Understanding blame

Comments on *ways to be blameworthy: rightness, wrongness, and responsibility,* by Elinor Mason

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Abstract
Elinor Mason has provided an account of blame and blameworthiness that is pluralistic. There are, broadly speaking, three ways in which we aptly blame -- and ordinary sense, directed at those with poor quality of the will, and then a detached sense and an extended sense, in which blame is aptly directed towards those without poor quality of the will as it is normally understood. In this essay I explore and critically discuss Mason's account. While I argue that she has identified interesting aspects of the way in which we hold people morally responsible, I disagree with certain features of the account, in particular, that ordinary blame issues in demands and that there is any deep sense in which we can simply decide to take on responsibility.

Keywords Moral responsibility · Blame · Praise

1 Introduction

There are some very interesting questions surrounding the connections between our deontic evaluations of action and our critical practices of holding responsible. For example, some writers argue that in order for an act to be blameworthy it must be wrong. Others disagree. One way to diagnose these sorts of disagreements is by distinguishing different ways in which we can blame others – and in her book, *Ways to be Blameworthy: Rightness, Wrongness, and Responsibility*, Elinor Mason presents a compelling and well-argued case for distinguishing three different sorts of praise and blame which help us to more clearly understand our responsibility practices.

First, what can we say about the deontic concepts, such as right and wrong and their relation to responsibility? Mason argues that there is a *responsibility constraint* to be observed for all plausible accounts of right and wrong action. This, by itself, is

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not very controversial since much depends upon how the constraint is to be understood. For example, even those who hold there is an objective sense of 'right' will at least hold that the agent must be *causally* responsible for performing an action. This is kind of a limiting case, though, since mere causal responsibility is not sufficient for moral responsibility or blameworthiness. Writers in favor of objective standards of rightness will often note that standards of praise and blame are – in some sense – subjective, though the sense of 'subjective' can vary widely, and might even be spelled out in ways that do not appeal to anything in the agent's psychology. Mason herself develops a view a subjective obligation and right which ties wrongness to blameworthiness. Very objective standards allow for the agent having caused something bad to happen, and in that sense having done something wrong, but even they demarcate this standard from standards of praise and blame. When it comes to responsibility, then, it is a subjective standard that interests us. This standard, on Mason's view, holds that to "…act subjectively wrongly is to act wrongly *by the agent's own lights*." (19, emphasis added). Further, to act rightly the agent must be "…*trying* to do well by Morality." (20, emphasis added). In order to try to do well by morality, the agent must have at least some genuine grasp of morality. It is this trying to do well by morality that is praiseworthy, and failing to try or failing to sufficiently try is blameworthy.

2 Three kinds of blame

Again, on Mason's view, an agent's subjective obligation is to *try to do well by Morality*. In order to do this, the agent needs to at least have an adequate grasp of Morality. We are praiseworthy when we try to do well by Morality. Sometimes, however, people don't try to do well by Morality, or they don't make sufficient effort, in which case they are blameworthy. This sense of praise and blame is termed *ordinary* praise and blame.

In her account of subjective obligation and ordinary *blameworthiness*, she is trying to avoid a series of problems having to do with the impact of moral ignorance on moral responsibility. Some people hold that one is responsible for one's wrongdoing, even if one didn't know it was wrong – as long as the action in question, for example, expresses a poor quality of the will. Other writers have argued, in contrast, that one can only be responsible and blameworthy for one's wrong actions that one knew at the time of action were wrong. What Mason is arguing for is an intermediate position. On her view, some knowledge of morality is necessary for an agent to be blameworthy, but it needs only be "background" knowledge such that the agent would have known the right thing to do if she had tried hard enough, or thought about it long enough, for example. That is, the agent is blameworthy if she had the knowledge, even if it was not properly deployed in her practical reasoning.

Mason's corresponding account of ordinary *blame* is highly influenced by Michael McKenna's account of blame as communicative.[1] On her view, when we blame someone in this sense we are issuing a demand – which is a communicative

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[1] *Conversation and Responsibility*, Oxford University Press, 2012.

act – requiring the wrongdoer to do things like sincerely apologize. In order for the wrongdoer to be able to sincerely apologize the wrongdoer must recognize that what they did was wrong. So, the wrongdoer must have *some* grasp of Morality for the blame to be apt. There are two issues I have with this model. One has to do with viewing blame as essentially communicative, and the other has to do with blame as essentially demanding. I certainly do think that *one* function of blame is communicative. When someone goes to the trouble of expressing blame *to a wrongdoer* they are initiating a step in an interaction which is communicative. However, a great deal of blame, possibly even most of it, is private. There are cases in which it might be a very bad idea to express blame, for example, but there still seems to be a *point* to the blaming. If that is the case, then the point of blame isn't exhausted by any communicative function. One response to this line of criticism, of course, is to argue that even though a good deal of blame as a matter of fact is private in nature, it can only be *understood* on the communicative model. Afterall, apt blame is directed towards another person of the appropriate standing who has engaged in wrongdoing. Given that person's standing as a moral agent, apt blame can be seen as issuing in a conversational move that gives the putative wrongdoer a way to defend themselves, through excuse for example. Even if we don't view this move as issuing in a demand, it can still be thought of as a conversational invitation. However, I remain skeptical of this model since I think there are many cases of blame which seem perfectly apt to me in which the blame seems more expressive of a desire to have no interaction at all with the wrongdoer. Mason has another form of blame – detached blame – that is not understood on the conversational model. However, this category is supposed to capture cases in which the person being blamed falls outside of the relevant moral community, such that there is no point in initiating the conversation. It won't capture the cases I have discussed here.

I also don't think that even when blame is expressed, it necessarily issues in a demand. Of course, often it is demanding. However, this framework tends to understand relationships in terms of demands in the sense that the only failures that are blameworthy – that is, for which blame is apt, are those that constitute *wrongs*. The wronging is understood as a failure to meet a warranted demand, such as a failure of basic respect. Thus, there is an entitlement to make the demand for respect through the practice of blame. But this model leaves out a whole host of relationship failures that may involve blameworthy behavior that falls short of actual wrongdoing. I have elsewhere argued that some actions are morally problematic without constituting wrongs, but in virtue of violating serious relationship norms these actions are nevertheless blameworthy. The most common examples involve people who are standing on their rights in cases where the balance of moral reasons indicates they should not do so. So, for example, one person has a moral right to refuse to donate her bone marrow, though in circumstances in which her sister requires it for life saving treatment, standing on such a right could be considered blameworthy.[2] Why? A first pass at an account invokes a distinction between demands and normative expectations. Some of our normative expectations are

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[2] This is based on a case presented in my earlier "The Suberogatory," *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 1992, 286–295.

demanding, but many are not and, indeed, it seems that something is lost in trying to see them as demanding. For example, one might have the view that in a loving relationship partners are expected to care for each other's well-being, and that this includes considering their desires. When one partner, then, fails to adequately consider the desires of another, it is odd to view this as a failure to meet a *demand*. This kind of care is precisely something that cannot be demanded at all, though it is important to any well-functioning loving relationship. So important, that it's failure is blameworthy under the right conditions, but the blame is not one of demanding that the person change, since making such a demand it itself incompatible with the relationship. The point is that the loving partners want to consider each other's well-being.

There are various strategies for countering this criticism. One interesting line of thought is to hold that we need to distinguish blame, which issues demands, from something else – moral criticism, for example. Mere moral criticism does not issue in demands, but, rather, something else – maybe a complaint.[3] What these relationship cases indicate then is not that blame is not demanding but that other reactions can be warranted by relationship failures, such that the issuing of a *complaint* for a non-wronging moral failure. This is an interesting line of thought that deserves more development. However, I also remain skeptical that this line of thought will suffice to show that such a distinction helps in many of these cases. For example, one might reasonably hold that that anger is warranted for such failures, and anger is characteristic of blame rather than complaint.

Ordinary praise and blame on Mason's view is contrasted with *detached* praise and blame. Detached praise and blame is the sort of praise and blame applicable to people who do *not* have an adequate grasp of Morality. Thus, when they engage in wrongdoing they have not failed "by their own lights" so to speak. One case she discusses is that of Bill, who "…has been raised in an entirely sexist environment… He sincerely believes that women are too silly to be allowed any power or responsibility…" (116). It is also built into the case that Bill does not have a poor quality of the will in the sense that he is has no hostility towards women, and we are also to assume that he is not willfully ignorant – that his attitudes really are due to a poor upbringing. Thus, when he treats women paternalistically, though he is acting objectively wrongly, he is not acting wrongly subjectively. However, Bill is still an agent – he owns his actions, and would fully acknowledge them. In these sorts of cases Mason argues that ordinary blame is not apt, because he has no way of acknowledging that he did anything wrong. When we blame a wrongdoer who does not have a grasp of Morality, it would be unreasonable to expect any remorse or sincere apology. On the other hand, he isn't completely blameless in the sense that his objective wrongdoing still calls for a negative response. And this is detached blame – it is apt when the person has acted objectively wrongly and when they do not disavow the action.

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[3] Mason does acknowledge such a distinction between being blameworthy and being morally criticizable. For example, on page 89 she argues that a person who is just an uncaring person may in one sense have a bad will and be morally criticizable, but not blameworthy. However, the distinction itself isn't spelled out.

The discussion of detached blame is fascinating, and the sorts of cases Mason discusses have long been puzzling for people working in the blame literature. These cases involve genuine agents and yet also agents who lack important knowledge that can't be reasonably corrected. As Mason understands cases such as Bill's, Bill does not have a poor quality of the will. However, I would like to flag one way a critic could disagree here. Bill does have a poor quality of the will in that he has poor attitudes towards women. He may not be responsible for having those attitudes – we can blame his upbringing for that – but, nevertheless, he has poor attitudes and these attitudes are fully endorsed by him and reflect his commitments and values. I am in sympathy with this view of what constitutes poor quality of the will. However, even with this tweak this doesn't affect the basic idea behind Mason's distinction between a kind of ordinary blame and detached blame – that there is a different response called for between cases in which a person can recognize their wrongdoing and cases in which they cannot.

These two sorts of blameworthiness are in turn contrasted with *extended* blameworthiness. This applies to people who have *tried* very hard to do well by Morality, but because of other failings, such as forgetfulness, have failed. They have not violated their subjective obligation, so they are not blameworthy in the ordinary sense, further, they do not own the action in question in any clear way, but they are nevertheless blameworthy in *some* sense. In these cases, she argues, people should *take* responsibility for the failure, even though it was inadvertent. This is because the fault which led to the failure is a part of the agent, and we need to assume responsibility as a member of a moral community.

3 Extended blame

I find this sense extremely curious since, in a way, it seems that in these cases the agent makes herself blameworthy by taking responsibility onto herself, and it is praiseworthy for her to do so. The two sorts of cases she is particularly interested are cases in which the agent inadvertently does something bad. She focuses on these cases because we are inclined to view them as somewhat blameworthy, though it is difficult to see why in cases where the agent is really trying to do her best, but just fails. Let's look at some of Mason's examples. One she borrows from Bernard Williams, and it is an example in which a mistake on the part of Telemachus is contrasted with actual misbehavior on the part of Agamemnon. Telemachus is a character in the *Odyssey*, the son of Odysseus, who, with Odysseus fights his mother's suitors upon his return to Greece after the Trojan War. He made the mistake of accidently leaving open a door to the weapons room, which allows the suitors to have access to those weapons. Even though he did not do it on purpose, he takes responsibility for it. Williams' diagnosis, which Mason endorses, is that it is good for him to take responsibility because he was the cause of the door being left open and "…he might have to make up for it."(53; 180).

Mason also discusses the case of Perdita, who borrows a necklace from her friend. The necklace has some sentimental value. Perdita loses the necklace through

forgetfulness. The key here is that she had no ill-will, she was not disregarding Morality, and she did not lose the necklace intentionally. We can even elaborate the story to include that the forgetfulness on that day was understandable – maybe Perdita had received some bad news, or was particularly distracted. In any case, she is not at moral fault. In this case, Mason argues, Perdita should nevertheless assume responsibility for her failure because:

> Duties in relationships require a sort of investment. In not taking responsibility in this case, Perdita would be showing that she is more concerned with herself than with her friend….The thought that her friend has been hurt by Perdita's (inadvertent) action should be enough for Perdita to set aside quibbles about the exact causal origin of her act, and own it. Thus, she should accept responsibility, allow herself to feel remorse, and express that remorse. (194)

It is important to note that the sense of "should" employed here is not expressing a moral demand. Instead, Perdita should assume responsibility given that she wants to maintain the relationship. It is a way of expressing her concern for how she has causally impacted her friend.

I don't find this argument convincing, partly because I believe that there's more to a typical conversation of this sort amongst friends. Supposing that Perdita says: "I am so sorry. I didn't mean to lose it, but I did, and I will happily do what I can to make it up to you! Please, accept my apology." This does seem appropriate. However, it also would seem to me that her friend should respond as follows: "Oh, Perdita – no need to apologize, I know what a bad day you had yesterday! Let's just go out and you can treat me to a pizza." The friend should respond by pointing out that Perdita's slip wasn't intentional, acknowledging the lack of ill-will, and rejecting the appropriateness of genuine apology and remorse.

One thing that characterizes this case, and other cases Mason discusses of extended blame, is the unclarity in how the agent's fault is to be understood – was it some genuine flaw in the will, or not? Maybe the person is trying to act rightly, but not trying hard enough? So, we need to distinguish cases in which there is such unclarity even to the agent herself, and cases in which the agent is clear that there was no failure of will, but realizes that it might not be clear at all to the observer. If it isn't even clear to Telemachus, he may take responsibility and blame himself so as to make himself more careful in the future, to reinforce good dispositions. If it is simply that it might not be clear to others, then we can bring in other considerations such as the need to reassure others that he has not, in fact, been disloyal.

There are other cases somewhat different that come up in the literature that raise similar worries. For example, Sarah Paul discusses examples in which agents have made certain reasonable choices over the course of their lives regarding the normative commitments and projects that they will take on.[4] These commitments help them in practical deliberation because it restricts their scope of practical deliberation. To just take one mundane example of forming an intention: When I think about where to go for my vacation, given that I've committed to France,

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[4] "Good Intentions and the Road to Hell," *Philosophical Explorations*, 2017, 40–54.

my deliberations will be restricted to options in France – Paris, Bordeaux, Lyon, etc. This is the sort of commitment one needs to make in order to engage in basic planning activities. We make much more serious commitments crucial to structing practical deliberation as well. The sorts of cases that interest Sarah Paul are cases in which a person has decided, for example, to be a great professor, and has decided that being a great professor involves certain normative commitments – commitments to, for example, treating everyone fairly, maintaining a professional distance with students, always being available at office hours, etc. And, of course, these commitments are driven by the attempt to do right by Morality. Given these commitments, then, certain things just either won't occur to the professor as options, or, if they do, the professor experiences a kind of motivational deficit with respect to those options. So, for example, it might be the case that a situation arises in which a student who has been doing poorly needs extra attention that only the professor can provide, but this doesn't occur to the professor as she has decided to treat all students the same so as to avoid any unfairness. Paul thinks that there are cases like this in which it is hard to find fault with the person, and yet we nevertheless want to hold them accountable for failing to do the right thing. These sorts of cases are not cases like forgetting, distraction, bias – so they aren't inadvertent in the way that Mason describes, but raise a similar worry, and offer another possible application of Mason's views on extended blameworthiness and blame. Perhaps we can account for the ambivalence by similarly thinking that the professor was reasonable and yet still acted wrongly, and it would be appropriate for the professor to take on responsibility for the failure.

Mason's discussion of the phenomenon of extended blame is extremely interesting and adds a great deal to an underexplored area in our critical practice. While I am skeptical that assuming blame makes one blame*worthy*, even in these cases, there's no doubt that the phenomena Mason is discussing is an important aspect of how we interact with each other.