

# Blameworthiness and the Affective Account of Blame

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**Abstract** One of the most influential accounts of blame—the affective account—takes its cue from P.F. Strawson’s discussion of the reactive attitudes. To blame someone, on this account, is to target her with resentment, indignation, or (in the case of self-blame) guilt. Given the connection between these emotions and the demand for regard that is arguably central to morality, the affective account is quite plausible. Recently, however, George Sher has argued that the affective account of blame, as understood both by Strawson himself and by contemporary Strawsonians, is inadequate because it cannot make sense of blameworthiness. In this paper I defend the affective account of blame against several of Sher’s arguments for this conclusion. In the process, I clarify the Strawsonian account of moral responsibility, and I discuss how the affective account of blame ought to be understood and articulated.

**Keywords** Blame · Blameworthiness · P. F. Strawson · George Sher · Reactive attitudes

## Introduction

It is difficult to say precisely what it is to blame someone, but one promising account puts the emotions of resentment, indignation, and guilt at the core. According to this account—the *affective* account of blame—to blame just is to be in one of these emotional states.<sup>1</sup> Of course, these emotions are special: they are the clearest examples of P. F. Strawson’s reactive attitudes, and they “reflect an expectation of, and demand for, the manifestation of a certain degree of goodwill or regard on the part of other human beings toward ourselves” (Strawson 1962, p. 84).<sup>2</sup> We feel resentment

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<sup>1</sup>In calling this ‘the affective account’, I do not mean to imply that resentment, indignation, and guilt can be understood as *pure* affect.

<sup>2</sup>All subsequent references to Strawson will be to this essay.

toward those who have mistreated us, we feel indignation toward those who have mistreated our friends and loved ones, and we feel guilt when we mistreat others. This tight connection between these emotions and the demand for regard makes the affective account of blame quite plausible.

Recently, however, George Sher (2006, ch. 5) has argued forcefully that the affective account is inadequate.<sup>3</sup> He raises a number of objections, but perhaps the most worrisome accusation is that the affective account of blame does not “[slide] smoothly into the groove that blameworthiness creates for blame” (p. 85). In other words, Sher alleges that the affective account is unable to make sense of the obvious fact that blame is something that can be deserved or warranted—that it is something someone can be *worthy of*. In what follows I argue that Sher is mistaken about this. The affective account may have its problems, but this is not one of them. Considering Sher’s criticisms will, however, help to clarify the affective account of blame and to show how it ought to be articulated.

Sher advances his objection to the affective account of blame in two stages. First, he looks at what Strawson himself says in “Freedom and Resentment” and argues that those remarks leave no room—and perhaps, given Strawson’s naturalism, were intended *not* to leave room—for the ordinary notion of blameworthiness. Second, Sher considers whether contemporary philosophers who do not share Strawson’s strict naturalism might nevertheless defend a connection between blame and blameworthiness. Here he grants that the contemporary proponent of the affective account can say a bit more about blameworthiness, but Sher argues that she cannot say enough. My discussion will also proceed in these two stages.

## Strawson’s Essay

First, let me say a few words about Strawson’s essay. Contemporary moral philosophers are nearly unanimous in judging that it represents a substantial contribution to the literature on moral responsibility, though there is some disagreement about what that contribution is.<sup>4</sup> I suggest that the essay made (at least) two major contributions.<sup>5</sup> First, it encouraged philosophers once again to take seriously the role that the moral sentiments might play in our understanding of moral responsibility. Second, it proposed an unfamiliar but incredibly intriguing conceptual reversal: rather than viewing our practices of holding each other morally responsible as answerable to independent facts of moral responsibility, we should view the facts of moral responsibility as answerable to—or, at least, as partly determined by—those practices. This second contribution deserves a bit more elaboration.

The natural *unStrawsonian* picture is this: when we are considering whether to blame or hold someone responsible for some bit of wrongdoing, we have to ask ourselves various questions about the agent, perhaps the most important of which is whether he is morally responsible for what he did. If he’s not, then it will be inappropriate to *hold* him responsible. If he is, then that’s one step on the way toward blame. This is what I mean when I say that the familiar conceptual ordering is that

<sup>3</sup> All subsequent references to Sher will be to this book.

<sup>4</sup> For a useful collection of essays on Strawson’s essay, see McKenna and Russell 2008.

<sup>5</sup> For further elaboration, see Tognazzini 2013.

holding responsible is answerable to *independent* facts of moral responsibility— independent, that is, of our practices of holding each other responsible. Whether the agent is morally responsible, on this view, will be a fact that arises out of various other intrinsic facts about the agent—whether he was able to do otherwise, for example—but the practices of holding each other responsible come in only once all of those facts have been discerned. Only *then*, once we have decided that the agent *is* responsible, do we ask whether it is appropriate to *hold* the agent responsible.<sup>6</sup>

According to the Strawsonian picture, on the other hand, there are no independent facts of moral responsibility. Now, this is not to say that there are no facts *at all* about moral responsibility—just none that is independent of our practices of holding each other responsible. Introducing his conceptual reversal, Strawson takes our practices of blame and holding responsible to be what fixes the facts of moral responsibility. The capacities that will be relevant to determining whether someone is morally responsible, on this view, are those capacities that, when absent, undermine our tendency to blame, and when present, undergird it. Theorists will disagree about which specific capacities are at issue here, but Strawson’s main point is just that those capacities, whatever they are, are picked out as “the moral responsibility capacities” only because of their connection to our practices of holding each other responsible (and the norms associated with those practices). It is in this sense that the facts of moral responsibility are *dependent* on our practices.

What is it about our practices of holding each other responsible that helps to determine the facts of moral responsibility? Well, this is where the affective account of blame comes in. It is a fundamental fact about us, according to Strawson, that we feel resentment or indignation toward those who have shown ill-will toward us or those we care about. In other words, we blame people when we believe that they have violated “the demand for goodwill or regard” (Strawson, p. 78). (Strawson himself doesn’t explicitly identify blame with the reactive attitudes, but it is a natural interpretation; cf. Scanlon 2008, p. 224, n. 6.) These reactive emotions naturally disappear if it comes to light that the person toward whom they are directed did not display any ill-will after all (perhaps we come to realize that the event was an accident) or has some other condition that exempts him from the moral community (we come to realize that the agent is “psychologically abnormal” in some way (Strawson, p. 79)). The facts of moral responsibility, then, are not determined by independent facts about whether the agent could do otherwise (for example). Rather, the facts of moral responsibility are those involving capacities whose absence tends to undermine resentment and indignation. This does not happen for psychologically normal agents who display ill-will toward us or those we care about.

This is merely a quick sketch of Strawson’s view, but it does give us a nice flavor of the sense in which it is, in Sher’s words, “relentlessly naturalistic” (p. 85), a characteristic that allegedly leads to its downfall as an account of blame. Strawson suggests that we can understand moral responsibility just by looking at the facts of human nature that articulate how we, *in fact*, respond to one another: the responsible agents are those whom we naturally tend to blame. And these facts about how we

<sup>6</sup> The Strawsonian view dominates the contemporary literature, but there are non-Strawsonian views out there. See, for example, Zimmerman 1988; Oshana 1997; and Nelkin 2011. Another view that is not quite Strawsonian, but not quite non-Strawsonian either, is McKenna 2012.

respond to one another are not answerable to any independent facts about moral responsibility; rather, as Strawson says, “The existence of the general framework of attitudes itself is something we are given with the fact of human society. As a whole, it neither calls for, nor permits, an external ‘rational’ justification” (p. 91).

### Sher Against Strawson

So what’s the problem with this particular version of the affective account of blame? According to Sher, Strawson’s account leaves no room for the notion of blameworthiness. When an agent is blameworthy, Sher tells us, it is *reasonable* to blame the agent, the agent *deserves* blame, and there is something about the agent that *justifies* blaming him. (These may just be three ways of saying the same thing.) But it is precisely these normative notions—desert, reasonableness, and justification—that Strawson’s account leaves out.<sup>7</sup> He says only that there are certain facts about a person (a lack of excuses and exemptions) that *tend* to give rise to our blaming attitudes, not that these facts give us a *reason* to blame or that when neither excuse nor exemption applies the person *deserves* blame. It looks, then, as though the notion of blameworthiness has been completely left out.

In one sense this is exactly right, and exactly one of the main points of Strawson’s article. Above I described his conceptual reversal in terms of moral responsibility, but the same could be said of blameworthiness. According to Strawson, it’s not as if we can simply look at a wrongdoer and discover, independent of keeping one eye on ourselves and our reactive attitudes, some fact about the wrongdoer that renders him worthy of blame. It’s not as if we can just make a list—“Well, this guy was mean, he had no good reason to be mean, he knew what he was doing, and he was free to do otherwise...”—and then arrive at the conclusion that someone deserves blame. For the question will always remain: what is it about *those* capacities that “calls for” or justifies blame? Add as much to the list as you like, but, as Strawson says, “there still seems to remain a gap between its applicability in particular cases and its supposed moral consequences” (p. 92). The items on the list you make don’t have any particular normative “glow” or “pull” that automatically renders blame reasonable—at least not without such a glow being bestowed on them by facts about “that complicated web of attitudes and feelings which form an essential part of the moral life as we know it” (p. 91), namely the reactive attitudes. Without first considering our practices of holding responsible, the best we can do is try to “plug the gap with an intuition of fittingness” (p. 92), to say that blameworthiness somehow magically attaches to the items on the list. And that, Strawson says, is not good enough.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Perhaps Strawson does not leave these notions out entirely, but he does try to domesticate them in a way that Sher thinks they cannot be domesticated. Strawson says, for example: “Only by attending to this range of attitudes can we recover from the facts as we know them a sense of what we mean, i.e. of *all* we mean, when, speaking the language of morals, we speak of desert, responsibility, guilt, condemnation, and justice” (p. 91, original emphasis). See also Sher, p. 83, n. 23.

<sup>8</sup> It’s worse than that, actually. Strawson famously says that the intuition of fittingness is “a pitiful intellectual trinket for a philosopher to wear as a charm against the recognition of his own humanity” (p. 92).

So, if Sher's point is that Strawson's version of the affective account of blame leaves out blameworthiness, understood as tied to desert and an independent justification for blame, then even Strawson would agree, and would think it no critique. But this is a far cry from saying that Strawson's account leaves no room for any plausible conception of blameworthiness whatsoever. And, as it turns out, not only can Strawson countenance an important conception of blameworthiness, but it's also one that bears a striking similarity to the conception of blameworthiness that Sher adopts with respect to his own account of blame.

### Strawson and Blameworthiness

The Strawsonian account of blameworthiness that I have in mind is actually mentioned by Sher in the course of defending his critique from a potential objection. According to this objection, Strawson's discussion of excuses and exemptions furnishes us with all that we need for an account of blameworthiness: since the reactive attitudes are *undermined* when we come to see either that the agent hasn't actually shown ill-will or that the agent can't even be a "term of moral relationships" (p. 86) in the first place, we can say that the reactive attitudes are *appropriate* when neither of these applies. An agent would be worthy of blame, then, when the agent acts with ill-will and has the capacities that make him a possible "term of moral relationships" (i.e., when the agent is neither excused nor exempted).

Sher's response to this objection is to allege that it "rests on a non sequitur; for what Strawson takes the absence of an excuse to render reasonable<sup>9</sup> is not [the reactive attitudes themselves], but only the beliefs that are said to trigger [those attitudes]." Sher goes on: "However, from the fact that someone has reason to hold a belief that *causes* him to [respond with the reactive attitudes], it simply does not follow that he also has reason *to* [respond with the reactive attitudes]" (p. 84, original emphasis). In other words, it's one thing to say that the absence of an excuse makes it reasonable for us to believe something that causes us to blame, but quite another to say that the absence of an excuse makes blame itself reasonable. And Strawson can only say the former.

But I think that Sher's response here rests on a misunderstanding of Strawson's view. Sher presents Strawson's view as if it involves a chronological (or, at least, a logical) progression of steps: first, a fellow member of the moral community acts with ill-will; second, I see them doing so and come to believe that they have done so; and finally, my belief that they have done so causes me to feel indignation. Sher's response to the objection, then, is simply to point out that the lack of an excuse does no more than render the second step appropriate, whereas *blame* is identified with the third step. I'm inclined to think, however, that Strawson did not have such a neat three-step model in mind.

One of Strawson's insights into "our common humanity" (p. 85) is that we don't simply come to believe certain facts about the behavior of others in the way that a primatologist might come to believe that an ape is attempting to exact revenge. Rather, to be human is, at least in part, to *see* our fellow humans in a certain light,

<sup>9</sup> The text here actually says 'unreasonable', but this must be a typographical error.

to take up a distinctive *stance* toward them, one that involves “a demand for the manifestation of a reasonable degree of goodwill or regard, on the part of others, not simply towards oneself, but towards all those on whose behalf moral indignation may be felt” (p. 84). It is precisely this demand that Strawson thinks is embodied by the inescapable fact that we are disposed to respond to each other with the reactive attitudes. In fact, Strawson goes even further than saying that the reactive attitudes “embody” the demand. He says, “The making of the demand *is* the proneness to such attitudes” (p. 90).

Now that remark in particular is, I admit, difficult to interpret, but it seems to me that it indicates a view of moral relationships according to which even the mere possibility of forming beliefs about whether one of our fellows has acted with ill-will—even characterizing an action as “displaying ill-will”—already presupposes that we have taken up the stance characterized by the reactive attitudes. The judgment, “He acted with ill-will”, is no scientific observation that we can write in our lab books as though we are cataloguing the behavior of another species. Rather, part of what it is even to perceive ill-will is to feel that one’s demand for regard has been flouted, but that presupposes that one already has made such a demand. And again, for Strawson, to make such a demand is to be subject to the reactive attitudes. To act with ill-will, on this line of thought, is not simply to act with the intent to harm, but also to act with moral disregard for a member of your moral community. But one can’t perceive *disregard*, in this morally loaded sense, unless one already takes the wrongdoer to be a proper term of moral relationships—i.e., unless one is already disposed to the attitudes that constitute Strawson’s participant stance.<sup>10</sup>

If this is the right way to understand Strawson, then it means that he would reject any neat separation of the steps Sher presupposes: first, ill-will; second, belief; third, blame. In particular, the second and third steps will become a complicated mixture of feelings, judgments, and demands that reflect the complexity of being involved in human relationships. This messiness—which one can only see clearly when one fights the urge to “over-intellectualize the facts” (p. 91)—allows for blameworthiness in the following way: to say that an agent is blameworthy is to say that it is appropriate to be subject to this complex mix of feelings and attitudes toward her, and what makes these feelings and attitudes appropriate is the fact that she has flouted the demand for regard that these feelings and attitudes express or embody. And since the demand for regard is, for Strawson, the very foundation of the relationships that constitute a moral community in the first place, there is nothing inaccurate in saying that the responses that serve to mark and protest such disregard (i.e., the reactive attitudes) are precisely what the blamee deserves. Strawson isn’t guilty of a non-sequitur that moves from “the belief that causes resentment is reasonable” to “resentment is reasonable” because, for Strawson, there’s no “sequitur” here at all. Disregard, in the relevant sense, is only possible if the framework of reactive attitudes is already in place.

Moreover, it turns out that when Sher gets around to stating his own account of blameworthiness, it sounds awfully similar to the account that I’ve just argued Strawson can give. In the course of explaining how his own account of blame—

<sup>10</sup> I believe this line of thought is in the same spirit as Pamela Hieronymi’s suggestion (2004, p. 125) that the judgment of ill will itself “capture[s] a central and essential part of the characteristic force of blame”.

according to which blame is centered on a belief that the wrongdoer has acted badly and a desire that he not have done so—can accommodate a robust account of blameworthiness, he says:

To satisfy [the demands of appropriate blame], a potential blamer must have the beliefs and desires that add up to blame *when and because a potential blamee has ignored or flouted, or is disposed to ignore or flout, a justified moral principle*. Because the demands that the norms [of appropriate blame] address to potential blamers are thus made applicable by the badness of the acts or traits of the potential blamees, there is nothing inaccurate about saying that the reactions for which they call are precisely the ones that the potential blamees deserve (p. 131, original emphasis).<sup>11</sup>

On Sher's account, then, we can say that blame is appropriate or deserved because the psychological components that constitute blame are "made applicable" by facts about the blameworthy agent. However, as long as we don't oversimplify Strawson's account, he can say the same thing: the psychological components that constitute blame (i.e., the reactive attitudes, which embody the demand for regard that is central to morality) are made applicable by facts about the blameworthy agent—specifically, the fact that the blameworthy agent has flouted the demand for regard. So, not only can Strawson countenance an important sense of blameworthiness, but it's also the very same sense to which Sher's own account appeals.<sup>12</sup>

### Sher Against Strawsonians

Of course, many contemporary theorists of moral responsibility are less "relentlessly naturalistic" than Strawson himself, so they may be unlikely to accept Strawson's complicated picture of the precise way in which the reactive attitudes are woven into the fabric of human life. After his discussion of Strawson, then, Sher considers the possibility that such contemporary theorists—who are concerned less with how displays of ill-will naturally lead us to react and more with the *fairness* of our reacting in those ways—may well have an easier time accommodating blameworthiness. R. Jay Wallace (1994), for example, gives a Strawsonian account of moral responsibility, but he explicitly builds in a robust sense of *appropriateness* that Strawson's naturalistic account seems to have left out. The capacities that have the moral responsibility "glow", according to Wallace, aren't just those capacities the absence of which would *in fact* inhibit our reactive attitudes. Rather, they are those capacities the absence of which would make it *unfair* for us to make the sort of demands on the agent that the reactive attitudes embody (Wallace 1994, ch. 4). For an agent to be blameworthy, on this

<sup>11</sup> Note that I borrowed some of Sher's wording here to articulate the Strawsonian account of blameworthiness in the previous paragraph.

<sup>12</sup> Of course, the parallel only goes so far. For example, whereas Strawson wants to say that the demand for regard issues from the members of one's moral community, Sher wants to say that the demand for conformity to the requirements of morality issues from those requirements themselves. Still, it's hard to see why that difference would preclude Strawson from giving an account of blameworthiness along the lines I've suggested. Thanks to an anonymous referee for urging me to clarify this.



account, is just for the agent to have exercised the capacities that render it fair for others to respond with the reactive attitudes.

Despite the explicitly normative language in the explanans of this account of blameworthiness, Sher still thinks that it fails. He raises three objections: (1) it has the implausible implication that “anyone who knows that the agent has acted badly... may appropriately react to him with anger or a lack of good will” (p. 86); (2) it gives blameworthiness “no particular priority over sadworthiness, turning-the-other-cheekworthiness, or any other kind of reactionworthiness” (p. 87); and (3) it focuses on the blamer rather than the blamee, which “renders mysterious our sense that to call someone blameworthy is to pass a negative moral judgment on *him*” (p. 88, original emphasis). For each objection, I will spell it out a bit more and then offer a response on behalf of the contemporary Strawsonian.

### Objection 1: Who Can Blame and for How Long

According to Sher’s first objection, the contemporary Strawsonian is committed to the view that when an agent has exercised the capacities that render it appropriate for others to respond with the reactive attitudes, the relevant “others” include anyone at all, and the appropriateness extends for any length of time whatever. Thus, Sher contends that the Strawsonian is saddled with a view that is “far too dark to be credible”, namely that “it is appropriate for everyone to be angry at, or to lack good will toward, virtually everyone else he knows” (p. 87).

If this were indeed the view of the contemporary Strawsonian, then it would be a *reductio*, as Sher contends. Happily, however, this is not the view. What leads Sher astray here is his failure to distinguish between, on the one hand, its being *in principle* appropriate, for *someone or other*, to respond to wrongdoing with the reactive attitudes, and on the other hand, its being *in fact* appropriate, for *someone in particular*, to respond to wrongdoing with the reactive attitudes.<sup>13</sup> When the contemporary Strawsonian says that blameworthiness is a matter of its being appropriate for others to respond with the reactive attitudes, all he means to be saying is the first thing: that it is in principle appropriate, for someone or other, to respond with the reactive attitudes. The facts that make this appropriate are, for the most part, facts about the blamee himself—the control he exercised, the knowledge he had, the stress he was under, etc.<sup>14</sup> But additional facts need to be considered before we can know whether it is in fact appropriate for some particular person to respond to a bit of wrongdoing with the reactive attitudes. In particular, we need to know whether the would-be blamer has *the standing* to blame.<sup>15</sup>

Various facts about would-be blamers can undermine their standing to blame, including hypocrisy, complicity, unfamiliarity, and incompetence. If I try to rebuke you for cheating on a test when we both know that I am a chronic cheater myself, then

<sup>13</sup> On the significance of this distinction, see Fischer and Tognazzini 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Always keeping in mind, of course, that part of the way these particular facts become relevant in the first place, for the Strawsonian, is via their connection to our practices of holding one another responsible.

<sup>15</sup> For more on the ways in which facts about the blamer might affect the propriety of blame, see Coates and Tognazzini 2012, and several of the essays in Coates and Tognazzini 2013.



you have every right to respond to my rebuke by challenging my standing to issue it. You might say, for example: “Look who’s talking!”, and this would be your way of dismissing my rebuke as inappropriate because hypocritical.<sup>16</sup> So, various facts that are, so to speak, *extrinsic* to the wrongdoing itself will be relevant to determining whether there is in fact anyone who can appropriately blame a wrongdoer. Nevertheless, facts that are at least partly *intrinsic* to the wrongdoing may still render the agent blameworthy, in the sense of its being in principle appropriate, for someone or other, to blame the agent. So blameworthiness, even on the Strawsonian picture, is quite a distinct concern from who can in fact blame (and for how long). Much wrongdoing by others, even if I know about it, will be none of my business, and hence I won’t have the standing to blame those wrongdoers even if they are blameworthy.<sup>17</sup>

The issue of standing seems most clearly applicable to cases of *expressed* blame, though, so one might think that a version of Sher’s worry still remains, namely that everyone is entitled to *feel* angry even if only some people have the standing to *express* that anger. And perhaps this implication also seems “too dark to be credible”.<sup>18</sup> But I’m inclined to think that issues of standing will be relevant to unexpressed blame, as well. Angela Smith (2007) expresses this view nicely in a discussion of how hypocrisy might undermine someone’s standing to blame:

Certainly when it comes to expressions of moral criticism, the fact that we share a moral fault with the agent can undermine our authority to explicitly reproach her for it. This fact can also affect our standing to take up certain kinds of blaming attitudes, such as righteous indignation. It would be unbearably hypocritical for us to be righteously indignant toward another for a moral fault which we share with them, such as selfishness, envy, or pride (p. 480).

As Smith explains elsewhere in the paper, one’s particular relationship to the wrongdoer will often make certain sorts of responses appropriate and others not, even if the responses are simply unexpressed emotions. Roger Wertheimer (1998) makes the same point quite vividly:

If the harm isn’t gross or the injustice egregious (no crime against humanity), if our concern, though earnest, is idle, then high-minded indignation has odors of moral self-indulgence if it’s unprompted by institutional or communal affiliations, or personal attachments or identifications with the victims, or some stake in the issues. Some matters—like other folks’ intimate intrafamilial relations—may be none of your business, not your affair, no (proper) concern of yours, so, whatever your evidence and emotions, it is not your place to bear ill will. Persons with ties to the principals may have better claim to a concern that could justify ill will than persons connected purely by principles (p. 499).

So, as long as we take issues of standing seriously, then although the view that Sher deemed “too dark to be credible” is indeed dark and incredible, it is not an implication of the contemporary Strawsonian view.

<sup>16</sup> For a nice discussion of the standing to blame, see Cohen 2006.

<sup>17</sup> It’s an open question why one’s standing to blame is undermined when the wrongdoing in question is “not one’s business”, but we don’t need a detailed explanation to acknowledge the intuitive force of the point.

<sup>18</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for pushing this worry.

## Objection 2: Blameworthiness and Sadworthiness

Sher's second objection is that the contemporary Strawsonian account is "too weak to do justice to the importance of blameworthiness within our moral scheme" because "anger and the withdrawal of good will are hardly the only appropriate reactions to bad acts". Since other reactions, such as "being saddened, turning the other cheek, turning away, becoming disillusioned, trying to change society, trying to reason with the wrongdoer", and so on are equally appropriate in response to wrongdoing, Sher contends that on the Strawsonian account, "blameworthiness as so explicated will enjoy no particular priority over sadworthiness, turning-the-other-cheekworthiness, or any other kind of reactionworthiness" (p. 87).

The worry, I take it, is that the contemporary Strawsonian is stuck saying that there is nothing special about blame. If being appropriately targeted with the reactive attitudes is going to be sufficient for being blameworthy, then there's going to have to be something special about wrongdoing that calls *specifically* for the reactive attitudes, something about the wrongdoing that makes those attitudes *particularly* appropriate, given how many other ways of reacting would also be "appropriate" in some vague undefined sense. If *blameworthy* is equivalent to something like *deserves blame*, then the sense in which the reactive attitudes are an appropriate response cannot be the same sense in which sadness is an appropriate response, lest *deserving blame* be no more robust than the rather morally uninteresting and useless idea of *deserving sadness*.

Perhaps this objection would succeed if the proponent of the affective account of blame were thinking of the reactive attitudes as *mere* affect or feeling, as though resentment were simply a particular phenomenological or physiological response. In that case, the reactive attitudes would simply be one appropriate response among many.<sup>19</sup> But there are more sophisticated accounts of the reactive attitudes available that would allow us to explain why they are *uniquely* appropriate in response to wrongdoing.

Suppose, for example, that the reactive attitudes are best understood as having some cognitive content, as well. Following R. Jay Wallace's influential account of the stance of holding responsible, we might say that resentment is partly constituted by the belief that the wrongdoer has disregarded moral demands and expectations that one accepts.<sup>20</sup> If that's right, then the emotion of resentment will be a particularly appropriate response to wrongdoing, at least if we construe wrongdoing to be partly a matter of showing disregard or ill-will toward others. Sadness and other emotions may also be appropriate, in some sense, but sadness does not have the same sort of directedness or interpersonal significance that resentment seems to have.

But there's an even stronger case to be made that the reactive attitudes are a uniquely appropriate response to wrongdoing. Not only is it plausible to suppose that the reactive emotions have a cognitive component that is directed specifically at the

<sup>19</sup> In fact, one can imagine this sort of objection being directed against T. M. Scanlon's recent account of blame, according to which blaming is modifying one's relationship with someone in response to one's judgment that the person has done something to impair that relationship (2008, pp. 128–129). One worry for this account is that there are many different ways to modify one's relationship in response to an impairment, only some of which seem to have anything to do with *blame*.

<sup>20</sup> See Wallace 1994, chapter 2. Alternatively, as Justin Coates suggested to me in personal correspondence, we might say that the emotion of resentment simply *represents* the wrongdoer as having disregarded moral demands. Belief itself may not even be necessary. See also Hurley and Macnamara 2010.

wrongdoing to which they are a response, but it is also plausible to suppose that the reactive emotions lie at the very heart of a commitment to morality. Christopher Franklin has recently argued, for example, that the reactive emotions are “essential to how we defend and protect moral values” (2013, p. 218), and failing to experience such emotions in response to wrongdoing would (ordinarily) indicate a failure to take morality seriously.<sup>21</sup> R. Jay Wallace has recently made a similar suggestion, saying that “the disposition to blame is a way of taking to heart the values at the basis of morality that is peculiarly appropriate to the relational character of those values...a tendency to experience [the reactive attitudes] thus involves a special form of care and concern for the values around which morality is organized” (Wallace 2010, pp. 368–369). Mere sadness, on the other hand, though understandable and perhaps even admirable as a response to wrongdoing, does not factor into this broader moral framework in quite the same way. One of the reasons why Strawson’s article continues to exert such an influence is precisely that the attitudes at the center of his framework seem to belong at the center of any framework that purports to represent the fabric of our shared moral life.

### Objection 3: Blame as Fundamental

Finally, Sher’s third objection is that the contemporary Strawsonian account is too oriented on the *blamer*. If blameworthiness is to be understood in terms of the appropriateness of certain blaming emotions, then a judgment of blameworthiness starts to seem more like a judgment about the blamer than it is a judgment about the wrongdoer. But since a judgment of blameworthiness is most centrally a judgment made about the agent who has done wrong, according to Sher, the contemporary Strawsonian account distorts (or at least cannot capture) the moral facts. Here it is perhaps best to let Sher speak for himself:

It is widely acknowledged that judging acts to be wrong is different from judging agents to be blameworthy; and it is widely acknowledged, too, that both sorts of evaluation are morally fundamental. To capture the fact that blameworthiness is a fundamental evaluative category, we must, at a minimum, construe being blameworthy as having some kind of negative moral status. However, according to the [contemporary Strawsonian account], to call a wrongdoer blameworthy is not to say anything about his moral status, but is if anything to say something about the moral status of those who react to him with anger or a withdrawal of good will (p. 87).

Thus, Sher contends, the contemporary Strawsonian account fails to capture an essential element of true blameworthiness.

I think there are two ways the contemporary Strawsonian can reply to this objection, depending on how we interpret Sher’s idea that blameworthiness is “morally fundamental”. On the one hand, perhaps it means that we should be able to determine whether an agent is blameworthy without appealing to any facts outside

<sup>21</sup> Sher (2006, ch. 7) makes a similar point about his own account of blame, and I’m merely pointing out that the same move seems to be available to the contemporary Strawsonian.

of the agent and his action. That is, perhaps blameworthiness is meant to be “fundamental” in the sense that it is an independent metaphysical fact about an agent, one that can obtain regardless of the relation between the agent and her moral community. If this is what Sher’s objection amounts to, then he’s certainly right that the contemporary Strawsonian cannot allow blameworthiness to be fundamental in *this* sense.

But if this is the way to understand what it is for blameworthiness to be “morally fundamental”, then it is not so much an objection to the contemporary Strawsonian account as it is a statement of disagreement with that account. As we saw above, contemporary Strawsonians take one of Strawson’s main insights to be that the relation between an agent and her moral community is crucial to understanding the nature of responsibility and blameworthiness. According to Strawsonians, independent facts about an agent and her action do not, by themselves, amount to “the blameworthiness facts”. In order to determine which facts “add up” to blameworthiness, we need to figure out which norms structure the attitudes and practices of blame in the first place. So if the complaint is that Strawsonians do not allow blameworthiness to be an independent metaphysical fact about an agent, then although it’s true, it’s hard to see how it is a legitimate objection in this dialectical context.

On the other hand, perhaps for blameworthiness to be “morally fundamental” is for it to be at least *partly* grounded in (even if not exhausted by, or wholly determined by) independent metaphysical facts about the agent and her action. Sher seems worried that the contemporary Strawsonian account would completely divorce blameworthiness from facts about the agent and make it completely contingent instead on facts about the agent’s moral community. So perhaps Sher is simply insisting that blameworthiness must be, at the very least, one of the *transgressor’s* properties.

This does seem to be a legitimate desideratum for an adequate account of blameworthiness, but I’m not sure why we should think that the contemporary Strawsonian account fails to satisfy it. There are still, after all, independent facts about the agent that play a role in grounding her blameworthiness. In particular, the facts that she did wrong and that she has no excuse for her wrongdoing will play a central role. All the Strawsonian insists upon is that these facts—which are as independent and metaphysical as you like, or as your theory of moral wrongdoing will allow—do not *count* as “the blameworthiness facts” (or, perhaps, do not *gain their significance* vis à vis blameworthiness) without the obtaining of a certain relation between the wrongdoer and her moral community.<sup>22</sup>

Admittedly, one of the more common ways of stating the Strawsonian position—namely, that an agent is morally responsible (blameworthy) if and only if she can be fairly targeted with the reactive attitudes—may make it seem as though independent facts about the agent drop out completely in favor of facts about the agent’s moral community.<sup>23</sup> But this is not, I submit, the best way to understand the Strawsonian view. Rather, what the canonical biconditional of Strawsonianism is telling us is that we cannot determine which facts about an agent are relevant to moral responsibility and blameworthiness unless that understanding is *mediated* by an understanding of

<sup>22</sup> Thanks to Justin Coates for helping me to articulate this point.

<sup>23</sup> Formulations similar to this one can be found in Fischer and Ravizza 1998 and Wallace 1994. I am not claiming, however, that these theorists are guilty of the confusion mentioned in the text.

the agent's relation to her moral community and the norms of fairness that govern the moral community's responsibility practices. Those practices will not be completely *unconstrained* by relevant facts about the agent and her wrongdoing—excuses and justifications are still important, as is control, perhaps—but the crucial point is that they are not constrained by some prior and independent facts of moral responsibility or blameworthiness. On the Strawsonian view, there just are no such prior “responsibility facts”, but that doesn't mean there are no prior facts at all. And it certainly doesn't mean that the practices of the moral community can be justified *completely independent* of what's true about the agent, intrinsically considered.

In other words, when we look at a wrongdoer and ask whether she is blameworthy, the contemporary Strawsonian tells us that in order to answer this question we need to widen our gaze to include the moral community as well. But we do not thus lose sight completely of the wrongdoer; we simply come to see her more completely, since some facts about her are at least partly grounded (but only *partly*) in facts about her relation to her moral community. In short, in order to determine whether she is blameworthy, we first need to look at the practices of blame to see what it is she might be worthy *of*.

It thus seems to me that there is a perfectly good sense in which blameworthiness, even for the contemporary Strawsonian, is “morally fundamental”. Perhaps Sher has in mind an interpretation of this phrase that I haven't considered, but I'm not sure what it could be.

## Conclusion

To sum up: I first considered an objection Sher raises to Strawson's own naturalistic version of the affective account of blame, and then I considered the three objections Sher raises against contemporary Strawsonian incarnations of the affective account. In each case, I argued that the affective account of blame can adequately rebut the objections, and in the process I hope to have clarified how contemporary Strawsonian accounts ought to be interpreted.

In closing, I'd like to consider one last objection that Sher raises against the affective account, though this one has nothing to do with the notion of blameworthiness. Rather, Sher thinks that the affective account of blame faces an independent problem, namely that there can be affectless blame. As Sher says:

We may, for example, feel no hostility toward the loved one whom we blame for failing to tell a sensitive acquaintance a hard truth, the criminal whom we blame for a burglary we read about in the newspaper, or the historical figure whom we blame for the misdeeds he performed long ago. As [these] examples suggest, blaming is something that we can do regretfully or dispassionately...[w]e simply do not have the emotional resources to muster even a twinge of hostility toward each of the innumerable miscreants, scoundrels, and thugs—many of them long dead—whom we blame for what we know to be their bad behavior or bad character (pp. 88–89).

I'm inclined to think that this, in fact, is the most pressing objection to the affective account of blame, and that dealing with it may require some fancy footwork from proponents of the affective account.

Still, I suspect that even this objection is not insurmountable for the resourceful Strawsonian. The key move—which is a move that the Strawsonian will need to make in any case to defend the affective account of blame fully—will be to spell out, in detail, the nature of the reactive emotions. We’ve seen above that they are not most plausibly construed as *pure* affect—some propositional content will be involved—but perhaps a full account will not even require that they involve any occurrent phenomenological *feelings* at all. Perhaps, for example, it will be possible to resent—really and truly to resent—a long dead thug without even feeling a flicker of annoyance or anger. It will all depend on the nature of resentment, and that’s a question that is far from settled.<sup>24</sup>

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