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What we can blame each other for

Andreas Leonhard Menges

Münstersches Informations- und Archivsystem multimedialer Inhalte (MIAMI)

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Andreas Leonhard Menges
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1.

Theories of moral blameworthiness aim at identifying the conditions under which it is appropriate to blame a person. It is typically claimed that, in cases in which these conditions are fulfilled, the agent is blameworthy for her action. But the thing we can blame that agent for is not further scrutinized. In this paper I will show that this is a mistake. I will discuss and reject different attempts to identify the thing we can blame each other for in paradigmatic cases of blameworthiness before suggesting that, in such cases, we can appropriately blame each other for moving our bodies with morally objectionable intentions. This account makes an important contribution to our understanding of moral blameworthiness and helps to defend the claims that ‘blameworthy’ implies ‘wrong’ and that ‘being obliged to do X’ implies ‘being able to do X’.

2.

You are in the middle of a street and you do not realize that an onrushing car will very likely hit you if you do not move. In the first scenario, a rescuer shoves you with the intention of protecting you from the car. In the second scenario, a killer shoves you with the intention of ensuring that you will be hit by the car. But she accidentally shoves you too hard such that you are not hit. Both of them shove you and the physical pain they cause may be the same. But, other things being equal, it seems appropriate to thank the rescuer and to blame the killer.²

Considerations such as these suggest that the intentions with which an agent acts at least partly determine whether it is appropriate to blame her or not. This idea can be formulated as the

Simple Account of Blameworthiness: If a person who has a certain kind of control over her attitudes and behaviour acts with morally objectionable intentions, then it is appropriate to blame her.

The Simple Account identifies paradigmatic cases of blameworthiness, namely those in which

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² You may also feel relief and something like gratitude (an analogon to what is often called agent regret in the case of one’s blamelessly causing harm) toward the killer. But blaming her seems to be appropriate, too.

mentally normally developed adults act with morally objectionable intentions. But what is it that we can appropriately blame such a person for? Before discussing possible answers, I will briefly sketch what I take blame to be.

I am concerned with blame as an attitude which can, but does not have to be, expressed in actions or speech-acts. According to one account, our blaming a person in this sense should be understood as having certain emotions toward her such as resentment, indignation or, in the case of self-blame, guilt (Wallace 1994: ch. 2 & 3). According to another account, blaming a person is having a certain desire-belief pair toward her (Sher 2006: ch. 6). Others again take blame to be the revision of attitudes that constitute one's moral relationship with the person blamed (Scanlon 2008: ch. 4). My arguments will be compatible with these accounts.

3.

Let me call the thing we blame someone for the object of our blaming. My aim is to identify the object of appropriate blame in paradigmatic cases. At first glance, it seems obvious that it is appropriate to blame a person who fulfils the conditions identified by the Simple Account for her action. However, there are two problems with this proposal. First, it is unclear what is involved in an agent's action. It is debated, for example, whether the killer's shoving me is identical with her rescuing me or not. Thus, different people who claim that an agent is blameworthy for her action can have very different ideas about what exactly she is blameworthy for. Second, as will become clear in a moment, depending on what one takes the killer's action to be, the claim that she is blameworthy for her action can be quite implausible.

Leaving the concept of action aside, it seems to be initially plausible that we can appropriately blame people for intentionally moving their bodies in certain ways. And we can refer to such movements by saying that a person shoved us, that she stepped on our feet and so on. Let me call a person's intentionally moving her body at a certain time her act. Neither the person's intention nor the act's consequences are part of the act. Some might claim that what I call a person's act is just her action, but I will be neutral with regard to the nature of action. Thus, a first attempt to identify the object of appropriate blame is the

Act Theory: If a person who has a certain kind of control over her attitudes and behaviour acts with morally objectionable intentions, then she is blameworthy for her acts.

According to the Act Theory, you can blame the killer for *shoving you*. The problem with this claim is that there is nothing morally questionable about her shoving you. The killer is (very likely)

morally obliged to shove you because this will (very likely) save your life. But if shoving you is what she is obliged to do, then it seems highly implausible that she can be appropriately blamed for that thing. Imagine that you express your blame attitude toward the killer and ask her angrily: ‘How could you have shoved me?’ This would be inappropriate.

Another way to make the same point is this: Other things being equal, it is appropriate for a person to apologize for those things for which it is appropriate to blame her. This is so because apologizing is a natural counterpart of blame. But imagine that the killer apologizes for having shoved you. This would be odd. In general, the Act Theory implies that it is appropriate to blame people for things that are morally unquestionable. This is implausible.

One way to bypass the problems of the Act Theory is to say that the object of appropriate blame is the person’s intention. Thus, one could suggest an

Intention Theory: If a person who has a certain kind of control over her attitudes and behaviour acts with morally objectionable intentions, then she is blameworthy for her intentions.

This account plausibly implies that what we can blame the killer for is her *intention to kill you*. But the Intention Theory is incomplete. What I blame a person for who steps on my foot with the intention to hurt me is, it seems, not only that she intends to hurt me but also that she steps on my foot. And this seems appropriate. Thus, the object of appropriate blame is, in paradigmatic cases, not only the agent’s intention.

Now, one might try to combine the Act and the Intention Theory by saying that the objects we are blameworthy for are our acts and intentions. Call this the

Act and Intention Theory: If a person who has a certain kind of control over her attitudes and behaviour acts with morally objectionable intentions, then she is blameworthy for her acts and intentions.

Imagine that a person steps on your foot and then shoves you in order to hurt you. The Act and Intention Theory says that that person can be blamed for *stepping on your foot*, *shoving you* and *intending to hurt you*. Recall that an agent’s act, as I understand it, does not involve the intention with which it is performed. Thus, the Act and Intention Theory implies that we can blame a person who performs several acts with an objectionable intention for completely distinct things. However, you would probably not blame the person who steps on your foot and shoves you in order to hurt

you for three completely distinct things. And it seems inappropriate to do so. The blameworthiness of such a person does not have three completely different sources. Her blameworthiness has one source or, perhaps, different sources that are closely connected. It seems important, for example, that the two acts the person performs are performed with the same objectionable intention to hurt you. A theory of what we can blame each other for should account for these connections. As the Act and Intention Theory rather obscures than reveals how the objects of appropriately blaming such a person are connected, we should reject it.

4.

Three initially plausible attempts to identify the object of appropriate blame fail. Their problems have a common source: They treat the agent's intentional body movement and her intention as two distinct objects of appropriate blame. But we should identify the object of appropriate blame, at least in the paradigmatic cases I focus on here, as the complex of one's intention and the act performed with that intention. Or so I suggest.

Most of our verbs – such as ‘shoving’ – refer to the things we do without referring to the intentions with which we do them. But some verbs refer to the complex of the things we do and the intentions with which we do them – such as ‘lying’. I suggest that the paradigmatic objects of appropriate blame are complexes of this kind. Thus, I propose a

Complex Theory: If a person who has a certain kind of control over her attitudes and behaviour acts with morally objectionable intentions, then she is blameworthy for performing acts with these intentions.³

What you can blame the killer for, according to the Complex Theory, is her *shoving you in order to kill you*. This is intuitively plausible. And you can blame the person who intends to hurt you for *shoving you in order to hurt you* and for *stepping on your foot in order to hurt you*. This reveals how the things you can blame that person for are connected, namely by the intention that is part of both objects of blame.

I do not claim that complexes of acts and intentions are the only objects of appropriate blame. My thesis is that the Complex Theory identifies what we are blameworthy for in paradigmatic cases. Other things we seem to be blameworthy for include omissions, intentions themselves, attitudes other than intentions, and, perhaps most clearly, the consequences of what we

³ A complete theory of what we can blame each other for should, of course, say what is involved in a person's intention. Fortunately, however, the Complex Theory is plausible and helps to illuminate the questions I will discuss in the following section, even though it is in this respect incomplete.

do. Let me briefly discuss blameworthiness for consequences by considering the case of a murderer.

A murderer has morally objectionable intentions, moves her body with these intentions – she pulls the trigger – and thereby causes another person’s death. So far, the Complex Theory says that she can be blamed for pulling the trigger in order to kill that person. But it also seems appropriate to blame the killer for her victim’s death. A natural extension of the Complex Theory says that what we appropriately blame the murderer for is the complex of her objectionable intention, her pulling the trigger, and some of that act’s consequences, above all the death of the victim.⁴ A complex of this kind can be referred to by the verb ‘murdering’. Thus, what can be called the Extended Complex Theory has the intuitive result that the murderer can be blamed for *murdering her victim*.

5.

The preceding discussion adds some important brushstrokes to our picture of moral blameworthiness. Moreover, it illuminates other important philosophical debates: The Complex Theory helps to defend the claim that ‘blameworthy’ implies ‘wrong’ and the claim that ‘being obliged to do X’ implies ‘being able to do X’ against recent objections.

At first glance, it seems plausible that moral wrongness is one of the necessary conditions of moral blameworthiness. If there is nothing wrong with what you do, then it seems inappropriate to blame you. T. M. Scanlon, however, maintains that blameworthiness and wrongness can come apart: ‘[I]t can be appropriate to blame a person who has done what was in fact the right thing if he or she did it for an extremely bad reason’ (2008: 125). The killer case exemplifies this: She shoves you – which is (probably) what she should do – only because she intends to kill you. Thus, she seems to be blameworthy even though she did not do anything wrong.

The Complex Theory says that what the killer is blameworthy for is *shoving you in order to kill you*. Assuming that shoving you is permissible in that situation, we should take a look at the killer’s intentions. And her intentions include the intention to kill you. Plausibly, killing you would be morally wrong. It follows that the killer’s intentions include the intention to act wrongly. Thus, even if the killer did not do anything wrong, she intended to do something wrong.

This line of reasoning suggests a general defence of the claim that ‘blameworthy’ implies ‘wrong’: The wrongness that is presupposed by blameworthiness does not have to be the wrongness of what the agent does. It suffices that there is something wrong with what she intends: The agent can intend to do something wrong, her having a certain intention can itself be wrong and her not having a certain intention can be wrong. This is, of course, not the place to argue for these claims in detail, but they seem to be promising and deserve further development.

⁴ What people are blameworthy for involves only some of their acts’ consequences because it is inappropriate to blame people for consequences they could not reasonably be expected to foresee.

The second claim the Complex Theory helps to defend is that ‘A is morally obliged to do X’ implies that ‘A can do X’ (henceforth: OIC). If OIC holds, then, a famous objection goes, A can make it the case that she is not obliged to do X by making it the case that she cannot do X. Some take this to be especially problematic because A thereby also seems to make it the case that she is not blameworthy for not X-ing. I modify a case from Ulrike Heuer (2010) in order to illustrate the point.⁵ Lilly is morally obliged to attend a meeting at 10 a.m., but she does not want to go. Therefore, she locks herself in a room at 9 a.m. – long before she ought to leave the house – and throws the key away. If OIC is true, then her obligation to attend the meeting at 10 a.m. expires when it becomes impossible for her to do so, which is at 9 a.m. At 10 a.m., her not attending the meeting is not wrong because there is no obligation that requires her to attend. And if Lilly’s not attending the meeting is not wrong, then she seems not to be blameworthy for it. But this is odd. It seems clear that ‘the other members of the meeting have a reason to be angry with Lilly because she was letting them down by not showing up’ (Heuer 2010: 239).

The objection is that OIC implies, together with other plausible assumptions, that one cannot appropriately blame Lilly for not attending the meeting. One can still blame her for locking herself in and for making it impossible to attend the meeting. But one cannot appropriately blame her for not attending the meeting itself. And this is, so the argument goes, a good reason to doubt OIC.

The Complex Theory implies that what Lilly’s colleagues can blame her for is, perhaps among other things, *locking herself in in order to not attend the meeting* and *throwing away the key in order to not attend the meeting*. Thus, part of what they can blame Lilly for is her intention not to attend the meeting. Note that this is not ruled out by OIC. For at 9 a.m. when Lilly acted with that intention she was still obliged to attend the meeting. Thus, at 9 a.m. she intended to act wrongly and this intention is part of what she can be blamed for. But if it is appropriate to blame Lilly for acting with the intention not to attend the meeting, then I see no further reason to insist that it is also appropriate to blame her for not attending the meeting.

In sum, OIC seems to rule out that it is appropriate to blame certain agents for certain things they do where we intuitively think that it is appropriate to blame those agents for those things. The Complex Theory helps to defend OIC by suggesting that those agents are blameworthy for a complex that involves their intentions to do those things, even if they are not blameworthy for doing them. Thus, the Complex Theory helps to capture strong intuitions without giving up OIC.

6.

In this paper I discussed what we can blame each other for in paradigmatic cases of moral

⁵ Heuer criticizes the claim that ‘having a normative reason to do X’ implies ‘being able to do X’, not OIC. But her argument would generalize against OIC as I understand it.

blameworthiness. I proposed that the paradigmatic object of appropriate blame is moving one's body with a morally objectionable intention. Finally, I showed that this account helps to illuminate important debates surrounding moral blameworthiness.⁶

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