What Is Blame and Why Do We Love It?

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What is blame, and why do people blame so liberally even when there are compelling reasons to mitigate it?

Blame is an automatic species of moral judgment in which evidential criteria are revised to support an initial blame hypothesis—this "blame validation" mode can overwhelm tendencies toward mitigation and forgiveness.

Near the end of Anthony Burgess's (1962) novel *A Clockwork Orange,* Alex, the hyperviolent 15-year-old hero, is "cured" of his sickness by behavioral psychologists using classical conditioning. To demonstrate the effectiveness of the treatment, a beautiful, scantily clad woman is paraded before him, and just as his predilections for rape and murder surface, he becomes physically ill and unable to act on his instincts. For the scientists, this is further proof that Alex was a blameless victim of society—one whose behavior could be rectified with an admixture of progressive social reform and behavior modification.

Burgess's picture of a dystopian future satirizes the liberal view of criminality as an accidental by-product of misguided parenting and ineffective social institutions. In Burgess's prospective world, blame, punishment, and incarceration are banished; instead, much as in B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two* (Skinner & Hayes, 1976), society is perfected to the point where harmful and offensive behaviors virtually disappear, making blame irrelevant.

Before considering whether we could or should eliminate blame (the answer is *no*!—but more about that later), it is necessary first to address the more fundamental question of what blame is, a question that neither we nor anyone else has yet answered very clearly. The reason that blame is difficult to define is that it is both a hypothesis that is subject to updating as new data are received and a relatively quick summary judgment. Blame can be as reflexive as in the classic Harry Nilsson (1972) tearjerker: "You're breaking my heart, you're tearing it apart, so fuck you" or as lengthy a process

as in an eight-month jury trial that requires sifting through mountains of contradictory evidence.

It is also important to clarify whether blame refers to an offense that is known to have occurred or to one that is still in question. Most theories of blame, including the culpable control model of blame (CCM; Alicke, 2000), focus on the former question, as issues related to establishing whether an offense actually occurred fall more naturally under the auspices of responsibility attribution. Accordingly, in the following discussion, we assume a potentially blameworthy behavior or behavior pattern and consider first the process of ascribing blame and then whether and when blame is an effective means of social control.

Blame's Evolutionary Heritage

Evolutionary perspectives on social behavior assume that moral judgment originates in the need to monitor and punish group members who threaten the group's interests by violating established norms. As the anthropologist Christopher Boehm argues: "when band members started to form consensual moral opinions and punished deviant behaviors and rewarded prosocial ones a new element was added to human evolution" (2012, p. 83). The element that Boehm refers to is social selection of characteristics, especially altruism, that advance the individual's and, by proxy, the group's survival prospects. Moral behavior, therefore, involves compliance with implicit or explicit behavioral guidelines, and moral judgment is the assessment of whether a group member has met or violated these prescriptions.

From the social selection perspective, people are blameworthy when they defect from group standards in a way that threatens or could threaten the group's well-being. The act of blaming, however, transcends blameworthiness. Blame registers to oneself, and/or signals to others, that the actions and character of a group member are potentially detrimental to the general welfare. Blame is not simply a judgment, therefore, but also a form of direct or indirect social control.

Blame presupposes a character flaw or limitation. Without this, observers, after an initial evaluative reaction, would presumably rescind their judgment and recognize that whatever happened was an excusable blip that can be attributed to unusual or uncontrollable circumstances. Blame that perseveres, therefore, impugns the character of the harm doer. Although forgiveness may occur over time, blame places a permanent stain—even if only a smudge—on impressions of the blamed individual's trustworthiness and reliability.

One might legitimately wonder why, if blame derives from social selection pressures, it is so much more intense on the part of the individual who is directly harmed than it is for observers. The simple answer is that individual selection pressures supersede group considerations. Although the prosperity of the group facilitates individual survival, it still takes a back seat to the needs of self and kin. Nevertheless, third-party punishment, which entails punishing others at cost to oneself, is a routine, and probably unique, facet of human social control (Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1986; Turillo, Folger, Lavelle, Umphress, & Gee, 2002), and blame is the judgment that legitimizes its application.

Explanations that reference historical survival needs run the risk of deemphasizing aspects of human cognition and culture that transform the nature of mechanisms that originated to solve specific adaptive problems. Although it makes good sense to trace blame's origins to needs for social control, and although such needs elucidate many facets of blame, blame varies across times and cultures in ways that require additional explanation. Furthermore, human capacities of memory, language, and imagination alter not only the nature of blame, retribution, and forgiveness but also the ways in which these actions and emotions are manifested in social situations and the circumstances that hinder or facilitate them. Human blood feuds, for example, fueled by enhanced memory and imagery processes, have extended for generations (Baumeister, 1999). No other species is capable of carrying on vendettas against families, clans, nations, or religious groups in this way. Most important for present purposes is the fact that blame, as a derivative of moral judgment, is uniquely human and can be applied to harmless

offenses based on ideological grounds, visceral reactions, and complex emotions such as feelings of envy or relative deprivation. Thus, whereas blame originated in moral judgment, it is applied to perceived offenses (such as breaking a heart in the Harry Nilsson song) that lie outside the bounds of what are normally considered moral issues.

Spontaneous Evaluations and Reactive Attitudes: Hypotheses about Blame

P. F. Strawson's relatively short paper titled "Freedom and Resentment" is probably the most influential philosophical paper on blame (1962). Strawson introduced the phrase "reactive attitudes" to refer to sentiments such as gratitude, resentment, and indignation that occur spontaneously in response to praiseworthy or censorious actions. Strawson follows a long philosophical tradition, represented most prominently in the moral philosophy of David Hume, in emphasizing the emotional component in moral judgment and blame. For Hume, the emotional component was nearly sovereign: "The mind of man is so formed by nature, that, upon the appearance of certain characters, dispositions, and actions it immediately feels the sentiment of approbation or blame; nor are there any emotions more essential to its frame or constitution" (1748/2007, p. 74).

Inclining toward Blame

Using a terminology adapted to social-psychological research on automatic attitude activation (Fazio, 1989), we refer to Strawson's reactive attitudes as spontaneous evaluations (Alicke, 2000). As described in the CCM, spontaneous evaluations are attitudinal reactions that do not necessarily entail emotions; rather, they are positive or negative evaluations of the actors involved in the event, their characters and values, their actions, and the consequences of those actions. Although emotions are not a necessary component of spontaneous evaluations, they typically accompany them and modulate the strength of the reaction. Or, as one philosopher has stated it, emotions are not

criterial for blame but are a canonical feature of it (McGeer, 2013).

In a recent book that explores the evolutionary heritage and neurobiology of punishment, Hoffman (2014) argues that blame occurs the moment we think that a person has committed a wrong and that mitigation will occur much later. This is the bedrock assumption of the CCM; in contrast to blame models that precede (Shaver, 1985) and succeed (Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe, 2014) it, the CCM assumes that blame occurs naturally and automatically and that mitigation is the more difficult and complicated task. A more precise way to depict the processes of blame and mitigation or exoneration, however, is to say that blame is a hypothesis that occurs immediately upon witnessing a harmful or offensive action and that it is subject to modification (i.e., mitigation or exoneration) upon further consideration and evidence. In some instances, strong prior understanding of social situations negate blame almost immediately. People generally know what accidents look like, for example, and after an immediate anger response at being thwacked in the face by a branch that the hiker in front of us let go, we immediately recognize that he didn't realize we were so close behind and hold no grudge.

More generally, it is in humans' and other animals' interest to be able quickly to distinguish intentional from unintentional harms: Obviously, zebras who know that lions want to eat them have an advantage over peace-and-love zebras who think that all animals are God's children. Conversely, fleeing from or shunning others who intend to help us is also a costly strategy.

Akin to Pascal's famous wager about God, it makes sense to err on the side of intentionality and blame. Of the two mistakes in Pascal's fourfold table (assuming that God exists when he doesn't; assuming that God doesn't exist when he does), the latter is presumably more harmful, assuming the vengeful (and somewhat neurotic) deity of the Old Testament who demands recognition and allegiance. (Of course, if God doesn't give a fig whether you believe in him or not, then the former mistake means that you will spend a lifetime passing up enticing opportunities in his name, which seems like a worse mistake—but this is a different question for a

different paper.) In this same vein, assuming harmful intentions is a safer policy than assuming benevolence, although there is, of course, a price to be paid for unsubstantiated accusations, grudges, and, even worse, unfounded retaliation. As Pinker states the case: "good and evil are asymmetrical: there are more ways to harm people than to help them, and harmful acts can hurt them to a greater degree than virtuous acts can make them better off" (2003, p. 10).

Elements of Perceived Control

Still, the assumption that people are predisposed to blame obviously does not claim that they fail completely to consider evidence about intentionality, causation, and mitigating and extenuating circumstances in evaluating behavior. The CCM assumes that the relationship between the spontaneous evaluations that incline toward blame and rational and deliberate evaluation of the evidence is a compensatory one: In the absence of valenced reactions to the event, the state of the evidence drives the ultimate blame judgment. When spontaneous negative evaluations are strong, however, and are ignited by heightened emotions, evidence will be skewed in a manner that supports the initial blame hypothesis—what Alicke, Rose, and Bloom (2011) have called a "blame validation" mode of information processing, akin to confirmatory hypothesis testing.

Although the assumptions about the primacy of evaluation and blame validation processing have received most of the attention in our empirical work, the CCM was designed also to provide a view of evidence evaluation grounded in perceptions of personal control. Blame, like morality more generally, is predicated on the assumption that people can exercise control over their needs and desires. Only a lunatic (and there are some out there) would blame their cat for returning pregnant after a night on the prowl, but many teen-age daughters would be deprived of the same leniency: The cat cannot consciously monitor and override her desires, but the daughter presumably can. Suppose, however, that the daughter, a 15-year-old wealthy white debutante, remonstrates with her parents that the father

is a black Olympic athlete with an IQ of 175 and a family history of perfect physical and mental health and that she is going to have triplets. Having scored this incredible coup in the human gene pool, do we expect the family to commence with the party announcements? Maybe, but maybe not. Not only do humans establish moral rules and social norms that seem irrelevant or contradictory to inclusive fitness concerns, but they expect people to stick to them.

According to the CCM, three elements of control are most important in assessing blame: behavior control, causal control, and outcome control. Behavior control—also termed "intention of action"—is thwarted by reflexes, accidents, and lack of access to information and norms. We would not blame an epileptic who caused property damage while having a grand mal seizure, nor would we blame a foreign tourist who insulted his host because someone misinformed him about local norms as a practical joke. Each of these actions is unintentional in the sense that the behavior sequence was not initiated purposively or knowingly.

Causal control judgments are complicated by the fact that many causal conditions, including necessity and sufficiency, proximity in space in time to the outcome, and abnormal or counterfactual conditions, among others, are potentially relevant for blame. Causal control is reduced or negated by intervening circumstances and by other competing causes that reduce the actor's unique impact on the outcome.

Outcome control refers to whether the event's consequences occurred in the manner that the actor desired and/or foresaw. The absence of behavior control also indicates the absence of outcome control: People cannot be said to have controlled the outcomes of actions that occurred accidentally, even if they desired them. There are, however, many ways in which intentional behaviors can lead to outcomes that were unforeseen, undesired, or both, and also ways in which intended outcomes can be thwarted (i.e., failed attempts). Perhaps the most interesting cases that have been studied are those in which people achieve desired outcomes in unforeseen ways (e.g., Pizarro, Uhlmann, & Bloom, 2003). We have shown in a recent study, for example, that a pilot who is forced

at gunpoint to fly a plane to Cuba is seen to have had more control, and to be more blameworthy, if the hijacking fortuitously allows him to reunite with a girlfriend than if this outcome does not occur, even though his behavioral freedom was equally compromised in both conditions (Rogers et al., in preparation).

In Anglo-American law and most rational perspectives on moral decision making, something very close to behavior, causal, and outcome control (without these labels) are the decision criteria that are prescribed for determining blame. A major assumption of the CCM is that reactions to unfavorable personalities, actions, and outcomes lead observers to alter their perceptions of these decision criteria. In other words, observers' distaste for elements of the action sequence and/or the people involved leads them to evaluate these criteria in a way that justifies the blame attribution they favor (see Alicke, 2000).

Many empirical studies now strongly support the primacy of evaluative reactions in determining blame and its criteria (such as intent and causation). Among these findings from our own lab are the following.

- A person who is driving over the speed limit to hide a vial of cocaine is viewed as a more significant cause of an accident than one who is driving at the same speed in the same circumstances to hide an anniversary present (Alicke, 1992, Study 1).
- People are seen as more causal for later events in an extended causal chain when their initial motives are negative versus positive (Alicke, 1992, Study 4).
- A homeowner who shoots an intruder is blamed more when the intruder turns out to be his daughter's boyfriend than when he is a dangerous criminal (Alicke & Davis, 1989); and judgments about the homeowner's causal influence on the victim's death are mediated by blame attributions, but blame is not mediated by causation (Alicke et al., 2011).
- Individuals whose capacities are diminished (e.g., psychosis, anxiety disorder) are blamed more when these incapacities lead to harm if these individuals contributed to the development of the incapacity (e.g., by experimenting with drugs)

than if their incapacities developed due to circumstances outside of their control (Alicke & Davis, 1990).
- The mutability of an outcome influences blame only if a decision maker was culpable in the events leading up to the harmful outcome (Alicke, Davis, Buckingham, & Zell, 2008).
- Socially unattractive actors are blamed more for harmful outcomes than socially attractive actors, but this effect is reduced if extenuating circumstances are presented before participants learn about the facts that establish the person's dislikable character than if they learn about these circumstances after the unfavorable dispositional information has had time to fester (Alicke & Zell, 2009).
- Participants who learn of negative outcomes and first assess a defendant's legal responsibility for a negligent homicide charge see the facts of the case as more indicative of guilt than do participants who do not assess legal responsibility until after they evaluate the facts, suggesting that the former participants justify or validate their blame attributions by altering their perception of the facts (Alicke, Davis, & Pezzo, 1994).
- People who do good, counternormative things are blamed less for harmful outcomes than are those who do bad, normative things, showing that evaluative "goodness–badness" matters more in causal citation than normativity (Alicke et al., 2011, Study 2).

To date, research designed to test assumptions of the CCM have concentrated largely on judgments of causation, as causal judgment was the central concern of the attributional theories from which interest in blame and responsibility first arose among social psychologists. In recent studies, we have been extending our research to the other main blame criterion—intent. Interest in this topic has exploded among psychologists and philosophers, much of the research being directed at Joshua Knobe's "side effect" problem (Knobe & Fraser, 2008). Side effects, or peripheral consequences, are outcomes that decision makers realize will probably occur if they pursue their focal goal but either don't care about or are willing to accept to

achieve their primary goal. From the CCM perspective, the "Knobe effect," the finding that people ascribe more intentionality for negative than for positive side effects, is due to participants having more negative reactions to a decision maker who expresses a lack of concern for harmful consequences (Alicke, 2008).

In our present research, we have been interested in what is probably the more common peripheral effect problem, that is, one in which the peripheral consequence is unforeseen. In a recent study, for example, we described a journalist—Joan—who desired either to help or impede her friend's chances of getting hired for a high-status job. In both cases, prior to her friend's interview, Joan secretly slipped a sedative in her drink. In the *good*-Joan case, the sedative was intended to increase her friend's chances (it was known that the interviewer preferred calm employees), whereas in the *bad*-Joan case, the sedative was intended to undermine her friend's chances (it was known that the interviewer preferred more hyper, energetic employees). In both instances, however, Joan's friend had an unforeseen allergic reaction to the sedative and became very ill. Despite neither character having knowledge of her allergy, bad Joan's unrelated motive—to prevent her friend from getting the job—led to heightened ascriptions of intent and blame for her friend's illness.

One important unresolved issue in studies designed to test CCM assumptions concerns the conditions under which changes in the decision criteria mediate blame effects or when they simply represent post hoc justifications of blame attributions that have already been made. So far, we have been unable to find a consistent pattern: Sometimes judgments of causation or intention mediate blame, sometimes they do not. Both of these paths pose problems for the administration of justice in everyday social life and in the law, although the latter seems more pernicious. If people react unfavorably based on their emotions or personal biases and later, after considering the data regarding behavioral, causal, and outcome control, alter either their perceptions of the evidence or their threshold for how much evidence is needed to blame, there is at least the possibility that the facts might override

their desire to blame. If, however, they simply alter their judgments about causation, intent, foresight, mitigation, and so on only when they are explicitly asked about these criteria, it suggests that their blame attributions are largely emotion-driven and relatively independent of the state of the evidence.

Is It Bad to Blame? Should We Stop?

Western cultural institutions—Christianity and the mental health community being the most prominent—advocate forgiveness and almost uniformly condemn blame. Self-help books on blame endorse these views with titles such as: "Ending the Blame Game"; "Beyond Blame: Freeing Yourself from the Most Toxic Form of Emotional Bullsh*t"; "Stop Blaming, Start Loving!"; and "Beyond Blame: A New Way of Resolving Conflicts in Relationships." Clearly, there is little benefit to holding on to useless grudges or exacting ill-advised retribution.

Nevertheless, when cultural prescriptions clash with our fundamental human nature, there are always questions about both the soundness of these prescriptions and their feasibility. Religious views that discourage sex outside of marriage, for example, have probably had at least a modest civilizing function throughout Western history, especially in promoting stable family arrangements, but have also made people feel guilty about a behavior that is as natural as eating and drinking, with especially punitive consequences for women. And, of course, even with images of hellfire and damnation lurking in the background, even the most pious seem to circumvent these religious prescriptions quite adeptly.

Blame instincts are less entertaining than sexual ones, but they are probably as natural and immediate. Cultural perspectives on blame and forgiveness generally deemphasize the benefits of the former and the liabilities of the latter. Philosophers, by contrast, have noted that refraining from blame indicates a failure to take morality seriously (Coates & Tognazzini, 2013). Furthermore, blame is an assertion of individual rights, an injured party's way of saying that she or he is someone who will not be taken ad-

vantage of. Conversely, failure to blame can reflect an unwillingness to take a stand on important moral matters. What would it mean, for example, to cringe upon hearing a person utter racial epithets but to decide that you just can't blame him for it? To put it succinctly, "to foreswear blame is to fail to value what we ought to value" (Franklin, 2013).

In his book on the evolution of forgiveness, McCullough (2008) notes that national surveys have revealed forgiveness to be the fourth most valued personal quality, which is perhaps unsurprising given its widespread endorsement. The New Testament is filled with homilies about forgiveness, such as in Matthew 18:22–23: "Then Peter came and said to Him, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.'" But as Bertrand Russell (1957) noted in comparing the morality of Jesus unfavorably to that of Socrates, Jesus was quite capable of vindictive fury, as in Matthew 13:41, "The Son of Man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity, and shall cast them into a furnace of fire; there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth." So while the New Testament may be the most influential endorsement of forgiveness in Western cultures, it is by no means a universal one.

Psychologists, beginning at least as far back as Karen Horney (1937), have also highlighted the evils of blame and trumpeted the virtues of forgiveness. McCullough (2008) notes that vindictiveness underlies many of the personality disorders in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (DSM-5). One of the reasons for this, however, is that personality disorders in the DSM are almost all externalizing disorders that involve harm to others—such as narcissism, passive–aggressiveness, and psychopathy. From a cognitive-behavioral perspective, self-blame and low self-esteem are the primary causes of depression, which is the most common of all psychological problems. In many circumstances, self-blame is a natural consequence of failing to blame others who deserve it.

There is good reason to believe that future developments in the biological and social sciences will bring into sharper relief the genetic and environmental determinants of behavior and, even more importantly, augment our ability to predict the outcome of their interaction in specific situations. Harking back to the *A Clockwork Orange* example with which we began, the moral question about Alex is whether he is a victim of his nature and environment or whether he has freely chosen to be a violent criminal. As science moves closer to identifying the influences that contribute to violent and aggressive behavior and, indeed, to any harmful or offensive actions, will people stop blaming those who exhibit them?

This question relates to the familiar philosophical debate between compatibilist and incompatibilist positions on responsibility: If behavior is completely determined, can anyone be held morally responsible for their actions? In the simplest case, compatibilists say yes, incompatibilists say no. Nonphilosophers seem unimpressed by this issue. Apparently, the vast majority of people believe in free will in the diverse cultures in which it has been assessed, including the United States, Hong Kong, India, and Colombia (Sarkissian, Chatterjee, DeBrigard, Knobe, Nichols, & Sirker, 2010). Furthermore, and most important, even when people believe that an action is fully causally determined, they continue to ascribe moral responsibility (Nahmias, Morris, Nadelhoffer, & Turner, 2006). From the CCM perspective, these findings demonstrate that the strong need to blame supersedes abstract philosophical considerations, an assumption that has recently been supported in an impressive series of studies on free will and moral responsibility by Clark and colleagues (2014).

Conclusions

In this chapter we reviewed the psychological functions that blame subserves and the process by which it occurs. We argued that even when complex reasoning processes are engaged to make ultimate decisions about blameworthiness, they are likely to be heavily influenced by initial blame hypotheses,

especially when these are driven by strong reactions of disapprobation for the actors involved, their behavior, or for the consequences that ensue. Psychologists have tended to view individual blame instances as rational problems to be solved, problems that involve grappling with information about desires, motives, beliefs, causal paths, and the connection among all these with the chain of consequences that behavior sets into motion. We are on board with all this but emphasize that from a functional, evolutionary perspective, blame reflects the standards of conduct by which the group lives and contributes to maintaining order and solidarity. Those who violate the rules and are detected are unlikely to find solace in the fact that genetic and environmental influences contributed to their behavior and may even have fully determined it. When you screw up, *you,* not your genes or your environment, will be blamed and called to account. And for those whose moral functioning is on a par with Alex's in *A Clockwork Orange,* the world's best defense attorney accompanied by a stellar crew of philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, and neuroscientists is unlikely to sway the average juror with impeccable arguments for incompatibilism.

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