blame, then is to register the damage done to the relationship and the need for modification.

Now, Scanlon's objection to Smart's understanding of blame, is the belief that he failed to recognize the force behind blame or rather the damage done to the injured party, I believe comes from the issue presented when we treat all blame as being of the same kind. But, if we take perspectivalism to be true, there is no need to require third party blaming to have the sense of force that injured party blaming would have.⁷

This means that we could grant that third party blaming is, at a minimum, a dispassionate evaluation of wrongdoing that implies responsibility, while acknowledging that direct harm done to the injured party allows for this reactionary blame that takes into account the force of blame that Scanlon was getting at.

For the rest of this paper, I will rely on Smart's understanding of blame to represent the third party's blame and rely on Scanlon's view to represent the injured party's blame. This will serve to show the consistency and explanatory power that perspectivalism has for the case of the hypocrite.

⁵ Scanlon 2008; pg 125

⁶ Scanlon 2008; pg 131

⁷ Keep in mind that the line between third party and the injured party could be vague at times. For example, if a very close friend of mine is wronged and I am emotionally invested in their life in virtue of our close relationship, my loss as result of their loss could cause me to be an injured party instead of being a third party member.

2. Hypocritical Blame

Imagine the woman who stole the can of soup is arrested for stealing jewels from a jewelry store and sent to prison. Now in prison she finds that a few of her personal items are missing. Through a long and committed search, she comes to the conclusion, which I grant to be epistemically sound and justified, that the guards have been stealing her items. She's enraged by this conclusion and blames the guards for doing this wrong to her.

The value of this example lies in its ability to illustrate how the victim may appropriately blame the guards in spite of her having unrepentantly engaged in precisely the same sorts of behavior she now blames guards for, even though she would lose the standing to blame the guards for stealing from other inmates, since she herself has stolen and will continue when she is released, she still has the standing to react specifically to the wrongs that had been done to her.

Scanlon's view would acknowledge that guards owe inmates specific types of interactions, and that these obligations are grounded in the expectations that guards and inmates may reasonably have of each other in virtue of the nature of their relationship in the moral community. By stealing from her, the guards modify the relationship between the two parties in a negative way and thereby impaired the original relationship. The inmate's response of blaming is not simply an acknowledgement of the guards' wrongdoing, but a reactionary response to the guard's failure to fulfill the expectation of the relationship. This would account for why, had the guards returned the missing items, the inmates would most likely not respond with a lessening blame.

Now, imagine the same inmate is not the injured party but rather just a third party blamer. It seems that in this circumstance, the guards could respond to her blame with "look who's talking". This response is sufficient to highlight the loss of the moral standing to blame that the inmate has suffered. Since the inmate has no other areas of criticism, and given that she hasn't suffered any harm, the inmate is blaming inappropriately in this circumstance.

Of course there are circumstances wherein the injured party could be larger than just the direct victim. Suppose, there was an inmate who was emotionally close to the injured party, perhaps even her best friend, there could be reason to say that she herself is part of the injured party, given her close relationship with the victim. Moreover, when the warden finds out about the actions of the prison guards, her blame (since she does not steal or believing stealing is morally acceptable) could be that of an injured party given the expectations that exist in virtue of facts about the relationships between the warden and the guards.

Yet everyone watching the news of the prison guards being caught and arrested for stealing from the inmate would simply be blaming from a third party perspective. Their blame, since they aren't family members of the guards or of the inmate, would simply be acknowledging the fault in the guard's actions and implying the guards are responsible for those wrong doings. It seems that perspectivalism, with the use of Scanlon's and Smart's respective accounts of blame, supports the existence of these two distinct functions of blame.

3. Supporting Moral Luck Case

A morally conscious person is driving down the road. They⁸ are a good driver who takes into account the safety of others and does their best to follow all driving restrictions. One unfortunate night, the driver is going down a residential street. Sadly, as the driver is being morally conscious of their surrounding a small child runs out into the street and the driver has no time to stop before colliding with the child. Society and the moral community will write this off as an unavoidable accident and hold no one at fault. But the question here deals with the parent of the child and the driver. Can the parents of the child blame the driver when the moral community finds the driver blameless for the death of the child?

I believe that my understanding and explanation of blame would yield the result that the parents of the child can in fact appropriately blame the driver under these circumstances. Yes, it is the case that driver is not responsible for the child running into the street or for the harm done upon the child, but the parents are still left with a loss. Though the driver would not wish for this horrible event to happen, nor actively made it so, the driver still is the direct cause of a wrong. The driver is directly related to the death of the child. The parents have the standing to actively acknowledge that their child died causing their loss specifically at the influence of this particular driver.

Now this example is good for many reasons. First, it's honest about the ways in which our society operates. Additionally, it has explanatory power. Sadly, there are parents who have this tragic event happen to their family and there are people who drive cars safely, yet are still involved in tragic accidents. Second, I have the internal motivation to want to protect the driver from the blame of the parents because I could just as easily have been the person who killed the hypothetical child instead of the driver. But, then again, I too could just as easily be in a position like the parents and lost a loved one. Because both motivations are present, I think this is a good intuitive example for this distinction between the blame from an injured party and blame from a third party perspective. To blame as a third party is fundamentally different to that to blame as a first party. As someone from the third party perspective and a member of the moral community, I would say that the driver is not responsible for the death of the child

⁸ Again, a use of 'their' as a singular pronoun.

because the event was out of their control and there is no action of the driver's that we could criticize. The tragic outcome described above was merely the result of moral luck. Yet, to blame from the first party is to acknowledge a loss and a wrong event. It is a reactionary expression about both the perspective of the driver and the perspective of the parents.

4. Conclusion

It seems that our intuitions surrounding the practice of blaming support the conclusion that some people have greater claims to blaming than others, but perhaps this is only due to injured party blamers blaming in very distinct ways. This refers to the consideration of 'blamerworthiness' and less about 'blameworthiness'. Specifically, when studying cases concerning the hypocrite where the question concerns whether the hypocrite has the standing to be a 'blamer'.

Smart and Scanlon both offer insight into a distinct mode of blame. Of course, there are concerns that other theories of blame wouldn't fit so perfectly as those offered by Smart and Scanlon, being that one is a cognitive theory of blame and the other a conative theory of blame. Perhaps it is not the case that emotional theories of blame would work in this framework. My hope is that even if one rejects Scanlon's or Smart's view, the very least a reader takes from these examples is the motivation to see the difference between the blame of, say, the Warden, and the blame of anyone watching through the news. It seems intuitive that victims experience a different event than that of people from third party perspectives; should it not be the case that their reactionary blame be different? Ultimately, the ways in which we see both the hypocrite and moral luck examples provide reasons to question the state of how many people have studied 'blame'.

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