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Blame as Attention

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Abstract: The wide variety of blame presents two difficult puzzles. Why are instances of blame categorized under so many different mental kinds, such as judgment, belief, emotion, action, intention, desire, and combinations of these? Why is ‘blame’ used to describe both interpersonal reactions and mere causal attributions, such as blaming faulty brakes for a car crash? I introduce a new conception of blame, on which blame is attention to something as a source of badness. I argue that this view resolves both puzzles and offers an independently appealing conception of blame.

1. Two Puzzles

It is a commonplace that blame is strikingly diverse. We blame ourselves, loved ones, coworkers, dead relatives, celebrities, strangers, historical figures, and vending machines. We

blame for moral failures, athletic slipups, bad taste, and bad reasoning. We blame publicly, privately, angrily, sadly, fairly or unfairly. Though some examples are controversial, blame can be found in a wide variety of relationships, norm violations, and reactions. Accommodating the diversity of blame is a central aim of conceptions of blame.¹ Some of the best recent writing on blame considers underexplored kinds of blame, especially in non-moral contexts.²

Despite some progress in understanding the nature and diversity of blame, two central puzzles have gone mostly unnoticed. We can state them as follows:

Ontological Diversity: Why are instances of blame categorized under so many different mental kinds, such as judgment, belief, emotion, action, intention, desire, and combinations of these?³

Two Uses: Why is ‘blame’ used to describe both interpersonal reactions and mere causal attributions, such as blaming faulty brakes for a car crash?

Surprisingly, no one has directly explored what is puzzling about the wide range of basic mental kinds under which instances of blame are classified. Causal blame is also largely ignored, even in discussions of non-moral blame. In what follows, I aim to make two contributions to the growing

¹ Accommodating the diversity of blame is standardly included in lists of desiderata for conceptions of blame, such as those in Smith (2013, 33) and Shoemaker and Vargas (2021, 582-3). I return to these desiderata in §6 below.

² See, for example, Brown (2020a) and Boulton (2021, 2024) on epistemic blame, and the discussions of non-moral skill blame in Björnsson (2017) and Shoemaker and Vargas (2021).

³ I call this diversity ‘ontological’ because it concerns the most general categories of mental kinds. Those who prefer to use the term ‘ontological’ more sparingly, with all or most mental kinds grouped into just one basic category, are welcome to rename this puzzle Diversity of Mental Kinds.

philosophical literature on blame. First, I introduce and develop these two puzzles, arguing that they raise difficult, central questions about the nature and diversity of blame and that extant conceptions of blame struggle to offer a satisfying resolution (§§2-3). Second, I introduce a new conception of blame, which I call *Blame as Attention*. On this view, blame is attention to something as a source of badness. Drawing on recent work on attention and the selectivity of causal judgment, I argue that Blame as Attention offers a resolution of both puzzles (§§4-5) and an independently appealing conception of blame (§6) that can address some natural objections (§7). Although they raise important challenges, these puzzles also offer an unacknowledged clue by which we can recognize a central unifying feature of blaming reactions. It is no accident that we associate blame with pointing a finger, squinting, and italics in phrases such as: ‘*You did this.*’ Blame, I will argue, attends to something as a source of badness, through reactions of many mental kinds in both personal and merely causal contexts.

2. The Diversity of Blame

However they might vary, anger and indignation are clearly and uncontroversially emotions. But for nearly every mental kind, it seems, some theories claim that at least some instances of blame fall under that kind. For Zimmerman (1988, 38), ‘Blaming someone may be said to constitute *judging* that there is a “discredit” or “debit” in his ledger...; that his “moral standing” has been “diminished”’⁴ For Wallace (1994, 75), ‘to blame a person is to be subject to

⁴ Emphasis added. Watson (1996, 230-31) holds that in *some* cases, ‘to blame (morally) is to attribute something to a (moral) fault in the agent.’ See also Scanlon (1988), Haji (1998), and, for at least an emphasis on judgment, Hieronymi (2004) and Arpaly (2006).

one of [the] reactive *emotions* because of what the person has done.’⁵ Other discussions treat some or all instances of blame as actions, such as ‘dispassionately “unfriending” someone on one’s Facebook page.’⁶ As Sliwa (2019, 200) puts it, ‘When we blame one another for moral transgressions, we are *doing* something: we accuse the other of wrongdoing (“You did this on purpose”), demand an explanation (“How could you?”, “What were you thinking?”), or request an apology or compensation (“You owe me a drink!”).’

Many philosophers treat blame as combining or ranging across these and other mental kinds. In Miranda Fricker’s ‘proposed paradigm form of blame...I wrong you, and in response you let me know with feeling that I am at fault for it’ (2016, 171); this blame is an action ‘with feeling.’ Sher (2006, 130) writes of ‘the belief-desire combinations that I have said add up to blame,’ and sometimes treats blame as consisting partly of ‘affective and behavioral dispositions’ (115)—dispositions to feeling and action, rather than the feelings and actions themselves. For Scanlon (2008, 186-7),

Blame...can involve different things in different cases, including such things as withholding or modifying trust and reliance, seeing the person as not eligible, or less eligible, to be a friend or a participant in cooperative relations, changing the meaning one assigns to the person’s actions and to one’s interactions with him or her, or even ceasing to

⁵ Wallace (1994, 75); emphasis added. David Owens (2012, 31) holds that ‘blame is a form of anger.’ Macalester Bell (2013) understands blame in terms of ‘hostile attitudes,’ which include emotions such as contempt. Strawson (1962) did not identify either blame or ‘reactive attitudes’ with emotions, but many other philosophers influenced by him now conceive of blame as an emotion; for a helpful recent overview and defense, see Menges (2017). Wallace (2011) and Wolf (2011) are also particularly prominent defenses of emotion-centered views of blame.

⁶ Smith (2013, 32). Bennett (2013, 78) describes blaming as a ‘symbolic action.’

be disposed to be pleased when things go well for the person, and ceasing to hope that they go well.

Changes in trust, meaning, pleasure, and hope can constitute blame, on this view, and Scanlon also adds intention. When his friend Joe makes cruel jokes about him at a party, Scanlon writes, his blame of Joe might ‘revise...intentions to confide in him,’ or form ‘intentions to complain...and to demand an explanation, justification, or apology’ (129-31).⁷

Finally, some discussions do not define blame by its mental kinds at all. For Shoemaker and Vargas (2021, 582), for example, ‘Blame...[is] defined most fundamentally...by a *function*, namely, the signaling of the blamer’s commitments, including a commitment to the enforcement of those commitments. This is the remarkably underappreciated unifying feature of blame.’ On their view, blaming someone by getting angry, protesting, or yelling ‘What is your problem?’ signals our commitment to the norms she has violated, and ‘the only way to capture the diversity of blame itself is to recognize the explanatory priority of the signaling function’ (588). Reactions of different basic mental kinds can share blame’s central function.⁸

Together, these discussions classify instances of blame under a bewildering variety of mental kinds. Why does this matter? One reason is that judgments, emotions, actions, and other responses are subject to importantly different forms and standards of evaluation. To understand whether or in what way blame is subject to rational evaluation, what kinds of reasons can be given for or against blaming, or whether blaming can be voluntary or involuntary, one needs some basic

⁷ I discuss Scanlon, Sher, and Fricker’s conceptions of blame in detail in Chislenko (forthcoming).

⁸ In laying out these various views, I have followed Tognazzini and Coates’ (2018) helpful classification of theories of blame into cognitive, emotional, conative, and functional theories, at least in rough outline. Unlike Tognazzini and Coates, I do not treat Sher or Scanlon’s views as straightforwardly conative, since these views combine cognitive, emotional, and motivational elements.

picture of the sort of reaction it is. The apparent ontological diversity of blame frustrates attempts to develop that picture. But this diversity also matters because it is itself an interesting and puzzling datum. Why do instances of blame appear to people to fall into so many different categories? Are people mistaken, and if so, what are the mistakes? Or are people somehow mostly right in this wide range of classifications?

It is not easy to see why people would make so many basic mistakes in classifying instances of blame, if they are indeed mistakes. There is no one easily identifiable mistake common to many of these categorizations. A patchwork explanation can attempt to identify a series of mistakes. Treating blame as an action may confuse an attitude (blame itself) with an outward expression or a typical accompaniment of that attitude ('That was so cruel!'). Some people who treat blame as a judgment may be, as Tognazzini and Coates (2018, §1.1) suggest, 'conflating *blaming* with *judging blameworthy*.' These suggestions have some appeal. But they do not obviously cover all the mistakes made by various categorizations; more explanation is needed even if they are correct. And they are not immediately convincing. Recent writers do make the relevant distinctions, and still continue to categorize instances of blame in different ways, making simple confusion a less likely explanation.⁹ And anger and indignation, too, can be expressed outwardly and judged appropriate. Why would there be such ontological confusion about blame, but not about them? I think these are underappreciated challenges, especially for single-kind theories of blame. Anyone claiming that blame is always an emotion, always a judgment, or always an action must struggle to explain the widespread, enduring appeal of many basic category mistakes. A single-kind theory can bite this bullet, claiming that most theories and most blame attributions are simply mistaken.

⁹ As Shoemaker and Vargas (2021, 597n4) put it, 'McKenna is one of the many who explains in detail why what he calls "overt" blame is the more fundamental thing to be explained.' See Coates and Tognazzini (2013, 8 and 8n14).

But this bullet makes the theory less convincing. So far, we are left without an explanation either of why most people go wrong, or of what, if anything, they might be right about. We would need a good reason to remain so baffled and so uncharitable.

It is also difficult to vindicate the appearances. How could it be true that blame can be an emotion, a judgment, an action, an intention, a disposition supported by a belief and a desire, and a change in trust, pleasure, or hope? This truth, if it is a truth, is not easily accounted for. One might say that blaming is a way of holding responsible, and there is a wide variety of ways to hold someone responsible; it should then be unsurprising that blame can be an emotion, a judgment, and so on. But switching the example makes obvious the fallacy of this reasoning. Compare: ‘A boycott is a way of holding responsible, and there is a wide variety of ways to hold someone responsible; it should then be unsurprising that a boycott can be an emotion, a judgment, and so on.’ Falling into a broader genus does not make something range as widely as the genus does. If blame falls into many kinds, in ways a boycott does not, we have not yet explained why.

We might look instead to views that treat blame as ranging across mental kinds, to see how they demarcate blame. Scanlon (2008, 128-9) appeals to the notion of a relationship: ‘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.’ If relationship changes vary across mental kinds, as blame does, understanding blame in terms of relationship changes may help explain this diversity. But blame does not obviously include all forms of relationship change, or even all those the blamer holds to be appropriate. As Smith (2013, 38) puts it: ‘It is clearly going too far to suggest that showing extra love and affection toward someone can count as a way of blaming him!’ Like ‘holding responsible,’ ‘relationship modification’ is clearly a wide-ranging category. But even if blame is a member of that category,

it is not clear why it should range across mental kinds in the way the broader range of reactions does.¹⁰

Functional theories may offer a more promising explanation. If blame functions to signal one's commitment to particular norms, then boycotts, loss of trust, or feelings of indignation or guilt can all send that signal. Nevertheless, functional explanation carries a significant cost. It accommodates blame's apparent ontological diversity, at the price of its functional diversity. For Sliwa (2019, 201), 'our blaming practice serves an *epistemic function*. It facilitates shared knowledge about how an act of wrongdoing has reshaped the normative landscape.' Sliwa thinks it is this epistemic function that 'unifies the great diversity of blaming forms and expressions' (215). Fricker (2016, 175) thinks at least paradigm cases of blame have a 'proper point,' by being 'fundamentally aimed at promoting greater alignment between the moral understandings of the blamer and the blamee by enlarging the moral awareness of the wrongdoer.' For others, blame centrally aims, as Brink and Nelkin (2022, 180) put it, 'to *open a dialogue* or *initiate a normative exchange*,' or to protest, or to enforce compliance with norms rather than signal the blamer's commitment to them.¹¹ Together, these many suggestions raise a challenge that parallels Ontological Diversity. Why do so many different functions seem central to blame? Saying 'God

¹⁰ Scanlon's notion of a relationship is also, as Boulton (2021, 522) puts it, 'somewhat technical,' designed to accommodate blame toward strangers and the dead as modifications of 'the moral relationship: the kind of mutual concern that, ideally, we all have toward other rational beings.' For more detailed criticism of this account's demarcation of blame, see Sher (2013), Smith (2013), and Chislenko (2020). I explore the normative risks of overly broad conceptions of blame in Chislenko (forthcoming).

¹¹ Norm enforcement is quite frequently seen as a core function of blame; for discussion, see Brink and Nelkin (2022, 180). Pereboom (2017, 128) describes protest as one of the 'core functions' of blame, treating protest more explicitly as functional than Smith (2013) does. On the communicative function of blame, see McKenna (2012), Macnamara (2015), and Fricker (2016). McGeer (2013) emphasizes both communicative and signaling functions. Some writers, including Fricker, Shoemaker and Vargas, and Sliwa, allow the possibility that blame is functionally diverse; as Sliwa (2019, 207) puts it, 'different sub-types may well serve additional functions.' But none offers a detailed defense of the view that other functions are additional or secondary, whereas one is a central or definitive 'unifying function.'

damn it, you left your shoes out again!’, or the attitudes or reactions this speech act expresses, can serve simultaneously to enforce norms, signal competence and commitment, further shared knowledge and moral alignment, express and protect oneself, dominate someone, and withdraw from a relationship. We might want to know why, if blame has a single, unifying function, so many different functions should appear central to blame. A satisfying explanation should explain the appearance of both ontological and functional diversity.¹²

These considerations suggest that Ontological Diversity is a genuine puzzle, which a conception of blame should address. Blame’s apparent ontological diversity is difficult to dismiss, and difficult to explain or vindicate. I will offer a solution—but first, let us explore our second puzzle.

3. Two Uses of ‘Blame’

We blame faulty brakes for a car crash, or rain for a bad mood. We read the headline: ‘Authorities blamed Hurricane Katrina for five deaths,’ or: ‘Algae blamed for green Olympic

¹² Functional theories of blame also face other challenges in accounting for blame’s diversity that I will not pursue here. First, as Brink and Nelkin (2022) argue, it seems blame’s function can change over time, at least in principle. Second, as the shoes example suggests, diversity of function itself, rather than some alternative function, can seem central to blame, as it does to laughter or to human hands. This offers another source of resistance to single-function views of blame, and pressure to describe blame in terms of non-functional characteristics that underlie these various functions. Finally, as I argue in Chislenko (2019, 179), functional theories of blame can easily be too inclusive, by describing a function that reactions other than blame serve as well (or better) than blame does. Shoemaker and Vargas (2021) mention a concern about ‘false positives,’ in which a theory miscategorizes a broader range of reactions as blame, but, notably, they, like Sliwa (2019), do not argue that their theory avoids false positives.

diving pool.’¹³ These reactions do not treat the brakes, rain, hurricane, or algae as persons, as other blame reactions do. Instead, they are cases of *causal blame*, or seeing something as a cause of an undesirable effect. As Tognazzini and Coates (2018, §1) put it, ‘Almost all philosophical discussions of blame ignore (or mention only to set aside) the form of blame sometimes characterized as causal or explanatory responsibility.... Just what the relation is between causal blame and interpersonal blame has not been well-explored.’ How is causal blame related to distinctively interpersonal forms of blame? Is there a single phenomenon of blame, present in both contexts? If not, why do we use ‘blame’ in these two ways?

One possible answer denies that there is a single sense of ‘blame’ common to both contexts. We can call this *the disambiguation strategy*. Brink and Nelkin (2022, 179) write that ‘there is a notion of blame in which it is perfectly apt to blame the weather for a road closure. [But] the notion of blame at stake here is one connected to a kind of blameworthiness that only agents have and that presuppose that they are responsible agents whom it is appropriate to *hold to account*.’ If these are different *notions*, there is a simple and satisfying response to Two Uses: ‘Blame’ is used in both contexts, because ‘blame’ is ambiguous. A discussion of interpersonal blame can then legitimately leave causal blame aside, and limit its scope to interpersonal blame.

Unfortunately, causal and interpersonal blame are surprisingly difficult to disambiguate. One difficulty might be called *the continuity problem*. When we disambiguate ‘bat’ into ‘small flying animal’ and ‘baseball stick,’ we find two distinct categories; there are no tricky intermediate cases of ‘bats’ that are partly like the animal and partly like the stick. But between paradigm cases of interpersonal and causal blame, there is a range of intermediate reactions that is fairly continuous

¹³ I borrow these examples from Chislenko (2021, 347), which considers attention to be a common feature of interpersonal blame but not of causal blame.

along several dimensions. Blame's target ranges across hurricanes, brakes, algae, cats, and persons of varying mental capacities. We blame for what is morally wrong, morally bad, non-morally bad, or for unfortunate effects. And a reaction, such as saying 'If you had stolen second base we would have won,' can range continuously from lighthearted, matter-of-fact causal blame to angry betrayal. It is unclear how to draw the line between causal and interpersonal blame. We cannot, for example, distinguish interpersonal blame by its targeting a person, since persons have no special exemption from causal blame.

A second difficulty for disambiguating 'blame' is that blame seems to shift easily between human and inanimate targets. We can call this *the shift problem*. In Calvin Harris' pop hit 'Blame,' the chorus repeats, over and over again: 'Blame it on the night, don't blame it on me' (Harris 2014). Harris' first verse establishes 'blaming it on me' as painfully personal, with the lyric 'Guilt is burnin', inside I'm hurtin'.' Does the chorus then shift from one sense of 'blame' to another? It is far from obvious that there is any shift in senses here (or anything clever in the song at all). Although we do sometimes switch senses of a single word mid-sentence, we usually mark the shift in some way, either with some special emphasis or with an apparent contradiction that forces a shift in meaning, as in 'I don't just like you, I *like* you!', or: 'I don't want to do what I want to do, I want to do what you want to do!' A shift in senses does not seem marked or encouraged by 'Blame it on the night, don't blame it on me.' Similarly, if we say: 'Don't blame me, blame the brakes!', there is nothing to suggest that we use 'blame' in two different senses in rapid succession.

Finally, those tempted to distinguish a *moral* (rather than, more broadly, interpersonal) sense of 'blame'¹⁴ face examples in which we blame someone not for moral failures but for

¹⁴ See Wallace (1994), Hieronymi (2004), McKenna (2012), and Smith (2013), among others. I return to moral blame in §§6-7 below.

superstition ('You idiot!'), ugly brushwork, or bad cooking or basketball playing. We then also seem to need some further senses of 'blame' to include epistemic 'blame,' aesthetic 'blame,' skill 'blame,' 'blame' of pets, and so on. Proliferating senses of 'blame' risks violating Grice's Razor: 'Senses are not to be multiplied beyond necessity.'¹⁵ We can call this seemingly unintuitive proliferation of further senses of the word 'blame' *the proliferation problem* for the disambiguation strategy.

These problems are not knockdown objections. But they make disambiguating 'blame' awkward and somewhat implausible. We seem pressured to say there are three or five or eight senses of 'blame,' continuous with each other and messily intertwined. Why not just say there is one notion of blame, with broad application and various subcategories rather than multiple senses? If we could characterize this broader notion in a satisfying way, that might be preferable.

Two variants of the disambiguation strategy might still be tempting. First, one might say that in causal blame, we are not really blaming the object at all; 'blame it on the night' is really just a way of excusing oneself or avoiding responsibility. This response faces the obvious question of what blame attributions such as 'she blames the brakes' mean. Second, and relatedly, one might say that merely causal uses of 'blame' are simply metaphorical. Scanlon (2008, 161) writes, for example, that 'with respect to inanimate objects, we can speak of...blame only in a metaphorical sense.' But this insistence on metaphor will be counterintuitive to those of us who do not experience ourselves as speaking metaphorically. I think I do blame the rain for my bad mood;

¹⁵ See Grice (1989, 47), who calls this 'Modified Occam's Razor,' and for discussion and qualification, Hazlett (2007) and Davis (1998, 19-27). There can of course be different *kinds* of blame—a point I return to later in the paper—and those interested in skill blame or epistemic blame need not be proliferating *senses* of 'blame.' But they can sometimes be inclined to add senses, in my view unnecessarily; Brown (2020b, 3596), for example, suggests that beliefs can be 'blameworthy...in a distinctively epistemic sense.' On Blame as Attention, we blame in only one sense, but in many different ways.

when I tell you this, why should I believe I am not literally attributing a blaming attitude to myself? The shift problem, too, presents a challenge to the insistence on metaphor. If I say ‘Blame it on the night, don’t blame it on me,’ or ‘Don’t blame me, blame the brakes,’ then I must (supposedly) be encouraging blaming the night or the brakes in a merely metaphorical sense. But whatever this metaphorical blame of the night or brakes amounts to, why would it conflict with literally blaming me? The request to shift blame’s target makes most sense if the ‘blame’ is literal throughout; I am then, much more straightforwardly, asking you to literally blame the brakes instead of literally blaming me. We also still have a kind of proliferation problem. How many common non-literal uses of ‘blame’ are there? Is ‘blaming’ a cat also metaphorical? Is aesthetic blame literally a kind of blame? Once again, distinguishing the uses of ‘blame’ is difficult. Scanlon’s reason for insisting that ‘blame’ of objects such as cars is metaphorical is that ‘cars...do not have feelings or respond to reasons’ (2008, 161). If we think of blame as essentially part of a fabric of offering and responding to reasons, then it does seem tempting to think that merely causal ‘blame’ must be somehow metaphorical. But this is precisely the kind of view of blame on which Two Uses puts pressure. The puzzle encourages us to consider whether blame might extend more widely than some might have thought, and target creatures and objects that may not respond to reasons. If we are not willing to consider this possibility, Two Uses creates a mess that is difficult to resolve.

Suppose we give up on disambiguating ‘blame.’ Can a single-sense conception of blame address Two Uses? Here, recent discussions seem woefully unequipped to accommodate causal blame. Some Olympic officials might have been upset about the greenness of their pools. But for most of us, blaming the algae does not seem to require or consist in an emotionally charged response of resentment or anger, or an action, or a modified relationship to the algae. Nor does causal blame seem to function to signal any significant commitment to norms, or to further shared

knowledge or moral alignment any more than most other beliefs do. The theories that seemed best able to address Ontological Diversity founder on causal blame. Like our first puzzle, Two Uses is a genuine puzzle. ‘Blame’ is difficult to disambiguate, and difficult *not* to disambiguate.

Since causal blame is naturally understood as a belief, the most promising response may come from theories that see interpersonal blame, too, as a judgment or belief. On these views, blame in general may be a kind of negative evaluative belief, with the theory specifying the kind. Two Uses would not present a formidable challenge to such a view. On the other hand, treating blame as a belief does not explain why blame, but not anger, is naturally categorized under such a wide variety of mental kinds. Belief-centered theories of blame offer no compelling response to Ontological Diversity.¹⁶ More generally, although some conceptions of blame have something plausible to say about either Ontological Diversity or Two Uses, it is difficult to see what view could offer a satisfying response to *both* puzzles.

Are these puzzles really so difficult? Might existing conceptions of blame, and even single-kind theories, have more resources for responding to them? Some recent writers have developed conceptions of blame on which some instances of blame are primary or fundamental while others are secondary, explainable with reference to the primary cases. For McKenna (2012, 69), ‘What is more fundamental to the nature of emotions—at least the morally reactive ones that concern me here—is the public manifestations of them’ (69). Fricker (2016, 171), as we saw, describes a ‘paradigm form of blame,’ on which blame is paradigmatically a communicative action ‘with feeling.’ On such views, we can understand privately held, unexpressed blame as a secondary or

¹⁶ Such views are also widely seen as independently implausible. Discussions of blame often begin with the observation that ‘blame normally involves more than an evaluation’ (Scanlon 2008, 122), or by listing ‘data points that theories of blame aim to account for’ that include the view that ‘blame involves more than a mere belief that the norm violator has acted wrongly’ (Shoemaker and Vargas 2021, 582).

derivative case, whose characteristic thoughts and feelings are best understood with reference to what its public manifestations would have been. Perhaps these theories can offer similar explanations of causal blame, and of blame that takes the form of belief or some other mental kind, as secondary or derivative cases, lacking some of blame's paradigmatic features but sharing enough of them to be recognizable as cases of blame. Ordinary blame attributions could then range widely without being systematically mistaken, and we could use 'blame' in both interpersonal and merely causal contexts, with the interpersonal contexts being fundamental.

Although the appeal to primary or fundamental kinds or uses of 'blame' is promising, I think it is best seen as abandoning single-kind theories of blame rather than defending them. It does not say that the secondary cases are not really blame after all. On the contrary, it aims to categorize a wide variety of emotions, actions, and other responses as instances of blame and explain them with reference to the primary or fundamental cases of blame. Nor is it a disambiguation strategy. In McKenna's case, explaining emotions in terms of their public manifestations is not a way of distinguishing 'emotion' in the private sense from 'emotion' in the public sense. Similarly, McKenna and Fricker do not say that unexpressed blame is 'blame' in a different sense of the word 'blame.' They aim to explain some kinds or instances of blame in terms of others, not one sense of 'blame' in terms of another. Paradigm explanations aim to unify their subject matter with reference to a paradigm case, rather than carving it up into different spheres.

Still, appealing to a fundamental, core, or paradigmatic form of blame does not by itself resolve our two puzzles. On the contrary: the puzzles raise pressing questions for such an appeal, about which other forms of blame can be understood in terms of the fundamental one. We still want to know why blame appears to range across so many mental kinds—whether instances of most of these mental kinds are secondary cases of blame, or some are simply not cases of blame.

And if interpersonal interaction is so fundamental to blame, the use of ‘blame’ in merely causal contexts, such as ‘blaming’ brakes or rain, seems only more puzzling. We can still ask whether merely causal blame is a secondary kind of ‘blame,’ understandable in terms of the core sense of ‘blame,’ or whether there is a convincing way to disambiguate ‘blame.’ *Ontological Diversity and Two Uses* clarify the challenges inherent in appealing to primary or fundamental forms of blame, rather than being easily resolved by those appeals. So far, no conception of blame offers a clear path to a satisfying resolution of both puzzles.¹⁷

Without a satisfying response to *Ontological Diversity and Two Uses*, we are left with crucial gaps at the heart of our conception of blame. We lack even a basic understanding of what kind of thing blame is: whether it is a belief, emotion, action, or all of these; whether it is a response to persons or also to other life forms and inanimate objects; and what its unifying features are, if any. Since we do not know whether blame is or can be a belief, emotion, action, or other state or activity, we also do not know what kinds of reasons we can have for and against blaming: whether it is appropriate to blame or withhold blame based simply on evidence, as we do with belief, or based on the kind of fittingness that emotions can have, or based on practical considerations such as usefulness or harm. We do not know whether ‘blame’ is a univocal term or an ambiguous one. And we lack a charitable way to understand why people see blame as falling into so many different basic mental kinds. Here lies the significance and the difficulty of our puzzles. They are not ‘puzzles’ in the sense of clever or technical problems. Instead, they raise central questions about the nature, diversity, and proper assessment of blame.

¹⁷ McKenna and Fricker both offer a helpful partial response to *Ontological Diversity* by considering a variety of secondary or derivative forms of blame. But they leave aside some of the mental kinds I considered, and they do not respond to *Two Uses*. It remains unclear how or whether taking emotionally laden communicative cases of interpersonal blame as fundamental can help us understand causal blame.

One of my aims here is to introduce these puzzles, which present real challenges for existing theories, and to encourage these theories to address them. Meanwhile, the puzzles also motivate looking for an alternative conception of blame.

4. The Diversity of Attention

Our two puzzles can be taken as an argument for disunity. Perhaps we must concede that there are not two or five uses of ‘blame,’ but an endlessly variegated and disunified mess, with little method to the madness.¹⁸ Might blame be just a haphazard, disunified collection of various kinds of disapproval? Or might blame fall into a single category that is in fact ontologically diverse, and includes both interpersonal and causal blame?

One such category is attention. As Watzl (2017, 2) puts it,

There is perceptual attention, intellectual attention, emotional attention, desire-like attention, and attentive basketball playing. Attention thus crosscuts the usual divisions of the mind: between the cognitive and the conative, the perceptual and the intellectual, the active and the passive, the epistemic and the practical. Attention can be *any* of these things.

¹⁸ Fricker (2016, 167), for example, holds that blame is ‘significantly disunified,’ and Scanlon (2013, 84) holds that ‘the things we are inclined to believe about blame form an inconsistent set.’ Similar views can be found in, among others, McKenna (2012, 2013), McGeer (2013), and Nussbaum (2016, Appendix B).

Hearing a song, remembering a proof, nursing a grudge, having a crush, and dribbling a ball involve attention in a wide variety of processes of different mental kinds. Taking this diversity as a clue, I want to propose the following conception of blame:

Blame as Attention: Blame is attention to something as a source of badness.

This is a conception of the nature of blame in the form of a classical definition, with a genus and differentia. It is meant not to capture the meaning of ‘blame,’ but to characterize the nature of blame in a way that accommodates its familiar features. ‘Attention’ gives the genus, and will be the key to resolving our puzzles. ‘Something’ is deliberately broad, ranging across persons, other life forms, and inanimate objects. ‘Source’ accommodates the typical structure of blaming something or someone *for* something; to blame X for Y is not simply to attend to X and Y as bad, but to associate X with Y in a particular way. ‘Badness’ ranges across moral, aesthetic, epistemic, and other forms of badness, allowing blame to attend to something as a source of logical error or poor brushwork. There is much more to say about the elements of this conception. I will focus mainly on the genus, attention, and comment more briefly on the differentia.¹⁹

In a paradigmatic example, a parent might come home to a couch covered in food, look around angrily, find her teenage son or her dog or her spouse, point her finger, squint her eyes, and

¹⁹ Unsurprisingly, like many other reactions, blame has sometimes been described as involving attention among its other features; see Hurley and Macnamara (2010) and King (2020), discussed briefly below. These views should be distinguished from views that treat attention as the central notion in a conception of blame. King (2020, 1426n8), for example, writes: ‘the claim here is not that attention is sufficient for the activity of blame, but rather that the activity of blaming is sufficient for attending to the wrongdoer in light of their wrongdoing.’

say: ‘*You did this.*’ But a wide range of cases can be considered typical. Most importantly for our purposes, attention is ontologically diverse.

Across various active debates, psychologists and philosophers alike tend to describe attention in ways that accommodate its ranging across mental kinds. For Watzl (2017, 2), ‘Attention is not another element of the mind—like perception, cognition, emotion, motivation, or intention.... Attentional structure is organizing the mind into parts that are central or prioritized and those that are peripheral.’ Jennings (2020, 3) similarly holds that ‘attention is mental prioritization by a subject.’ In their concluding overview of a 40-essay anthology on the psychology of attention, Nobre and Kastner (2014b, 1204) write: ‘if one were to distil a core definition of attention out of the contemporary literature, it would be something like: the prioritization of processing information that is relevant to current task goals.’ Importantly, not all writers describe attention in terms of prioritization. But other theorists still tend to insist on or at least allow a range across mental kinds. On Christopher Mole’s cognitive unison theory, ‘attention requires the unified activity of whichever processes happen to be relevant to the subject’s task, but it does not require any *particular* processes to be taking place’ (Mole 2017, §2.6).²⁰ For Wu (2014, 271), ‘Attention is selection for action,’ with various possible forms of selection.²¹ As Allport (2011, 251) puts it, ‘Attention is associated with a diverse range of selective functions, including binding, tracking, spatial orienting, priming effects, short-term memory storage, and the control of action and verbal report.’ Although not all selection is attention—Wu and Jennings mention sorting machines and natural selection, respectively—states or processes of many mental kinds

²⁰ For helpful overviews of philosophical conceptions of attention, see Mole (2017) and Jennings (2020, Ch. 2). Some theories consider only perceptual attention; see Mole (2017, §2).

²¹ Earlier precursors of Wu’s ‘selection for action’ view can be found in Allport (1987) and Neumann (1987). Wu’s view that all action involves attention is criticized by Jennings and Nanay (2016) and defended in Wu (2019).

seem able to select or prioritize in ways we can recognize as attention. In what follows, I will avoid relying on one conception of attention. Instead, I will argue that blame fits well with a widespread and intuitive notion of attention as a kind of mental selection or prioritization, which theories develop in various ways.

Attention is ontologically diverse; anger, pointing, and wanting someone to clean up can all be ways of attending. More specifically, various mental kinds can select or prioritize something under a particular aspect: as a source of badness. In an example of Hurley and Macnamara's (2010, 386), when Beth resents her husband George for not doing his fair share of the household tasks, 'George's bad qualities capture her attention; she is quick to notice his clothes on the floor, his dirty coffee cups on the table.' It is natural to imagine Beth's resentment attending not only to George's clothes or qualities, but to *him*, in an evaluatively laden way, as a source of trouble or an agent of injustice.²² Other possible reactions can also be ways of putting him in center stage, or singling him out, as a source of badness: a belief that he is ruining their marriage, a punishment or protest, a desire to punish, a withdrawal of trust, or a cooling relationship can all be ways of selecting or prioritizing George's role as a source of mess, unfairness, or marital conflict. Belief, action, desire, mistrust, and relationship change, as well as emotion, seem able to play this role.

Blame as Attention thus offers an especially straightforward resolution of Ontological Diversity. On this resolution, instances of blame appear to fall into many different mental kinds, because they do. They do, because instances of attention to something as a source of badness fall into many different mental kinds.

We might then wonder about the apparent ontological diversity of attention. Does this response not push the puzzle back to attention itself? If it did, it would still make progress by

²² For an influential discussion of emotions as involving patterns of salience, see de Sousa (1987).

reducing one puzzle to another. After all, the seeming diversity of attention was already there. But the discussion so far also offers an explanation for the apparent diversity of attention. Attention appears to come in many mental kinds, because it does. It does, because many mental kinds have the selective or prioritizing character that we ordinarily associate with attention. This character remains highly interesting and deserving of further study. But it does not leave us thoroughly puzzled or baffled in the way we might be when we realize that we have no idea why blame seems to take so many wildly different forms.

Still, this resolution has two notable limitations. First, ongoing psychological and philosophical research on attention might lead us to different views about whether to treat many emotions, actions, or desires as themselves being ways or instances of attending, or as merely involving or interacting with attention. I am inclined to view these reactions as ways of attending, but the weaker view may at least remain an option. On that view, Blame as Attention may need some further refinement to specify a more complex way in which blame involves attention.

Second, I have said little about judgments or beliefs as instances of attention. To fill this gap, let us return now to Two Uses.

5. Causal Selection

Suppose you blame faulty brakes for your cousin's car crash. Many other factors will be clearly relevant, some arising after the brakes' faultiness and some before. You will not deny the causal contributions of the appearance of a second car or the cars' speed just before the crash, any more than that of the construction of the road or the births of the drivers (cf. Lewis 1987b, 215-6).

But you might be reluctant to say that the drivers' births caused the crash. Causal judgments and beliefs are typically selective, in the sense that they treat, e.g., faulty brakes as causing a crash, while treating many other factors as causally relevant but not as causes. Treating only one or several of countless causal factors as causing an effect can be called 'causal selection.'²³

Discussions of causal attributions are increasingly recognizing their selectivity, and beginning to explore it in more detail. According to Hart and Honoré (1985, 33), 'two contrasts are of prime importance' for causal selection; namely, 'between what is abnormal and what is normal..., and between a free deliberate human action and all other conditions.' In the case of fire, the presence of oxygen is normal, whereas the lighting of a match is less so. But we are usually not willing to accept the presence of arsenic in someone's food as the cause of her death, abnormal as arsenic may be. Instead, we inquire further, and declare the cause of death to be an act of poisoning. Hart and Honoré's two contrasts have turned out not to be the only central ones. Philosophers and psychologists have presented cases in which we select causes by looking to moral norm violations, predictive value, instrumental efficacy, factors within human control, factors out of human control, and personal or practical interest, among other factors.²⁴ Causal beliefs have

²³ Though I think they are distinct, I will not make much of the difference between judgment and belief here, since, to my knowledge, there are no obstacles to viewing causal judgments and causal beliefs as similarly selective. For a helpful discussion of the distinction between judgment and belief, see Cassam (2010).

²⁴ Most of these are discussed in Hesslow (1988, 15-21); see Van Fraassen (1980, 125) and Zheng (2018, 327ff). On the role of normative expectations in causal judgments, see Alicke (1992, 2000), Knobe and Fraser (2008), Hitchcock and Knobe (2009), and Alicke, Rose, and Bloom (2011). It has been common, especially among followers of Lewis, to claim that causal selection is a pragmatic matter and a feature not of our beliefs but of what we choose to report or emphasize; as Collins, Hall, and Paul (2004, 37) put it, 'considerations of salience will weigh heavily on our judgments about what is appropriate to report as a cause.' Knobe and Fraser (2008) present empirical evidence that most people view causal belief itself, rather than appropriate reporting, as selective. For a recent overview of patterns of causal selection, see Morris et al. (2019). For discussion of ways in which deliberately drawing attention to or away from someone can affect causal judgments about her, see Young and Phillips (2011) and Mandelkern and Phillips (2019).

myriad ways of selecting one or several causes from among a vast number of causally relevant factors.

This diversity in causal selection can create a sense, by now familiar to us, of bewildering variety. But we might feel more oriented when we remember what all of these judgments have in common. They all select, or prioritize, one or more factors as central. Characterizations of causal attributions often correspondingly describe them in terms of importance or salience. Hesslow (1988, 12) asks: ‘What determines the selection of the most important cause from the complete set of causal conditions? This is the selection problem.’ Talbert (2019, introduction) writes that ‘It is often fairly clear that a person is causally responsible for—that is, that she is the (or a) salient cause of—some occurrence or outcome.’ Selective causal judgments are mental states that prioritize one or more factors as salient. With our earlier discussion of attention in mind, it is natural to think of them as forms of attention.

The idea is not that belief in general is a kind of attention. Believing that 17 is an odd number acknowledges a fact, while leaving it open whether one pays any attention to that fact. Many of us have this belief, without any corresponding prioritization. It is the selectivity of causal beliefs, not their status as beliefs, that makes them selective in the way attention is selective. Causal beliefs single out match lighting, arsenic, or faulty brakes among countless other causal factors as particularly important or salient causes. They can thus be counted among the many forms of attention, as mental states that select or prioritize particular factors as central.

This view needs to be formulated carefully, and will encounter some resistance. At the very least, one might think, not all causal beliefs are selective. David Lewis (1987a, 162) writes: ‘I am concerned with the prior question of what it is to be one of the causes (unselectively speaking). My analysis is meant to capture a broad and nondiscriminatory concept of causation.’ Following

Lewis, many philosophers have privileged ‘egalitarian’ or unselective causal notions, on which the big bang is among the causes of every car crash. This notion of causation can seem to be the primary one, more fundamental than questions about which cause we find salient or are most interested in.

One response to this concern might deny that unselective causal beliefs are primary or even common. As Schaffer (2016, §2.3) writes, ‘it is not obvious that we *have* any such concept as Lewis seeks.’ Hart and Honoré (1985, 12) insist that ‘neither the plain man, nor the historian, uses the expression “cause”, or any related expression’ to include all causally necessary factors; ‘for the contrast of cause with mere conditions is an inseparable feature of all causal thinking, and constitutes as much of the meaning of causal expressions as the implicit reference to generalizations does.’ This view is especially natural if we think of causal beliefs as offering or corresponding to causal explanations; as Zheng (2018, 328) puts it, ‘explanations necessarily foreground certain relevant factors.’²⁵

This response is appealing. But, fortunately for our purposes, we do not need to decide the issue. It is enough that many typical causal beliefs select one or several among countless factors as causes, ‘the causes,’ or primary or salient causes. If there are non-selective causal beliefs, such as the belief that the driver’s grandparents’ births caused the crash, we can simply say that non-selective causal beliefs are not forms of attention. The crucial point is that many typical causal beliefs select or prioritize, unlike beliefs that some number is odd. More specifically, causal blame

²⁵ On the centrality of explanation for causal thinking, see Lewis (1987b), Hesslow (1988), and Lombrozo (2010).

seems to be a kind of *selective* causal belief; even if we do accept that the big bang is a cause of the crash, it is implausible to think we blame the big bang for the crash.²⁶

A different doubt arises when those who are (seemingly) blaming each other appeal to different conceptions of causation. One person might say: ‘I blame the brakes—they are way too unreliable!’ Another might object: ‘But the driver made a difference too.’ A third might add: ‘I think the fog made the crash a lot more likely.’ These people seem to be appealing to norm violation, difference-making, and probabilistic causation, respectively (Paul and Hall 2013, Schaffer 2016). Which instances of causal thinking qualify as causal blame? Here too, I think we can avoid a large debate about the metaphysics of causation. What qualifies something as causal blame is not the correct view of causation, but the blamer’s view of causation. All of these participants exhibit causal blame; all are attending to something as a source of badness, in at least a roughly causal sense of ‘source,’ which they themselves see as central to causation.

²⁶ This is helpful for avoiding a large debate about causation, as pluralist views of causation are well motivated, popular, and controversial. Hall (2004, 228) holds that resistance to counting the big bang under causes ‘conflates the transitive, egalitarian sense of “cause” with a much more restrictive sense (no doubt greatly infected with pragmatics) that places heavy weight on salience.’ Other pluralists include Cartwright (2004), Hitchcock (2007), and Godfrey-Smith (2009), who argues that ‘causation’ is ‘something like what W. B. Gallie...called an ‘essentially contested’ concept. These are concepts whose role in our conceptual scheme is pivotal in a way that makes them permanently resistant to definition and the drawing of stable boundaries’ (327). Paul and Hall (2013, 245-9) conclude a systematic study of causation with a view of causal intuitions as deeply divided. Meanwhile, Hitchcock and Knobe (2009, 593) view the unselective or ‘egalitarian’ notion of ‘cause’ as appropriate for ‘causal structure’ but not for ‘actual causation.’ Reiss (2013, 1072) complains: ‘The problem with ignoring the principles of invidious discrimination is that one can do so only at the risk of [a] concept of cause that is entirely irrelevant to ordinary language, history and the law. For the concept of cause that is at work in ordinary language, history and the law is selective.’ I am inclined to agree, though, as I say in the text, agreement would not be required here. Blame as Attention can offer a unified conception of blame, even if attention and causation are themselves disunified. In the case of causation, the important point is that *some* causal beliefs—the ones central to causal blame—are selective. On the related issue of degrees of causation, see Kaiserman (2018) and Sartorio (2020).

Returning to our puzzles, the selectivity of causal belief allows Blame as Attention to resolve Two Uses. The puzzle was: Why is ‘blame’ used to describe both interpersonal reactions and mere causal attributions, such as blaming faulty brakes for a car crash? The resolution is: blame, in both contexts, is attention to something as a source of badness. All beliefs that something is a central or primary cause, is the cause, or causes in a selective sense, are mental states that prioritize or single out one or several factors, in the ways attention does. There is thus no need to disambiguate ‘blame,’ or to treat either of the two uses as confused or mistaken.

6. Blame as Attention

Blame as Attention offers a way to both explain and vindicate the sense that blame ranges widely across both causal attributions and interpersonal reactions of various mental kinds. It elegantly resolves both our puzzles. But is it a satisfying or illuminating conception of blame, apart from resolving these two puzzles?

In a discussion of moral blame, Smith (2013, 33) identifies

four...desiderata that any successful account of the nature of blame must meet. First, the account must explain how blaming someone goes beyond simply judging her to be blameworthy. Second, the account must allow for the possibility of unexpressed blame, including blame of the distant and the dead. Third, the account must be flexible enough to accommodate the variety of attitudinal and behavioral reactions we are inclined to countenance as instances of blame. And fourth, the account must explain the special tie between moral blame and ascriptions of moral responsibility; that is, it must make clear

why the responses of moral blame are appropriately directed only at individuals deemed morally responsible for their conduct.

Let us take these briefly in turn, to see how Blame as Attention meets them.

First, suppose we believe that Alexander the Great acted wrongly, had no excuse, and can appropriately be blamed. We can believe this without paying any attention to it, just as we can believe that 17 is an odd number or that there are some leaves on the ground. Many of our judgments are of little or no concern to us, occupying a peripheral position in our mental lives. Blame goes beyond judgments of blameworthiness by attending, often in morally laden ways such as resenting or protesting. We can believe someone to be blameworthy without attending to her.

Second, we *can* often attend to strangers, distant or dead relatives, or historical figures as sources of badness, either publicly or privately. We often cannot attend to them visually, by looking at them. But we can focus our thoughts or feelings on them, or harp on them in conversation, as morally, aesthetically, epistemically, or otherwise bad. So unlike conceptions that treat blame as an emotion, communication, protest, or relationship change, Blame as Attention does not even initially appear to struggle to meet Smith's second desideratum.

Third, and more generally, Blame as Attention accommodates a wide range of reactions. We can attend to anything or anyone as a source of badness: a hurricane, faulty brakes, annoying cats or algae, a disloyal friend, a stranger who cuts us off on the highway, a dead relative who left no will, a fracking company, the first Viceroy of India, or ourselves while procrastinating. Attention ranges easily across kinds of target; across various things someone might be blamed for, such as actions, omissions, attitudes, characteristics, and consequences; and across many attitudinal and behavioral reactions, such as resenting, yelling, or asking for an apology.

Fourth, when someone is not morally responsible, say, because of dementia or duress, it seems inappropriate to attend to *her* as a source of moral badness. Since Blame as Attention is not a conception of specifically moral blame, it does not have to meet Smith's fourth desideratum; but it also suggests this natural link to moral responsibility, worth exploring further.

Blame as Attention also meets several other desiderata that we might add to Smith's four.

Fifth, it is parsimonious, offering a simple one-line conception using only one sense of 'blame.'²⁷ This conception can be qualified or adapted if necessary, without becoming overly complex.

Sixth, it offers a comprehensive framework that includes moral, aesthetic, epistemic, skill, and causal blame. We might want to understand Coke and Pepsi as different kinds of soda, without their being 'soda' in the Coke sense and 'soda' in the Pepsi sense. Similarly, we might want to better understand the relation between different kinds of blame, without disambiguating senses of 'blame.' Blame as Attention offers an appealing way to understand this relation. Blame varies in the kind of badness it attends to; stealing, poor brushwork, mathematical error, or athletic slipups can be attended to as morally, aesthetically, or epistemically bad, as poor performance, or as having undesirable consequences, with no need to sequester non-moral blame as a distinct topic to be dealt with later.

Seventh, Blame as Attention easily accommodates common talk of placing, taking, shifting, or dividing blame, since we already talk in these ways about attention.

Eighth, it also accommodates blame's apparent functional diversity, since attending to something as a source of badness is functionally diverse. Attention to a corporation's role in global warming can serve to articulate and enforce norms, further shared knowledge and moral alignment,

²⁷ For a helpful discussion of ontological parsimony in conceptions of blame, see Boulton (2021, 531-2).

signal one's own moral competence and commitment, express and protect oneself, and probably other functions as well.²⁸

Ninth, Blame as Attention also accommodates blame against one's better judgment. As Pickard (2013, 613) puts it, 'We sometimes blame others when *we know* they do not deserve it. Blame is like the emotions in its potential for independence from considered judgments or beliefs about another's actual blameworthiness.' Adapting an example from Pickard, imagine that I am in a bad mood, after my husband left for work without making me tea as he usually does. My attention is insistently drawn to his omission, and I feel resentful. A night of bad sleep and an upcoming performance review are clearly the real issues, but I keep thinking: 'If he had just made me tea, or said something nice, I would feel so much better.' This is true, but it is a highly questionable form of causal selection, and I know it. Our attention can often follow our judgment, focusing on what we believe to be a source of badness. But it can also sometimes diverge from our judgment when we are distracted, manipulated, or grumpy.²⁹ Some of these cases can be cases of what Watzl (2017) calls 'passive attention guidance,' in which certain features, such as someone's not having made us tea, are especially salient to us without our choosing to pay attention to them. Other cases can be cases of akratic action, such as irritably reproaching a partner who we know has been nothing but sweet and helpful.

²⁸ Notably, some theories of attention are functional theories, which understand attention itself in terms of one central function. But this function is a highly broad and variable one, such as selection for a task, and includes a wide variety of more specific aims, functions, or tasks such as the ones I mention. For discussion, see Allport (2011) and Nobre and Kastner (2014b).

²⁹ For further discussion, see Menges (2017, 261-2), who calls this 'recalcitrant' blame; I prefer 'akratic' rather than 'recalcitrant' or Pickard's 'irrational'; blame can be irrational in other ways as well. Pickard mentions blaming 'others' against one's better judgment, but of course we also akratically blame ourselves, and many people spend years in therapy working through self-blame.

Finally, and most importantly, Blame as Attention offers a useful framework for debates about the justification and value of blame. One central question concerns the kind of reasons we can have for or against blaming. Are these reasons practical reasons, of the kind that justify action, or considerations of fittingness that typically apply to emotion, or epistemic reasons of the kind that justify belief, or perhaps some other kind of reason? Blame as Attention offers a pluralist answer, according to which any of these can be relevant, depending on the case. No one kind of reason is always the relevant kind. Nor is the answer ‘all of the above’ in any particular instance of blame; some purported reasons can be the wrong kind of reason in particular instances. Instead, the answer is that being an instance of blame partly *underdetermines* the relevant kind of reason. We must look further, to the mental kind into which a particular instance of blame falls. As we do this, certain valuable and undesirable features of blame’s attention will likely come into focus. Attending to someone as a source of badness can be crucial for holding her accountable, or even for understanding what happened. It can be overly backward-looking, especially when too intense, too prolonged, or in lieu of forward-looking solutions. It can be unfair or inappropriate if it is disproportionate, underemphasizes other factors, causes undeserved pain, or deflects attention from one’s own responsibility. When a blamer is a hypocrite, a meddling stranger, or complicit in a wrong she objects to, her blame may be, as King (2020, 1423) puts it, ‘attending to the wrong things.’ Evaluations along these lines will need to combine considerations of harm, desert, and accountability in complex ways. Blame as Attention can help to articulate, organize, and illuminate these considerations.

Tognazzini and Coates (2018) classify the leading theories of blame as cognitive, emotional, conative or motivational, and functional theories. Blame as Attention is a novel conception, and does not fit easily into any of these four types. Although those theories capture

important features of blame, they founder on our two puzzles, in ways that motivate a search for something new. As the two puzzles suggest, it is time to integrate causal blame into the discussion, and to give up on restrictive theories focused on a single mental kind. Blame as Attention elegantly resolves these puzzles. And as its ten further advantages suggest, it is not only a theoretically motivated view, manufactured to resolve two puzzles. Blame as Attention is an appealing and fruitful conception that captures and explains many central phenomena of blame.

7. Objections and Replies

Blame as Attention can seem too broad or inclusive, too narrow, or otherwise implausible. In closing, I want to briefly consider some ways in which it is likely to be controversial. Some of these bring out other advantages; some may lead us to qualify or complicate the theory.

Blame is usually seen as a way of holding someone responsible. One might wonder: where is the element of responsibility when one simply attends to something as a source of badness? It is not enough to point out in response that there are cases of private blame that do not publicly hold someone responsible. Even private blame, one might think, seems to somehow treat its target as a member of a moral community, and find its place among practices of holding responsible.

This objection is likely to ignore Two Uses. When we blame brakes for a car crash, or rain for our bad mood, we do not treat the brakes or the rain as participants in a moral community, answerable to its norms. We do not hold them responsible in this full-fledged way, either publicly or privately. We do treat them as *causally* responsible; but this simply amounts to treating them as salient causal factors or sources. Holding someone morally responsible, or treating her as a participant in a moral community, might be central to *moral* blame. But we should not confuse

moral blame with blame more generally. If we hold brakes and rain responsible, accountable, or answerable, it is only in the sense that we take them as central to a causal account, providing an answer to the question ‘What caused this crash?’ or ‘What is the source of my bad mood?’ Our attending to them as sources of badness through causal selection is our way of answering these questions. Moreover, in interpersonal cases, as we saw in §2, there are many ways to hold someone responsible, and blame is one among others. Like invoices, quizzes, and non-judgmental interventions, attention to someone as a source of moral, epistemic, or aesthetic badness is one of our practices of holding responsible. When a dam bursts, our emphasis on negligent legislators, shoddy construction, or excessive rain gives our answer (or at least, an answer we are inclined to give) to the question: ‘Who or what is responsible for this?’ When this answer singles out one or more persons, it views them as failing in significant ways. In both causal and interpersonal cases, attending to something as a source of badness does constitute holding it responsible. Far from ignoring responsibility, Blame as Attention brings out an often underappreciated feature of holding someone responsible. In cases of blame, holding someone responsible prioritizes an aspect of her, treating her failing as central in the ways attention does.

Relatedly, Blame as Attention can seem to be too broad or to have ‘false positives,’ by incorrectly classifying some reactions as blame. These include affectless reactions; someone might, for example, say ‘*You* did this,’ and demand that someone make amends, without feeling anything at all. One might think that by treating emotion as inessential, this view ‘leaves the blame out of blame’ (Wallace 2011, 349). But this objection, too, is likely to ignore Two Uses, as emotion-centered theories of blame typically do. Blame as Attention is a conception of all blame, not only of moral or interpersonal blame, and it is entirely plausible that causal blame can be affectless. Indeed, Blame as Attention can never incorrectly classify a reaction as *moral* blame, since it does

not classify any reaction as moral blame. Still, the theory can also suggest a more controversial picture of moral blame, to the extent that it makes it appear less likely that only emotional forms of blame could count as ‘moral.’ It can also encourage attaching less importance to whether an instance of blame is called ‘moral’ or not. We might prefer to instead make several more fine-grained distinctions, asking whether an instance of blame evaluates something as morally bad, makes demands, or involves feelings of resentment or indignation.

A similar point can be made about classifying too broad a range of emotional reactions as blame. When reactions of sadness or disappointment include causal blame, they *should* be classified as instances of blame, though they may not be instances of ‘moral’ blame, depending on how one understands this term. On the other hand, if one reacts to a bad action with curiosity or villainous admiration, one is likely attending to its agent as an object of study or emulation, rather than as a source of badness. Blame as Attention then rightly denies that the reaction is blame.

In a perhaps more controversial kind of apparent ‘false positive,’ Blame as Attention also allows cases of blame without judgment or belief in blameworthiness. It is common to hold that ‘Blame involves more than a mere belief that the norm violator has acted wrongly’ (Shoemaker and Vargas 2021, 582). This suggests that blame does involve some such belief as one necessary component, supplemented by others (Sher 2006; Scanlon 2008). Although we often attend to what we *believe* is a source of badness, Blame as Attention does not treat belief or judgment as necessary for blame. The theory is amenable to various modifications, and one variant of it might treat blame as both believing and attending. But since we seem able to blame against our own better judgment, it might be wise to accept that evaluatively laden reactions such as attention can sometimes constitute blame, even without a belief in blameworthiness.

Blame as Attention can also seem to be too broad, or incorrectly attribute blame, when someone says: ‘He did cause the crash, but I don’t blame him.’ If this is a case of causal blame, is the blamer incorrect in saying she does not blame? There may be more than one way to understand such cases. Sometimes, when interpersonal or more specifically moral blame is clearly the topic, ‘blame’ can be used as shorthand for ‘moral blame.’ We can then say the blamer blames causally, but not morally, and is correct in her self-report. In other cases, even causal blame can be qualified or limited. If the driver was drugged, or grieving, his context might mitigate both moral and causal responsibility. ‘I don’t blame him’ can then also serve to express a causal-explanatory emphasis on other factors, and a lack of *significant* or sustained attention of any kind to the driver’s contribution to the crash.

Blame as Attention can also seem too narrow, missing some cases of blame—for example, cases of ignoring, unfriending, or ‘canceling’ someone. Can we not blame someone by *not* paying attention to her? Here it is especially helpful to remember the ontological diversity of attention. We can unfriend someone, block her calls, or refuse to watch her show. But if we still resent her, dwell on her mistakes, or tell people why we blocked her, we *are* paying attention. Indeed, when a close friend or associate makes many good decisions and one bad mistake, unfriending, blocking, or canceling her is itself a way of prioritizing that mistake, attending to her primarily as a source of badness. Giving someone ‘the silent treatment’ can even be a way of communicating one’s blame.

Other controversies can concern the choice of paradigm cases of blame. As we saw, many writers treat blame as fundamentally a kind of attitude, which can be held privately or expressed outwardly. Others do not; as Shoemaker and Vargas (2021, 597n4) put it, ‘McKenna is one of the many who explains in detail why what he calls “overt” blame is the more fundamental thing to be

explained.’ On Blame as Attention, both attitudes and overt reactions can be instances of blame, and neither must be treated as fundamental. Strategic public scapegoating can *be* blame, while also being insincere in purporting to express a blaming attitude that the scapegoater does not actually hold. This seems plausible to me, but it might generate some controversy.

Several natural objections to Blame as Attention see it as too broad, in part because they continue to ignore causal blame. But perhaps I have taken causal blame *too* seriously, and overemphasized its similarity to interpersonal blame. Can Blame as Attention do justice to the *differences* between causal and interpersonal blame?

According to Blame as Attention, these are differences in kind, not in sense. We can recognize humans and hamsters as importantly different kinds of mammal, without needing to distinguish two senses of ‘mammal’: the human sense and the rodent sense. The differences between humans and hamsters are explained not by what it is to be a mammal, but by what it is to be the particular kinds of mammal that humans and hamsters are. Similarly, we can care for a human or a hamster, without needing to disambiguate senses of ‘care.’ We can simply accept that caring for a human involves importantly different forms of care than caring for a hamster or plant does. Blame as Attention suggests that blame be treated similarly. Instead of disambiguating ‘blame,’ we can instead ask what is distinctive about attention to a *person* as a source of badness.

Several important differences stand out. First, persons can be sources of kinds of badness of which hamsters are incapable. Hamsters cannot (let us grant) do anything morally wrong. Attention to something as acting wrongly is a distinctive kind of attention, appropriate only or mainly to persons, with its characteristic moral emotions of resentment and indignation and its distinctive behavioral responses. Second, although it can be appropriate to attend to a messy, aggressive hamster as a source of badness, there is little point in expressing or communicating that

attention *to* the hamster. Attention to a person as a source of badness is much more naturally communicated, as many writers say blame is—though on Blame as Attention, it is naturally communicated to its target not because it is blame, but because it targets a person.³⁰ Third, when we attend to a person as a source of badness, we are typically attending to someone who can also attend to us in an evaluatively laden way, at least in principle. This attention makes us accountable to persons for our blame in many cases, in ways we are not accountable to hamsters, plants, or rain, although we might still rightly blame them. Finally, there are distinctive kinds of reasons for and against attending to a person as a source of badness. For example, attending, or not attending, in this way can be disrespectful by holding someone to the wrong standard, or by treating her as too central or too peripheral.

These distinctive features of interpersonal attention are complex, and I mention them only briefly. The point is simply that there is ample room to characterize the distinctiveness of interpersonal evaluative attention, without creating pressure to disambiguate ‘blame’ or ‘attention.’ It is also worth remembering that a conception of blame can shed light on interpersonal blame by bringing out its similarities with causal blame, not only its differences. If I am right, we can think more clearly about interpersonal blame if we remember that it is largely a matter of prioritization or emphasis—of treating someone’s role as a source of badness as central in our conception of her and in our interactions with her. This insight is not rendered insignificant by the fact that it highlights a feature that interpersonal blame shares with causal blame.

³⁰ One might wonder whether Blame as Attention can capture the point of expressing blame. But by now I think we should be wary of talking of a single ‘point.’ Blame can serve one or, more likely, several important functions. That is one sense in which it has a ‘point.’ Blame can also be expressed to its target, and that expression can have a function or ‘point.’ But the point might vary widely, like attention and communication do more generally. See the discussion of blame’s many possible functions in §2 above.

One final objection worth raising is that attention must be occurrent—a matter of focusing on or considering something right now—whereas blame need not be. I am somewhat encouraged by also hearing the converse objection: that blame is always a matter of being worked up about something in the moment, whereas one can be said to, for example, be focused on her career even if she is not currently thinking about it. One might hope that these two complementary objections somehow cancel each other out. And actually I think they do, in the following way. We can say:

A. ‘She is focused on her career.’

or

B. ‘She blames her father.’

In each case, we can have in mind an occurrent state, or a dispositional state, or something in between: a summary judgment about a frequently occurring occurrent state. We can make either statement about someone who is asleep. If we focus more narrowly on one use of ‘She is focused on her career,’ and a different use of ‘She blames her father,’ there can seem to be a disanalogy. One of them seems dispositional and the other occurrent. But if we combine our two complementary objections and take a broader diet of examples, the disanalogy goes away. We then have a richer range of possibilities, including ones in which someone occurrently, intensely focuses on her career or blames her father, and others in which the attention or the blame is merely latent.

Still, controversy or further research might affect our conceptions of attention in relevant ways. Attention *is* like belief, emotion, and action in being the subject of ongoing controversy—and is unlike them in only now beginning to attract systematic philosophical attention. New findings may encourage different views about, for example, whether many emotions, actions, or desires are *ways* of attending, or merely involve or interact with attention. We might come to revise our views on whether attention must be conscious. If I am completely wrong about some of these

issues, Blame as Attention can be revised to hold that blame is a disposition to attend to something as a source of badness, or perhaps a reaction that involves or draws such attention. The theory can be revised in these ways while keeping many of its advantages. But so far I see no compelling reason to abandon the simpler view I have defended.

Blame as Attention is simply stated, and can be qualified or modified without becoming overly complex. I am not convinced that any modification is necessary. Once we broaden our scope from moral blame to include the many other forms of blame, apparently necessary features such as moral emotion or judgments of blameworthiness seem more likely to be merely typical. But attention and blame are both topics of ongoing active research, and we should remain open to changing our views as new puzzles and findings emerge.

8. Conclusion

Blame is a central topic in moral psychology, a widespread way of holding oneself and others responsible, and an important element in most, if not all, forms of oppression. It is extremely diverse, in ways that can frustrate attempts at reflection. I think we can come to understand it much better if we think of it in terms of attention. Far from being yet another of many theories of blame, Blame as Attention is uniquely positioned to resolve our two central puzzles about the diversity of blame reactions. It also fits at least most intuitive categorizations of various reactions as ‘blame,’ and offers much that we might hope for in a conception of blame, while also encouraging further reflection on both blame and attention.

It is time to give up on single-kind theories of blame. Instances of blame do not all fall into a single mental kind, such as emotion, judgment, or action. But they are also not haphazard; they have common features that make them significant in similar ways, and similarly subject to distraction and manipulation. These features encourage asking particular kinds of ethical questions. In evaluating blame, the question is not always, or not only, what action to take, what emotions are fitting, or what to believe. The question is what to emphasize, and whom or what to single out.³¹

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