

Blame, Excuses & Responsibility

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Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

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Blame

Abstract

There will be times in my life when I take it to be appropriate for me to blame someone else for something they have done. There are also likely to be times when I see it fit to blame myself for something I have done. There are other times still when it will seem right for me to blame a group of people for their actions. This interpersonal blame addresses the actions of moral agents. But blame can also be applied to non-moral agents. I am equally prone to blame the weather for getting me wet or the chair I stub my toe on for the pain it brings me. We might blame a tumour on the brain for causing a person to behave in unusual ways. We will even think ourselves justified in blaming something more abstract, like an influential idea that leads us astray or the metaphysical being who planted that idea in our mind.

Regardless of its type, when we blame we assume that the blaming is justified, which is to say one of two things. Either, to be justified in blaming is to be right in who we blame, or it is to rightfully participate in the act of blaming itself, whatever that act happens to be. Often, in contemporary thought, the two are conflated, reducing the classical sentiment of 'it would be wrong to blame those who have done no wrong', to the more simplistic 'it is wrong to blame'. The initial pressure of this essay is to interrogate this newly chiselled interpretation of blame. Is it simply wrong to blame, in principle? Can blame ever be justified? These are important questions with practical implications and they must be given their due. But, we cannot expect to handle this without spending time on each of the key terms. To do that we must ask, rather simply, what is blame about? What is its nature?

Emotional Blame

There have been varying opinions on this. Basic interpretations have suggested blame is primarily its emotional burn - either the hurt we experience when we are blamed or the feelings that arise in us prior to blaming someone else. Think of it this way. We will likely have our own similar, but unique stories to tell about blame. Each of these stories will be evocative in some way. We might feel resentment when we blame others or guilty when we are blamed. Moral attitudes¹, as they were called by P. F. Strawson can themselves be modified further by apologies or forgiveness. They can, through lack of action, also be maintained and prolonged. To us, the blamers, it usually seems right to blame, which suggests the belief that our blaming is justified. In those instances, our blaming might indeed feel righteous too. We might contrast this against the alternate cases, where events unravel in such a way that it eventually becomes clear that we were wrong to blame. In these counterexamples, the feeling of justification we started with might be replaced by regret. This

¹ Strawson, P.F. (1962) 'Freedom and Resentment', *Proceedings of the British Academy* [Preprint]. Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/STRFAR> (Accessed: 02 August 2023).

suite of experiences, Strawson argues, can offer a rough approximation of blame's justifiability².

Is this to say that blame is justified by its emotional experiences? If it were so, then we might demand a search for the necessary emotion or set of emotions that constitute blame. Need it be that every time I blame someone I am indignant? Should you, the recipient of my blaming have to feel its sting? To the contrary, it is quite plausible that in blaming you I fail to exact any emotional response at all and quite similarly, I might myself not feel anything at all when I set about blaming you. I can even blame you and feel joy when I do it. As it is so unclear as to which emotion is necessary to blame some will judge that this emotional theory of blame is really no theory at all. It is another theory grounded on the whims of personal experience. I am doubtful that this is as powerful a rebuttal as it seems. Given the range and diversity of human experience, it is only clear that experiences can vary. We can narrow it down a little by examining healthy use cases. We naturally associate blame with negative feelings. Can we assume then that blame's usual presentation would be something like indignation or resentment? There is certainly weight to the idea. But, there is more to blame than the expression of an emotion. In his book 'Conversation and Responsibility'³ Michael McKenna states that it is not just that a particular emotion needs to be expressed when blaming. We need only to be aware that it would be acceptable to express it⁴. That is, we can appreciate how indignation and resentment would be appropriate even if we do not experience them. This does elude definition somewhat as the appropriateness can still appear subjective. But, I take the term appropriateness to mean something that relates to our moral norms. It would, given those norms, be quite fitting to express indignation but not bliss or lust, although we could feasibly experience either. It is only that, as members of a moral group, we know that those emotions would not be appropriate.

Another way to contend with this emotional theory of blame begins with the observation that we usually feel justified when we blame someone for a fault even if we eventually turn out to be wrong. The reverse is also true because we rarely blame someone knowing fully well we are completely unjustified in doing so (although Pickard's account of irrational blame offers an exception to this general rule⁵). With this, perhaps we ought to confess that *feeling* justified may not be the same as *being* justified. Is this a problem? What we want when we blame is not just to feel justified but to be in the right to do so. Wouldn't it be more sensible to look for blame's justification in whatever it is that makes us right in the first place?

Let me attempt a defence on behalf of the emotional theorist. I think it is clear that yes, we should accept that the emotions can be mistaken. But, I would say that it was the strength of my conviction, not the emotional correlate, that led me to miss the truth and falsely blame you. What you have in mind is something about certainty, which you might say is falsely

² Strawson, P.F. (1962) 'Freedom and Resentment', *Proceedings of the British Academy* [Preprint]. Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/STRFAR> (Accessed: 02 August 2023).

³ McKenna, M. (2012) *Conversation & Responsibility*. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁴ McKenna, M. (2012) in *Conversation & Responsibility*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 25–29.

⁵ Pickard, H. (2013) 'Irrational Blame', *Analysis*, 73(4), pp. 613–626. doi:10.1093/analys/ant075.

justified by the emotions. In this, I ask, are you saying that it is not the indignation you dislike, exactly, but the fact that that indignation was righteous? If that is the case then your argument is not aimed at the emotions of blame as we usually conceive of them. Rather, it is aimed at how credulous I am or how believable my emotions are. Yours is an epistemic point and it is one I can agree with without sacrificing my theory. Certainty is not always warranted when blaming, but, so what? You might also have in mind disproportionate emotional responses, those where I overreact to something you have done, which can seem equally unreasonable. This too, I am fine to admit, would be unwarranted. But again you fail to attack the emotions directly. You only make the obvious point that when something is too much it is more than it should be. I say, in defence of the emotions, that this has less to do with the emotions themselves and more to do with their occasional misapplication. Would you still take issue with an emotional response that was completely proportionate? What of being righteous when I am right to blame you? These would be examples of being enough, or just right, would they not?

Now, we have talked about unwarranted certainty and disproportionate responses, but what of blame itself? To that, I can add something else. I would also admit that it was not feeling alone that got me into blaming or forgiving you. I speculated about what had happened, I blamed you, which was to say, I had reasons for blaming you and these reasons preempted the emotions that followed. You might want to say that the emotional outburst was crude, surely, but those emotions only reflected the reasons I already had in mind. No apt emotion comes about without a sufficient cause and in the instance that I blamed you, they came about because I believed it was right to do so. The emotions only reflected that belief. I would be fine to admit that reasons can be wrong. You might think that if the emotions have some correspondence to reasons in a blaming exchange then those wrong reasons will bring about the wrong emotions too. But, this isn't quite right. I know that it would have been wrong for me to continue feeling righteous, even when I knew I was mistaken to blame you, but I no longer felt this way. My feelings changed. You ought to acknowledge that my emotions were not static in any of this. They changed in response to the reasons you gave and I take this to mean they were appropriate, given the knowledge I had at each moment of the exchange. I say that you have only shown when the emotions are insufficient or overblown. What you have failed to get at is the unjustifiability of the emotions themselves.

Extending that point, I can be reasoned in or out of blaming you just as much as I can feel my way into or out of it. If it would be foolish for me to blindly believe the emotions I experience, which sometimes turn out to be wrong, then it would be no less foolish for me to blindly believe your reasons. Sometimes reasons given are wrong simply because the reason-giver knows no better. Other times, the reason giver is lying. I then fail to see how or why the emotions should be held to a different standard to reasons. I will add that I can easily imagine a case in which I only felt wrong to blame you because of the reasons you gave me, which turned out to be fabricated. Upon my finding out the truth of things, you would think it suspicious of me to suggest that we do away with reasoning altogether or were I to suggest that reasoning is unjustified, simply because the reasons you have given me, in this instance, turned out to be false. Now, I appreciate that this might all undermine an emotional theory. If

my aim for such a theory were to imply an emotional basis then this would be true, but, it is not. It is only to identify how the emotions commonly occur in a blaming exchange. It may be as Mckenna said, that they needn't be expressed at all, but that is not to say that their expression is inappropriate, nor does it suggest that they can so easily be dropped from a complete theory of blame. Consider for example, what would happen to reasons if I held them to the same standards. As I see it, all along my emotions were actively responding to the believability of reasons and because some of your reasons were false and I believed them it caused me to have emotions you now claim to be wrong. If only you had been honest instead then the emotions would not be in question. I would say that the problem then, if there is one, is your reasons and not the emotions.

Ultimately, I think you are taking too myopic a view where a wider lens produces a vindication for the emotional side to blame. It is entirely appropriate for me to experience indignation when I believe you are to blame and once again upon learning the truth of your deceit. But, it is also appropriate for me to be assuaged upon hearing a convincing reason. I am not at fault here and neither are the emotions. Rather, it is your dishonesty, which I at first did not notice. Once I did, I had an emotional response that would be considered quite healthy. Perhaps you mean to say that the emotions are factually incorrect? The wrongness was always there to see, as I recall, and so an appropriate and justified emotion would be one that recognised the truth of the events. I should have known not to blame you. I, or perhaps the subset of me that is my emotions, should have spotted the deceit. With this, I say you ask too much of the emotions. The emotional theory that you have been arguing against is one where the emotions respond to reasons. Now you say that the emotions would be better if they could move beyond your reasons altogether, getting right to the heart of your deceit in spite of what you say. Is this not more disrespectful to reasons than the emotional theory I have offered? Is it that you want an emotion of blame that does not appreciate reasons?

Here, you measure the credibility of blame according to its factual content. You do that because that's how you would justify a reason. However, in the context of blaming, the emotions are not justified by being true, if indeed that even makes sense to say. These moral emotions, or manifestations of moral attitudes as Strawson had them, are reactions to your quality of will, which both reasons and emotions can demonstrate. As Strawson says; 'the personal reactive attitudes rest on, and reflect, an expectation of, and demand for, the manifestation of a certain degree of goodwill or regard on the part of other human beings towards ourselves; or at least on the expectation of, and demand for, an absence of the manifestation of active ill will or indifferent disregard.'⁶ Therefore, my emotions, or reactive attitudes, seem partly justified here through their ability to notice and respond to your actions, which a reason is an iteration of. They could also be justified in their ability to modify my attitudes towards you as a result.

⁶ Strawson, P.F. (1962) 'Freedom and Resentment', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, p. 9. Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/STRFAR> (Accessed: 02 August 2023).

There is at last some room to posit a further justification for blame. If a blaming exchange can feature emotional responses to reasons given, as well as reasons given in response to the expression of emotions, which both are a result of circumstantial knowledge, then we can say that the knowledge itself can be a basis for blaming. Such was the case in an example I gave earlier. It was the knowledge of your deceit that caused me to feel indignation and that same knowledge that caused me to change my mind about your culpability. Is it that knowledge is the catalyst of change whereas the reasons we give and the emotions we experience are the medium through which that change takes place? At least having something like this as a basis for blame's justification can produce a more coherent picture of blame than a merely emotional or rational theory. As for the individual roles of emotions and reasons in blame, they are important but require augmentation. The emotions of blame, in the context of moral attitudes, are good enough for me - the blamer - to consider them and therefore myself as justified in what I do, but it is a mistake to rely on them so wholeheartedly. Reasons, meanwhile, are not always just for me, they can be for you. Maybe I want you to understand why I am upset (or whatever moral attitude I am experiencing) and I achieve this more effectively by offering you more than just the emotions. There is also the possibility that it is just better for me to provide reasons if what I want is to, not only persuade myself that I was right to blame you but to persuade you of the very same.

Cognitive Blame

I have loosely mentioned cognitive theories of blame that represent blame as something cold and analytical. J.C.C. Smart, for example, suggests that blame is a negative assessment of a moral action, which takes the form of a moral grading or evaluation⁷. The comparison drawn by Smart is one between blame and what is commonly thought of as its opposite, praise. In Smart's analysis, praise is instead contrasted against dis-praise, where praising an object like an apple constitutes a judgement that the apple is good and dis-praise constitutes the opposing judgement that it is bad. To make this distinction more clear, notice the difference between the following examples, where 'in one sense praise is the opposite of blame. We praise Tommy for his industry and blame him for his laziness. But when we praise a girl for her good looks this does not mean that we should have blamed her if her looks had been bad.'⁸

These concepts of praise and dispraise relate to this latter sense of dispassionate grading. What blame adds to it in the former, according to Smart, is an ascription of responsibility⁹. This is often pointed out as being incomplete, not because causal responsibility is not worthy of inclusion, but because of the extra emphasis put on ascriptions of responsibility, which leads to a muted kind of blame lacking the emotional bite we would typically associate with it. It is the primary criticism lofted at cognitive theories that they 'leave the blame out of

⁷ Smart, J.J.C (1961) 'Free-will, Praise and Blame', *Mind*, LXX(279), pp. 291–306.
doi:10.1093/mind/lxx.279.291.

⁸ Smart, J.J.C (1961) 'Free-will, Praise and Blame', *Mind*, LXX(279), p. 303.
doi:10.1093/mind/lxx.279.291.

⁹ Smart, J.J.C (1961) 'Free-will, Praise and Blame', *Mind*, LXX(279), p. 305.
doi:10.1093/mind/lxx.279.291.

blame (a term coined by Wallace)¹⁰. Although, practically speaking, this could just be what it looks like to follow in Mckenna's footsteps. If to leave the blame out of blame means to reduce or omit its sting then by failing to express emotions we know it would be appropriate to express we produce the very same outcome. This outcome is very similar to what cognitive theorists appear to be after. A 'dispassionate and clear-headed'¹¹ blame that can be achieved by slowing our judgments of people. As Smart said 'we should be quite as ready to grade a person for his moral qualities as for his non-moral qualities'¹². That is, we should judge people in the sense that we would grade them. Is it reasonable to expect this of moral agents given our propensity for judging in the moral sense? As we have already mentioned, it is possible to be less emotionally expressive although it is not as clear whether this would be a good thing for us all to do. Is it possible for us to be less prone to judge in the moral sense and only grade?

Take what that would mean. If we only need to know that a particular emotion would be appropriate to justify blame then we needn't ever express those emotions. It could produce a blame that is more dispassionate, and more level-headed. However, Strawson is careful to warn us that the moral attitudes, which blame can and often is reducible to, are not 'devices we calculatingly employ for regulative purposes'. They 'do not merely exploit our natures', he adds; 'they express them.'¹³ That is to say that we cannot be so utilitarian in our theory that we describe a possible practice of blame that is simply beyond the capabilities of the moral groups we find ourselves in. We must start from a position that, as Strawson, stresses, 'take account of the facts in all their bearings'¹⁴. The primary fact being 'the existence of the general framework of attitudes itself is something we are given with the fact of human society, which 'as a whole, it neither calls for nor permits, an external "rational" justification.'¹⁵

Still, although some of us possess the ability to be more dispassionate in our approach to blaming does it follow that we all share that same ability? Does it also follow that because we are capable of dispassionate blame we are somehow obliged to do it? I think this means well but goes too far. Now, forgetting these objections for a moment, if we are taking blame to be sufficiently covered by Smart's analysis we ought to ask how it can be justified, if it all? Initially, we might think it acceptable to point out that Tommy is responsible for his laziness but, this could be problematic, as Smart points out, because 'most men do not feel that blame,

¹⁰ Wallace, R.J. (2011) 'Dispassionate Opprobrium On Blame and The Reactive Sentiments', *Reasons and Recognition Essays on the Philosophy of T.M. Scanlon*, p. 355.
doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199753673.003.0015.

¹¹ Smart, J.J.C. (1961) 'Free-will, Praise and Blame', *Mind*, LXX(279), p. 305.
doi:10.1093/mind/lxx.279.291.

¹² Smart, J.J.C. (1961) 'Free-will, Praise and Blame', *Mind*, LXX(279), p. 306.
doi:10.1093/mind/lxx.279.291.

¹³ Strawson, P.F. (1962) 'Freedom and Resentment', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, p. 15.
Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/STRFAR> (Accessed: 02 August 2023).

¹⁴ Strawson, P.F. (1962) 'Freedom and Resentment', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, p. 15.
Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/STRFAR> (Accessed: 02 August 2023).

¹⁵ Strawson, P.F. (1962) 'Freedom and Resentment', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, p. 14.
Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/STRFAR> (Accessed: 02 August 2023).

in the way they use the word 'blame', would be appropriate if a man's action was the result of heredity plus environment'¹⁶. That is, we might struggle to justify blaming a person if that person's actions are attributable to their genes or their upbringing. In those cases, it would seem as irrational to blame them for their actions as it would be to morally judge them and in those cases, we could say that the blame could not be justified. So, if I develop a tumour on my brain that causes me to act wrongly, which is caused by my genes and/or my environment, it might seem wrong to blame me for my actions.

If we accept from common practice that a tumour on the brain is a sufficient reason to forgo blame then it makes perfect sense to do just that. But this does not account for the blaming that we do before we receive the knowledge of that tumour. It is not that we should have never blamed them at all. To do that, without sufficient explanation would have been just as unreasonable as continuing to blame them in spite of good reasons. The rightness of blaming, in this case, turns on our awareness of crucial facts. The blaming is only undone if I had known all along that you were suffering from a tumour and that it was making you behave unusually. If that were so I would have been less prone to blaming you even before there was something to blame you for. If there is any confusion for Smart here it stems from the idea that there is a certain type of explanation that can excuse a person for a blameworthy act that is inherently linked to the causes of those acts. This creates a selection problem because genes and environment can account for any action, blameworthy or not. If I cannot be blamed for a wrong act due to genes plus environment then it follows that I cannot be praised for a right act either. Accordingly, given the reach of our genes and environment, we must apply this dispassion to everything we do, which leads us not only to forgo blame and praise but passion in and of itself. This, I think, would ask too much of ordinary people. If cognitive theories leave the blame out of blame then this leaves the human out of human experience.

Our practices of blame and praise are also not exceptional in any way. If every practice is produced through the same confluence of genes plus environment then there is no way to justify any action or behaviour, unless I appeal to the utility of that practice. Those who wish to draw from common practice, like Strawson, may find this unsatisfactory, impractical or even impossible. Smart, however, readily admits that 'threats and promises, punishments and rewards, the ascription of responsibility and the non-ascription of responsibility, have a clear pragmatic justification which is quite consistent with a wholehearted belief in metaphysical determinism'¹⁷. How is this so? Well, as Smart points out, if all of our actions are determined by antecedent events then they are also partly determined by current practice. So, Tommy may be the sort of individual who is sufficiently stupid, a moral idiot if you like, that the practices of praise and blame, or threat and punishment, would not influence his behaviour in any way. The homework would still not get done. But, this would be unlike the Tommy who is just plain lazy. He 'can be influenced in such ways. Whether he does his homework or not is perhaps solely the outcome of his environment, but one part of that environment is the

¹⁶ Smart, J.J.C. (1961) 'Free-will, Praise and Blame', *Mind*, LXX(279), p. 305.
doi:10.1093/mind/lxx.279.291. P16 Smart, free will p and b

¹⁷ Smart, J.J.C. (1961) 'Free-will, Praise and Blame', *Mind*, LXX(279), p. 302.
doi:10.1093/mind/lxx.279.291.

threatening schoolmaster.¹⁸ To a lazy boy, these practices of praise and blame can add to the likelihood, in a deterministic way, that their homework gets done. Smart, in conclusion, loosely describes social practices like the above as means through which we spur one another on to do better but remains unsure as to whether the practices live up to their supposed function. To say I should have worked harder often depends on my having the necessary genes and environment, and not on any external pressure from me. Sometimes, I can be incapable of better. So what assumptions can we fairly make of one another? What should I do when others perform poorly? Is it better to presume we are all moral idiots, incapable of doing any better than we ever do? Or, is it better to do as we already do, treating everyone on the basis that they are capable, and only altering that presumption later? Perhaps, it is better to assume nothing at all about one another?

So far, it is impossible to make any strong prescriptive claims about this or blame's utility. We can know what blame is like but we can never know what blame will be. Still, we would hardly think that blaming was justified if another practice could bring about the same outcome as blame, minus any of its proposed drawbacks. With that in mind, let us now turn to the topic of utility.

The Utility Of Blame

Those interested in blame's utility will think of it - and therefore its justifiability - in terms of outcomes it either satisfies or fails to achieve. To satisfy any outcome blame must have a function. This is where we take all the initial string of examples from the beginning and say, what is the point of blame? What is it doing? What does it achieve in these completely normal cases? The predominant emotional and cognitive theories we have discussed deal obliquely with this and only offer a vague answer. When we blame we are not just emoting or cogitating, nor are we merely ascribing responsibility. We also do not appear to be doing it entirely for personal gain. Strawson, for example, had described blame as a means of 'regulating behaviour in socially desirable ways'¹⁹. But, there have been more recent attempts to expand on this. Miranda Fricker, in her essay 'What's The Point of Blame?'²⁰ describes a communicative theory of blame. It is a blame that 'aims to bring the wrongdoer to see or fully acknowledge the moral significance of what they have done or failed to do'²¹, 'a practice that is fundamentally aimed at promoting greater alignment between the moral understandings of the blamer and the blamee by enlarging the moral awareness of the wrongdoer.'²² A blame that is 'designed to shift different moral understandings into increased alignment'²³. Michael

¹⁸ Smart, J.J.C. (1961) 'Free-will, Praise and Blame', *Mind*, LXX(279), pp. 302. doi:10.1093/mind/lxx.279.291.

¹⁹ Strawson, P.F. (1962) 'Freedom and Resentment', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, pp. 2. Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/STRFAR> (Accessed: 02 August 2023).

²⁰ Fricker, M. (2014) 'What's The Point Of Blame? A Paradigm Based Explanation', *Noûs*, 50(1), pp. 165–183. doi:10.1111/nous.12067.

²¹ Fricker, M. (2014) 'What's The Point Of Blame? A Paradigm Based Explanation', *Noûs*, 50(1), p. 173. doi:10.1111/nous.12067.

²² Fricker, M. (2014) 'What's The Point Of Blame? A Paradigm Based Explanation', *Noûs*, 50(1), p. 175. doi:10.1111/nous.12067.

²³ Fricker, M. (2014) 'What's The Point Of Blame? A Paradigm Based Explanation', *Noûs*, 50(1), p.179. doi:10.1111/nous.12067.

Mckenna proposes a similar theory that begins with 'the blame that a blameworthy agent (putatively) deserves by virtue of their action'²⁴. To Mckenna, blame achieves the function of 'alignment' because it 'is liable to harm the blameworthy party by impeding her ability to enjoy and sustain normal interpersonal relationships by interfering in her personal life and by emotionally unsettling her.'²⁵.

There are recurring themes here. First off, blame is viewed as predominantly social and interpersonal. Second, social cohesion is somehow mediated by a moral centre of gravity - an alignment if you prefer (although I think homeostasis captures the idea just as well). Accordingly, we would be able to tell whether blame is justifiable if it produces a homeostatic effect for a social group. If it promotes social turbulence instead then it lacks utility. Before giving the theory its due I ought to address a brief issue as terms like 'aligned' and 'homestasis' may call for greater explication than I have time for. I propose we temporarily settle for something cruder to measure utility if only to get us off the ground. As I have no real reason to avoid using the more typical measures here; those that relate to individual well-being or flourishing, I will start with them. Another rule of thumb to consider before moving on is that to vindicate blame requires that blame's capacity for homeostasis must be unmatched. If there is something out there that can produce the same level of homeostasis as blame it will at least be reasonable for us to think it could be substituted for its equally proficient alternative, whatever that is. This wouldn't make it unjustifiable per se, but it would certainly damage its reputation. If something is more effective at producing homeostasis or, if it is just as good as blame but causes less harm to us then perhaps we are obliged to pursue those alternatives instead. These are all viable possibilities and so we must now put blame's utility to the test.

The Harms Of Blame

The mechanics of blame are such that it can hurt to be blamed. If we assume that blame has whatever utility it has at producing this homeostatic effect then it must be of a way that it can produce a desirable benefit to the moral group, despite this, or any other undesirable harms blame can produce for moral agents in that group. I think it safe to admit that the harm of being blamed reduces well-being of a group thereby reducing blame's utility. If we carry on with this presumption that blame has utility then there must also be a counterbalancing aspect to blame. For example, if there is harm caused by abstaining from blame, of not satiating our desire to do it, and that avoidance causes greater harm to us than the harm caused by being blamed then blame would still have utility. It could also be that the mere desire to blame - the pleasure of doing it - increases well-being and that increase is the same or greater than the reduction caused by blame's harms. To me, this seems an odd way to think of blaming. I do not exactly take pleasure in the process. I see it, not exactly as pleasurable, but as likely to become unpleasant if I fail to blame. It is the lack of satiation that causes the harm. As for the negative experiences of blame, there are at least two. There is an avoidance of whatever impulses we have to blame and of course, there is the sting when we ourselves are blamed.

²⁴ McKenna, M. (2012) in *Conversation & Responsibility*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 128.

²⁵ McKenna, M. (2012) in *Conversation & Responsibility*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 200.

Now clearly the latter is potent in a way that the former is not. There is an emotional bite we experience with the sting that is not present when we suppress blaming. It might only feel uncomfortable to suppress blaming, like trying to hold in a cough. So, we might say that because blaming can cause more obvious harm to others than forgoing blaming does to ourselves we should, all things considered, be morally obliged to suppress blame. This is somewhat representative of the view held by Derk Pereboom, who suggests that moral anger, which the sting of blame is an expression of, should be substituted with moral sadness²⁶. Utilising moral sadness and sorrow, he claims, 'accompanied by a resolve for fairness and justice, or to improving personal relationships - will serve societal and personal relationships as well as moral anger does'²⁷. Not that Pereboom wants us to do away with blaming altogether. It is only the moral anger that he describes as 'destructive' and 'dangerous'²⁸. So, for Pereboom, it would still be permissible to continue blaming so long as we discounted moral anger. Remember though that we had said that blame was about achieving a sort of moral homeostasis. Pereboom's primary claim is that blame with moral anger fails to do this. One reason he attributes this to is that 'we seem often to make errors about intention and causation when moral anger is involved in blaming'²⁹ which are avoided by utilising moral sadness or sorrow. There is a kernel of truth to this. There are times when moral anger causes us to respond with disproportionate and unnecessary vigour. But, are we right to take issue with moral anger, even though it is predominantly the disproportionate version we take exception to?

Miranda Fricker said that 'like most things in life, our practice of blame is susceptible to the vices of being done from the wrong sort of motive, in the wrong degree, in the wrong way, or with the wrong sort of object.'³⁰ This can apply to moral anger. Is there never a time when moral anger is the appropriate response? This seems to be falsifiable through common practice. There are times when moral sorrow or moral sadness would not go far enough. For example, if you promise to take me to the airport for my holiday but you forget about it, such that I miss my flight and my holiday, then my expression of sorrow and sadness could seem ill-fitted. It would seem even less apt if I learned you intended to make me miss my trip all along. That would be a disproportionate response, in the same way that moral anger could be under different circumstances. It is only that this time the response is less than it should be and not more. In this, what would your disproportionate response do for my moral awareness? I am quite doubtful it would do anything at all.

²⁶ Coates, D.J., Tognazzini, N.A. and Pereboom, D. (2013) 'Free Will Skepticism, Blame, and Obligation', in *Blame: Its Nature and Norms*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 189–206.

²⁷ Coates, D.J., Tognazzini, N.A. and Pereboom, D. (2013) 'Free Will Skepticism, Blame, and Obligation', in *Blame: Its Nature and Norms*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 203.

²⁸ Coates, D.J., Tognazzini, N.A. and Pereboom, D. (2013) 'Free Will Skepticism, Blame, and Obligation', in *Blame: Its Nature and Norms*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 204.

²⁹ Coates, D.J., Tognazzini, N.A. and Pereboom, D. (2013) 'Free Will Skepticism, Blame, and Obligation', in *Blame: Its Nature and Norms*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 206.

³⁰ Fricker, M. (2014) 'What's The Point Of Blame? A Paradigm Based Explanation', *Noûs*, 50(1), p. 168. doi:10.1111/nous.12067.

Putting sadness and sorrow aside, we could also reduce the harm caused by blame just by keeping it private. Then there would be no sting imposed on others and no harm caused by it. There is a precedent for this. We don't always publicly blame. Sometimes we keep it to ourselves. However, this could be accused of making the same mistakes as Pereboom. If I completely forgo overt blame when you forget to drive me to the airport then it may appear to you that I am completely forgoing blame entirely. It might seem to you that I'm not bothered at all, as from the outside my private blame would be indistinguishable from apathy. How could I expect you to understand that you have done wrong if my actions do not reflect that even I understand it? Yet, you might be the sort of person who manages to understand that your actions were wrong without my help. Maybe you are gifted in some way, but in making this observation I have to admit to myself that you surpass any reasonable expectations I might have for others. What of them? Is it fair for me to now expect everyone else to know more than they should just because you are a moral savant? Does your exceptional ability mean I should always keep blame private? Would this not be unreasonable? Plus, if you knew that you were blameworthy without my advertising does it even matter if I made that fact public? Is the outcome not the same?

Let's move on from these problems and get back to the sting of blame, which seems to be the only aspect of blame that has any direct potency. At least, that is what we have asserted, but is that true? In blaming you for failing to drive me to the airport I am only pointing out what you did or did not do and adding that it was wrong to do or not do it. Assuming I respond in the appropriate emotional tenor, what is the exact harm? McKenna described it earlier as being merely 'emotionally unsettling'³¹ to you. Is it possible that sometimes we are just conflating the act of being blamed with its consequences? Say, if I never speak to you again because you caused me to miss my flight then wouldn't it be the punishment that stings and not the blaming itself? Lastly, how does this measure in comparison to the harms imposed on ourselves when we forgo blame? At the very least they are comparable, if they are both quite muted, but I suspect forgoing blame is more damaging the longer it is sustained. It can truly hurt us to suppress our instincts, like those we have for blaming, when we know it is appropriate.

Of course, much of this is speculative, as is always the case for prescriptive thinking. I am reminded of Strawson's earlier warning. To be so utilitarian in our theorising, can jeopardise its plausibility yielding a possible practice of blame that is simply beyond our capability as moral agents. I fear, that at times, philosophers fail to take this warning seriously enough.

Metaphysical Blame

I would describe what we have been doing with utility as an act of abstraction. Such abstraction can open up ways of improving our ordinary moral lives. But, abstractions are acts of imagination, and when imagination fails to account for what we are like it may only be a fantasy. There is often this risk when we speculate about a practice. While proposing an alternative condition for responsibility, Gideon Rosen noticed that 'some writers find it

³¹ McKenna, M. (2012) in *Conversation & Responsibility*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 200.

plausible that a person should be excused whenever his act is ultimately caused or determined by factors beyond his control—a principle which, given determinism, entails that everyone is automatically excused—even though nothing in ordinary moral thought or practice clearly forces this principle upon us’³².

Here again, ‘something we do’ is pitched against ‘something we could do’. In this instance, it may seem clear to us which is which but to Smart it would be less obvious. For Smart, it is also clear that the ‘appropriateness of blame is bound up, in the eyes of the ordinary man, with a notion of free will which is quite metaphysical’³³. Think of it this way. If blame depends on moral responsibility, which itself depends on the freedom to make our own decisions then the justifiability of blame must depend on the falsity of determinism. Therefore, because determinism appears to be true our moral responsibility practices must be unjustified. If we were to curate a metaphysical blame, it would have to be presupposed by an acceptance of this argument, producing what Rosen had called; ‘a single global excuse that the law and common sense both fail to credit.’³⁴, which I would call an exemption. So, we now have an argument against blame provided by determinism. Usually, determinism is contrasted with libertarian free will, which reaffirms our first-hand impression of free choice. Is this what is intended by the term ‘ordinary moral thought’? I would think that unlikely. But, this does present itself as a means of grounding moral responsibility in a different, and still quite ordinary, experience. It is straightforward enough. Libertarianism relates to an experience that is so central to our ordinary practice - so plainly undoubtable - that we have to and always do presuppose its truth when we act. As for its impact on moral responsibility, it has always followed that because we have the freedom to choose we can be morally responsible. Much of the philosophy around libertarian free will has fallen out of favour with contemporary thinkers. I am inclined to agree that it may be philosophically weaker as it is not much more than the brute fact of the experience itself. It is nevertheless compelling.

So what are we to do about all this? Most philosophers act as if our choices are more limited than they are. The most straightforward approach would be to assume that determinism and libertarianism are incompatible in the knowledge that one undermines the other. Despite this, there are others who, while keeping the metaphysics fresh in their mind, take a more convoluted route. They believe it is a genuine possibility that the two can coexist. They make an argument of in-betweenness, of a contra-causal freedom that is both deterministic and libertarian, in some way. I will not pursue this here. I would rather focus on a third proposition that does not compel us to decide on which version of metaphysics we prefer. We can be liberated from the topic of metaphysics entirely if the freedom condition is misdefined, or if freedom is not solely what moral responsibility is about. A getaway could also be provided if freedom is not a basis for moral responsibility at all. Philosophically these are not uncommon positions to hold. The last, for example, I see as being close to that of

³² Rosen, G. (2004) ‘Skepticism About Moral Responsibility’, *Philosophical Perspectives*, 18(1), p. 298. doi:10.1111/j.1520-8583.2004.00030.x.

³³ Smart, J.J.C. (1961) ‘Free-will, Praise and Blame’, *Mind*, LXX(279), p. 305. doi:10.1093/mind/lxx.279.291.

³⁴ Rosen, G. (2004) ‘Skepticism About Moral Responsibility’, *Philosophical Perspectives*, 18(1), p. 298. doi:10.1111/j.1520-8583.2004.00030.x.

Strawson, Mckenna, Fricker, and Rosen. The similarity may only go unnoticed due to a persistent trend in philosophy to label claims about moral responsibility in terms of their relation to the metaphysics of free will. We call them compatibilists, which implies they would accept a presumption; that moral responsibility is resolvable through metaphysics, although I am doubtful they would accept this. These nominal compatibilists can be distinguished from the usual compatibilists due to the former's indifference to determinism and libertarianism. What they see instead is a practice that is underpinned by something else.

The Conditions For Responsibility

One way we apprehend the topic of responsibility is by the conditions that we say make us responsible. There is a freedom condition for moral responsibility which lends itself to thinking of blame in terms of actions people either perform or fail to perform. If we found out that someone could not have done any differently than what they did we might let them off. There are also clear cases where the appropriateness of blame depends on something other than freedom. I might, for example, regard an adult who loses their house keys as being more blameworthy than a young infant who loses their favourite toy. If I am forced to say why I might say something about how the adult should know better (this is close to Rosen's idea of culpable ignorance - we are culpable for things we should know³⁵), or, I might say it is because the child, unlike an adult, is incapable of knowing any better, and so it would not be fair, or appropriate to hold them to the same standards as an adult.

Either would be a kind of epistemic condition, which relates to knowledge. That knowledge may be about the moral significance of an act or it may relate to the above, where a person is simply incapable, due to their position in life, of knowing something. Sometimes it can be appropriate and therefore justifiable to blame a person who knows what they are doing is wrong. Other times it can over-ruled. A murderer, like a house-key-loser, can know that it was wrong to do whatever they did and it can be right to hold them culpable for it. But, this only makes it clear that the knowledge of a wrongdoing *can* make someone culpable for an act, not that it automatically does. And, that knowledge could be undermined by my lack of freedom to choose. Wouldn't we excuse someone from their wrongdoing if we learned they had no other choice?

These epistemic and liberty conditions are commonly held as the dual pillars of moral responsibility. And blame, given it shares a connection with moral responsibility, can be assumed to have a similar basis. Each may have yielded a strategy toward the justification or refutation of blame. But, it has left unresolved issues. Is it right that the culpability of losing my keys comes only from meeting either one of these conditions? Is it that I can only be blamed for losing them if I knew it was wrong or if nobody forced me to lose them? I do not think this accounts for a condition that is perhaps just as common to the practice of blaming as these most recently given. It is that losing my keys is something I *should* not do. Smart, quoting J. L. Austin, alludes to this;

³⁵ Rosen, G. (2004) 'Skepticism About Moral Responsibility', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 18(1), p. 300. doi:10.1111/j.1520-8583.2004.00030.x.

‘Consider the case where I miss a very short putt and kick myself because I could have holed it. It is not that I should have holed it if I had tried: I did try and missed. It is not that I should have holed it if conditions had been different: that might of course be so, but I am talking about conditions as they precisely were, and asserting that I could have holed it. There's the rub.’³⁶.

In this, I take the latter 'could' to mean something closer to 'should'. Now I will lean heavily into the writing of Lionel Kenner³⁷ for much of this, who suggests that 'to blame a person for an untoward event is simply to say that he is the cause of that event without necessarily making any suggestion that there was an act of free choice'³⁸. He continues with the example of the driver in a car accident. If the accident occurred through the driver's lack of skill we might blame him where we would not had it been caused by a heart attack. As Kenner makes clear; in both accidents, the driver is the cause and in both, he could not help what he was doing, the difference has something to do with moral foreknowledge³⁹. That is, we expect a driver to know he lacks the skill to drive and for this, we can hold him accountable when an accident occurs. Conversely, we do not expect people to know they are about to have a heart attack making it wrong to blame them.

There is then a sense of 'should' that does not imply 'could have' in the metaphysical sense, but instead suggests a normative sense in which the driver, as Kenner puts it, ‘fell below an accepted and usually achieved norm.’⁴⁰. As this applies to Austin's golfer it is not quite that he could have or would have putted. It is that he should have made it given his skill and the conditions. We could say then there is justification for blame in the idea that is less about whether a person could have done something and more about whether that person should have done it. To an earlier point, I had said that our responsibility practices turn on our knowledge of the matter. We hold responsible, blame and excuse according to what we know. This is good, but here we add that we also hold responsible, blame and excuse according to what we should know (again, this is similar to Rosen's Culpable Ignorance)⁴¹. A virtue of this approach to blame is that it manages to retain our usual sensibilities surrounding what is morally right or wrong in a way that the metaphysical approach to blame fails. In contrast, a metaphysical blame that focuses on only the one freedom condition thereby renders the norms we have moot because 'If all our actions were as uncontrollable as heart attacks we would never be able to blame anybody for any action'⁴². The corollary, of course, is that most of our actions do not require such special foreknowledge. The only sort of predictive power

³⁶ Smart, J.J.C. (1961) 'Free-will, Praise and Blame', *Mind*, LXX(279), p. 299. doi:10.1093/mind/lxx.279.291.

³⁷ Kenner, L. (1967) 'On Blaming', *Mind*, 76(302), pp. 238–249. doi:10.1093/mind/lxxvi.302.238.

³⁸ Kenner, L. (1967) 'On Blaming', *Mind*, 76(302), p. 240. doi:10.1093/mind/lxxvi.302.238.

³⁹ Kenner, L. (1967) 'On Blaming', *Mind*, 76(302), p. 240. doi:10.1093/mind/lxxvi.302.238.

⁴⁰ Kenner, L. (1967) 'On Blaming', *Mind*, 76(302), p. 241. doi:10.1093/mind/lxxvi.302.238.

⁴¹ Rosen, G. (2004) 'Skepticism About Moral Responsibility', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 18(1), p. 300. doi:10.1111/j.1520-8583.2004.00030.x.

⁴² Kenner, L. (1967) 'On Blaming', *Mind*, 76(302), p. 242. doi:10.1093/mind/lxxvi.302.238.

required to justify blame, according to Kenner, would be the moral norms that set our expectations for one another.

Perhaps one downside to this, is that the foundation it offers is less stable than the alternative. Anthropologically, although many of our moral values are shared cross-culturally, many of them differ and what is considered good and moral in one group might seem bad or immoral in another. This might embolden some to dismiss Kenner's approach to blame. I see no real problem with it. Rather, I see a positive as it accurately captures the varied nature of moral agents and the alive-ness of morality itself. That alive-ness forces our expectations to shift around and to adapt or change just as moral agents do. It does, however, make a philosophy of blame more difficult to maintain, but what it loses in stability it gains in fidelity.

Excuses

Explanations Are Not Excuses

Up to this point, I have aimed my attention at the justifiability of blame beginning with what blame is and what it does. From this, I've considered how satisfied we ought to be with blame as a moral practice. It is curious that I took it this way at all. For at least some of the pressure to apprehend blame, I would expect a significant amount of it, comes from our desire to get out of it. We simply do not like being blamed. If there is indeed a desire to blame, as I have said there is, then it is certainly less potent than our desire to be excused. It is there that I will pick up the project. If excuses drive our interest in blame, let us shift to that, allowing it to drive our inquiry instead.

I want to begin by sketching out some of the differences between excuses, as we experience them, and mere explanations. To merely explain my actions is to describe the sequence of events that might have contributed to bringing those actions about. I might explain my actions to you as dispassionately as I would describe a list of ingredients in a cookbook. I can say I have flour, butter, salt, and sugar, and I might go further still by adding them up together to explain, if you want to phrase it that way, the loaf of bread that their joint contribution successfully brings about. I imagine the underlying principles that we draw from when explaining will have something to do with what others have categorised as causal responsibility. As explanations go, the ability to attribute causal responsibility comes from a basic understanding, or maybe just a way of looking at things, that an event is usually comprised of parts.

Taken this way, an event is normatively neutral and can be comprised of a singular cause, a string of causes or a manifold of causes that themselves can precede an effect or effects. To offer an explanation, as I would have it, would be to continue in this spirit, much like a mathematician might put 2 and 2 together to cause the effect of 4. It is the dispassionate, non-arbitrary connection of a dot-to-dot picture, where the dots represent events and the completed picture represents an accurate representation of these events spread throughout

time. When the dots are rightly paired, as they are when a recipe produces a loaf of bread, we can say that the events add up to produce a satisfying and coherent explanation. We do not, however, usually put it this way. We wouldn't say that the recipe caused the bread, even if that is technically the case. We might normally reference the baker who followed the recipe to produce the bread instead. If things go wrong, and the bake fails, we might still reference the baker, but we could also point to a piece of defective equipment or something flawed in the recipe itself. But, this does not adequately detail how we come to blame someone, if those explanations draw from the same causal chain. This needs to be addressed. Why is it that the recipe does not produce the bread, but the baker does? Why is it that sometimes the baker does not ruin the bake and other times she does? Why indeed do we accept explanations that refer to the baker of the bread or the oven it is baked in and not something else, like the weather outside or something that happened to her when she was a child?

Recall that Kenner had said that 'to blame a person for an untoward event is simply to say that he is the cause of that event'⁴³. This is to say that, if I blame a malfunctioning oven for my bad bake, I would, necessarily, be claiming that the oven is responsible for the error. In this way, I could be fully pardoned for my poor baking, because I was not the primary cause that brought the outcome about. Kenner's point here is that our blaming practices are contingent on this elementary attribution of causal responsibility. It wouldn't make sense to say that someone is responsible or to blame them, for something that they did not do. This is somewhat clarifying, but, there is a gap between 'being the cause' of something and 'being responsible' for it that a mere causal explanation seems unfit to bridge. Causality, as limitless and regressive as it is, guarantees that we are spoilt for choice when it comes to the things we could reasonably blame. If we blame the faulty oven can we not then blame the reason for that fault, which will itself have its own explanation that we could blame and so on and so on, ad infinitum? This would allow us, ultimately, to work our way through from the original fault in the equipment to the beginning of time so far as it was causally related. And, ultimately, because all causal links will lead back to the same, original cause, be it God or something else would we then be right to default to that original cause in every case, blaming that instead? Common sense may advise us against this practice and we would not usually accept any explanations that try to, but without something more to causal responsibility we cannot ascertain why.

Beyond Causal Responsibility

Early in his book 'Conversation And Responsibility'⁴⁴ Michael McKenna clarifies that 'supposing moral responsibility requires causal responsibility, it certainly requires more'⁴⁵. I find that this reflects the broader message of Kenner's writing, which acknowledges blame's relationship to causal responsibility while adding that; 'we can only blame a person for an untoward event if his action is of a certain type'⁴⁶. Kenner continues; 'not only must the

⁴³ Kenner, L. (1967) 'On Blaming', *Mind*, 76(302), p. 240. doi:10.1093/mind/lxxvi.302.238.

⁴⁴ McKenna, M. (2012) *Conversation & Responsibility*. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁴⁵ McKenna, M. (2012) in *Conversation & Responsibility*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 7.

⁴⁶ Kenner, L. (1967) 'On Blaming', *Mind*, 76(302), pp. 241. doi:10.1093/mind/lxxvi.302.238.

person be the cause of the untoward event, but his action must be of such a type that he should have known in advance, in the sense of "should" explained above, that the consequences were likely to be disastrous, and, in the same sense of "should", should have desisted from his action.'⁴⁷.

Some of what is intended by 'should' has already been covered. But, some of it rests on our collective knowledge of what is possible. In common practice, we accept that it is impossible for us to sprout wings and fly away from our problems and so that fact will rarely arise when we are challenged about responsibility. We really could not have done it and it follows that we do not expect it. It is, however, possible for us to do the right thing instead of the wrong thing, and it follows that it would be reasonable to expect it. Are these moral expectations wrong if determinism is true? If all of our actions are brought about by their earlier causes we can say that it is always impossible for us to do other than what we did. We are, according to this metaphysical view of moral responsibility and blame, incapable of doing anything otherwise. Now, spontaneous wing growth is also impossible. Are these claims indistinguishable? Is our capacity to commit a different action, like not bullying a younger sibling or not stealing a pack of sweets from the local shop, the same as suddenly sprouting wings from our backs and taking off? If one limits themselves to a deterministic view of the world then perhaps so. But, I find this a striking admission as clearly, to me the chooser, the quality of choice I have in both cases differs. I cannot choose to grow wings like I can choose to behave. I am left to wonder whether this relates to an earlier issue. Is this just another category error? Has the concept of 'freedom to choose' crept from what was once a moral term to a metaphysical term? I am inclined to think so. Take 'freedom to choose' as a moral term and it better reflects the moral norms and expectations we presently have. As a plus, it better captures the difference between these two 'impossible' choices. The metaphysical usage, by contrast, lacks this distinction, putting incredible emphasis on the 'freedom' of 'freedom to choose'. It is a compression of the term that forces us to reduce moral responsibility to something more basic, like our physical limitations or whatever restrictions the universe imposes on us.

Excuses

Much has been said of explanations and the problem of relying on causal attributions alone but I had set out to define what an excuse is. It seems to me that an excuse, like blame, is also a common feature of our moral responsibility practices. It might even be right to say that an excuse extends or follows from being blamed. And so there is a warrant to suppose that if blame depends on a person being causally responsible and an excuse depends on being blamed, then an excuse must also depend on being causally responsible.

In one of the few papers to address the subject of excuses directly, Paulina A. Silwa defined an excuse as something that 'can make it appropriate to forgo blame, to revise judgments of

⁴⁷ Kenner, L. (1967) 'On Blaming', *Mind*, 76(302), pp. 241. doi:10.1093/mind/lxxvi.302.238.

blameworthiness, to feel compassion and pity instead of anger and resentment'⁴⁸. It is interesting that these definition shares a lot with the definitions of blame we saw earlier. It shares a function as a modifier of attitudes and in this respect, it makes sense to think of it as another moral attitude that only differs in its position along the moral exchange. As to that position, it would be strange to expect an excuse to arise anywhere other than in response to blame. Excuses that fail to do this, would appear to somehow arise preemptively. That would be to try and excuse ourselves, unprompted, before we have ever been blamed for something. To most, this level of eagerness to excuse oneself would only invite suspicion where perhaps it needn't be otherwise warranted. But, if an excuse is something that ordinarily follows from blame, is it that by technicality we should refer to an excuse that does not follow from blame as something else? Possibly, but I mean to get away from any examples that only showcase how an excuse can be misused. Even though this misuse makes an effort to excuse before being blamed the excuser still knows that being blamed would be appropriate. They only wanted to get ahead of it. What I want to get at are the cases where it would not have been right to blame us at all because we are not causally responsible. In those instances, it would not just be odd or inviting of suspicion to try to excuse ourselves, it would be pathological.

So, there is some consensus, that blame is contingent on a causal attribution such that we cannot be blamed for that which we did not do. We've also noted, partially from Silwa, that an excuse naturally follows from being blamed. From this, let us propose a general principle: If we cannot be blamed for that which we did not do, then we also cannot be excused for it. As this applies to the problem of metaphysical blame, it implies a circularity. For it is fine to say that if we cannot be blamed for that which we did not do then we also cannot be excused for it. But, if we cannot be excused for things we did not do and determinism says that we did not do anything then we can never be excused for anything. To draw out the basic point, imagine that I find out you have hidden my slippers. According to what we have so far you could confess to me what you have done, you could explain your actions to me or apologise for them, you could seek forgiveness or some combination of the lot. You accept that you did what you are accused of but you give me an excuse to stop blaming you for it. But, this summary is not quite right. If blame and excuses depend on causal responsibility, which you now admit to, then it would always be right to have blamed you, just as it would always be right to accept your excuse and forgive you.

The most significant change is only in the attitude one adopts at each stage of the exchange. I might feel the appropriate feelings of blame and forgo them, but not the fact of my blaming you, after an excuse is given. You can also imagine how in different circumstances I might blame you only to find out that I was mistaken. You did not do it; you are not causally responsible. In this case, you would still be, in the broader, more practical sense that Silwa observes, excused. I ought to revise my judgement of blame and so on. But, in the technical sense, given you were never causally responsible, it would never have been right to blame you or for that matter to excuse you. It means that a person is only excusable, at least in this

⁴⁸ Sliwa, P. (2019) 'The Power Of Excuses', *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 47(1), p. 37.
doi:10.1111/papa.12139.

sense, if it is right to blame them, which in turn is only right to do if they are causally responsible for the wrong act. If he is not causally responsible, he cannot be properly blamed and can not, therefore, be properly excused. So, what is going on here?

I think of these kinds of excuses as *exonerations*. They work by excluding a person from causal responsibility attribution; to exonerate is to free someone from the burden of causal responsibility. Although an exoneration can excuse, it is not an excuse, in the usual sense of the term. To get to an excuse we must first accept the subject of blame as being eligible for something like a causal appraisal, which leads us to assess whether that thing, a person or an object, is causally responsible or not. To rightfully blame the slipper thief is to complete this all in one way, by accepting that it would be possible for him to be causally responsible. Then, we conclude it is right to hold him responsible, from which blame and excuses can follow. To exonerate concludes this same process, with the opposing outcome. I would still think it right to conduct a causal appraisal of you - you are fair game as a candidate for that - but because you did not steal the slippers it would not be right to continue holding you responsible or blaming you. Therefore, I free you from the burden altogether. You are exonerated.

I hope I have taken enough care so far to avoid implying that falsely blaming someone means that the blaming practices themselves would be wrong. For, they would be the same regardless of whether I was right or wrong in blaming you. I may rightfully accuse you and then blame, express anger or resentment upon which you might offer an excuse that will help me to forgive you. If I wrongfully accuse you, I am not likely to do much differently. It is only that the basis for my doing so is taken away from me. We might think that this permits the claim that it was also wrong to blame. I don't think this is quite right. It is more clear to me that I was wrong to blame *you*. The difference is in whether I see the wrong, by which I mean the fault, in the method of blaming itself, where the verb 'to blame' signifies the process that one instantiates with a causal attribution but is itself greater than that causal attribution. It follows that the same can be said about our excusing practices.

Causal Responsibility's Selection Problem

Previously, we discussed how an exclusively causal approach to responsibility had a selection problem. When there are many possible causes for something it is difficult to discern which of those causes merits the judgement of responsibility. Why do we sometimes see an oven as responsible for a bake and not the baker? It also failed to show why we would not usually expect to be excused due to events that occurred before our lifetime, up to those that happened at the very beginning of time, even though a causal connection can exist between each of them. Moral expectations can help resolve this. We would regard somebody with sufficient expertise differently from those without them. We might expect a trained baker not to burn their bread and blame them when they do. It is reasonable to think that they should have done better than they did when we agree that they could have done better. But, we wouldn't expect them to anticipate a sudden flaw in the oven for that would require a separate

set of skills that bakers do not necessarily have. Similarly, we would not expect the untrained baker to achieve perfection on their first try. That would be unreasonable.

Expectations have a role to play in the excuses too. Let's say I want to produce good bread. I gather the relevant ingredients and set about putting them together in the correct order. Nevertheless, the bake fails. There is an aspect of me that wants to blame something other than my own skills for this. Sometimes it is painful to be so blunt with ourselves. Instead, we turn outwards to find blame elsewhere. What are the most present options available to us? Assuming we had wanted the bake to turn out well from the offset we will have begun by ensuring that the right equipment was used, that the proper recipe was followed, and that we sourced the best ingredients. By taking these considerations into account during the setup we bring them to the forefront of our minds. When something goes wrong and we are looking for something to blame or to excuse us these options become more easily accessible. Of course, as with anything else in life, there will be other things to consider when baking with each of these additional considerations adding an extra potential excuse. Determinism provides us with a limitless extension to this approach, a set of additional considerations to make and therefore a limitless set of possible excuses that we hadn't paid attention to before. As this invites an infinite regress we can say that determinism provides an infinite string of excuses. Excuses that reach the bottom of this causal chain are *exemptions*.

Exemptions seem to go against our moral instincts. Certainly, if moral responsibility is about expectations we have then we would discount events like the fall of Rome from moral thought because those events have already happened. It is hard to expect something if it is in the past. What we expect to happen must depend either on what we are yet to do or what we do not yet know. It can take past actions into account as they are surely a factor in a person's present actions, but it ought not to dwell on them if it means to be anticipatory. And it does, because if it isn't anticipatory then what does the verb 'to expect' really mean? It would be to know what people are going to do next. Perhaps determinism can make us this predictable, such that we could know exactly how everyone is going to act before they do. If such a feat were possible then perhaps we would have more justification to do away with the commonsense morality we presently suffer. But, at present, this is not the case. In the meantime, there must be something to fill the gap. An expectant morality, that revolves around norms seems a sufficient plug.

The opposite of these expectations is not to be completely unexpectant or quick to surprise either. Given their relation to moral norms, our expectations grant us some clue about what other people are capable of and therefore what is reasonable to expect of them. This is perhaps another reason why we do not expect excuses that refer to the extraordinary, or those where the causal connection requires significant explication. If it were the opposite, and moral responsibility wasn't linked to moral norms and the 'shoulds' and 'oughts' that are built around them then every action a moral agent took part in would be epistemically surprising, even though they might still result in a judgment that it is good or bad. I see this as a deficit of the theory for usually it is not that surprising at all. Some determinists recognise this and take the freedom to choose merely to be a useful illusion. Others think of it as a folly. But all

ignore a very important fact about human nature, which is that most, if not all, of our choices are underpinned by pre-theoretical values.

For example, adherents of the deterministic worldview often claim that responsibility requires the ability to make choices freely. However, a large number of our choices do not appear to be so overtly influenced by the possibilities of what we could do at any time. I made this point earlier but to recap; although I can hold my breath until I pass out I am not likely to trouble myself with this fact when going about my ordinary life. Similarly, although we might sometimes desire extra arms or the ability to shrink ourselves down to miniature size the desire itself is limited by the expectation that the desire is very unlikely to be fulfilled. As I have already said, the desire to be honest and behave well can be fulfilled. We can be decent people. We can also desire the desire to be honest and behave well. These desires, to an ordinary person, are fulfillable which in turn makes them reasonable to have. So, is it not possible that moral responsibility or norms of any kind depend on these desires, which are limited, in a number of ways, by what we are ordinarily capable of? It is at least plausible, and I think it is more cohesive than the alternative, which would cast us as hollowed-out puppets, completely limited and incapable of choosing to do anything.

Wants and Values

I refer you back to the central claim of determinism, that moral responsibility rests on the falsity of determinism. Now, determinists will say that the above is all true, but it doesn't matter. All of these choices are underpinned by a quality of choice that is not really free, and they are not really free due to causal determinism. So, we are back at square one. But, I think this makes a telling omission. Determinists are very selective about which truths to take into account when it comes to moral responsibility. They leave out important facts about our nature. I suggested that this has something to do with pre-theoretical values they have, so what might those values be? First, let's figure out what kinds of values there are. One kind of value arises from something mundane. I might find the outcome of my baking so delightful that it prompts me to behave a particular way, saying certain things that seem to reflect a normative judgement; that the way the ingredients added up was a good thing. Had it turned out poorly, I might've done the opposite, expressing dismay instead of delight and thereby reflecting a negative normative judgement instead of a positive one. This would express a value judgement, but I'm not so sure it reaches the depths of what I have in mind.

Consider these differences. I might increase the odds that I bake something edible by valuing food that is edible and similarly, writing a good essay will depend on whether I care, or value, whatever good essay writing entails. But these values are merely derivatives of personal goals I am temporarily oriented towards. The sense of valuing here may only refer to an impulsive wanting, like a desire to achieve some end that I believe, however mysteriously, that it will be good for me. When I say I value good writing, what I mean is that I want to produce a good body of work. And, when I say I value edible food, what I mean is that I want to eat well. Either can be easily inferred given their context. When my occupation is an essay writer, I ought to prefer good writing over nonsense and when my attention turns to something else,

like baking, it makes sense to prioritise edible food over distasteful rubbish. It might not be clear to me how I go about producing either of these outcomes and I might not even be capable of ever achieving them, it might also not be clear to me that I explicitly hold them, but to say I value them seems to suggest something less than what we usually have in mind when we consider values like truth, beauty, fairness or meaning. These are values that go deeper in us, are more permanent than temporary and direct our goals.

The set of values one holds, if that is indeed what we do with them, can be helpful in the pursuit of some goals while being a handicap in others. Say, if I value beauty over all else I likely hold the appropriate value so as to increase my chances of producing something beautiful, whether that thing is a loaf of bread or an essay. But, such a pure expression of that value must come at the expense of other values like truth or fairness, thereby decreasing the chances that I produce something true or fair. This is likely no issue for bread baking and other forms of art, but if one intends to produce coherent philosophy then holding the appropriate balance of values matters. So, there is the basic value, a mere desire if you like that has more in common with 'wanting'. We can contrast that mere desire against a deeper desire that has something closer to 'holding' or 'having'. It is a value. What I wonder is whether these desires can contribute to solving the selection problem. We've seen how excuses can at least be prompted by them. Even when excuses came from past experience (we wanted the bake to go well so we took these factors into consideration, therefore, these factors can also provide excuses) we'll notice that these past experiences began with desires, of either kind, that we already had (I wanted to bake good bread or I valued beauty, which is the bread is an expression of).

Now to address the previous question. Why do determinists prefer some facts over others? Suppose that a determinist's theorising has a strong basis in the value of objective truth, which lends itself to the proposition that we should act according to what is objectively true. Because so little of our actions appear to be objectively true, at least not in the way we would expect the movement of an atom to be, determinists incline themselves to dismiss our nature. Can we discount moral agents from a theory of moral responsibility like this? Is it even a theory about moral agents if it makes such an omission? Or, is it just a theory about something else? Granted, the determinist slant on this will return to the original claim, which is that the values we hold are not chosen by us either. To resolve this, I refer back to an earlier point. Determinism only limits us in one way - how we can act - whereas moral expectations limit us in another - how we should act. They exact opposing pressures on us. One due to the laws of a physical universe and another through interpersonal expectations - 'could' and 'should', as I have put it. The result is that although we may not choose the sorts of beings we are or the universe we were born into, we can - which is to say it is possible to and we are capable of - fulfilling moral expectations.

A Value Approach To Blame

A major difference between the causal approach and the value approach to moral responsibility would be the emphasis put on either cause or effect. While it is self-evident

which of them favours causes it may not be as apparent to us that when we say we desire something we only mean to say that we want a particular effect. We might desire to have a cigarette which means we desire the outcome of having smoked one. Other times, we value a particular outcome in spite of these desires. We still might want to smoke, but stop ourselves from doing it for the sake of our children. What we do not seem to do quite as much is desire a particular cause. A smoker does not desire he strike a match or put the cigarette between his fingers. He wants to smoke. So, when expressing a value or a desire there is not much in the claim itself that is attributing a cause. That is, the statement 'x is good', leaves out the 'who' or 'what' of responsibility. It is simply taken for granted that it was brought about, that there is the outcome x.

It seems unlikely that these expressions of value, or normative judgements if you prefer, can contribute to the production of an excuse. Recall that Kenner and Smart, despite their philosophical differences, agreed that blame depends on a causal attribution. Since then, we have added that excuses also depend on blame. If both these utterances lack causal attributions can they rightfully blame or excuse? It would seem not. To blame you in this way would be little more than the assertion of wrongness. If I were to catch you in the act of a wrongdoing, what would you, the wrongdoer, make of my dissatisfaction if I am limited to only expressing whether I think it is desirable or not? It would appear as if I am maddened about something, but to you and possibly to me the source of this madness was mysterious. We also said that explanations were not excuses without being explicit about whether excuses are explanations. I expect the relationship is similar to that of thumbs and fingers; all thumbs are fingers although not all fingers are thumbs. To repeat the analogy; all excuses are explanations but not all explanations excuse. If a-causal excuses are non-explanatory then what are they? They are merely normative judgements.

Metaphysical Excuses

The God Excuse

Throughout much of human history, moral practices like blame and responsibility have been bound up with theological metaphysics. This is not a criticism of any particular religious practice, but an observation that out of the many ways of explaining our moral practices or even of identifying the differences between what actions are right and wrong, we often turn to a particular type of explanation that puts much of what we do, moral or otherwise, in the purview of something metaphysical. Contemporary thought on the relationship between metaphysics and morality, while sceptical of the above theological proposition, takes a different approach. Determinists, as I have said, begin with a seemingly banal observation about reality, that every action is caused by something else. From this, it teases out something profound about our moral practices. If there is a cause for what we do then we can never be responsible for it. Galen Strawson's Basic Argument⁴⁹ is a helpful recapitulation of this

⁴⁹ Strawson, G. (1994) 'The Impossibility Of Moral Responsibility', *Philosophical Studies*, 75(1–2), p. 5. doi:10.1007/bf00989879.

general idea. If; 1) Nothing can be the “cause of itself.” and 2) In order to be truly morally responsible for one’s actions one would have to be self-caused then 3) nothing can be morally responsible.

Both of these ideas are aimed at undermining some or all of our moral practices. In the contemporary case, everyone is made exempt from responsibility even if the actions themselves retain their rightness or wrongness. The theological case is the same in this, in that acts can still be thought of as right and wrong. It differs only because it does not exempt people from responsibility. Rather, it provides a flexible but unfalsifiable excuse. Either way, these are perhaps only superficial or semantic differences. The outcome of their exploitation is always the same, which is to undermine and make arbitrary our moral practices. With that in mind, I will continue drawing a comparison between them. First, I want to test out excuses by exploiting this classical example, which frames our actions, moral or otherwise, as within the purview of a metaphysical agent. I could claim, for example, that God was in some way responsible for this essay.

Modern thought would predict that the reader would take this not as a literal claim, but as a sign of modesty and good grace. That is, by putting the responsibility for something positive I have created onto something other than myself I further display my virtuous nature. I meant the claim metaphorically, I might say, as I’m obviously the one responsible for my actions. My intention in citing an external force here was innocuous enough and intended only to praise the factors outside of my control. Factors that, were they not present, would have disrupted my ability to do what it is you say I am responsible for. I have only cast a shade upon myself to highlight something else, as a gesture of respect to something greater than myself. It follows that by citing the highest and most external power there could be better symbolises the extent of that gratitude. I continue on to re-emphasise that I do not truly believe I’m free from responsibility, in fact, in this case, I might say that responsibility has not been my primary consideration all along. It was all a turn of phrase, designed to revere the elements that in their own way have played a noticeable role in shaping me as a person. It was not meant literally and I believe the context of my utterance indicated this well enough.

I certainly enjoy the poetry of this. There surely can be something positive or well-intentioned about being thankful for the factors you are not directly responsible for, particularly if those factors are in some way integral to the actions you are directly responsible for. It is, however, more interesting to me that this is not just an interpretation available to a modern audience but, I would argue, that it is what most people would assume is meant by the claim. There is an alternative perspective on this, found by taking things more literally as if the claim is an attempt to abdicate my involvement in the action. How can I perform it badly, I might argue, if I had no part in doing it? The cash value of the reformulation is this: If I did not do the work then someone else must have, and it is them who should receive the criticism for it. Ergo, it would simply not be appropriate to penalise me for work I had no involvement in doing. We expect this defence in relation to acts we are not causally responsible for. If, as a matter of fact, I did not do the work. This, however,

comes in response to the same kind of factors that earlier I had shown gratitude for, for actions that someone else is indirectly responsible for.

These indirect factors, I say, are the foundations from which my current actions, those I am directly responsible for, can come about. And this, I continue, must mean that my current actions, which you might be quite critical of, can only come about if these factors are present. It would not be right to continue saying it was my fault for doing things I am directly responsible for when I have shown how the fault belongs to something else that arose earlier in time, that I cannot be directly responsible for. I have classified two types of responsibility that are produced by direct or indirect involvement in an action. It is useful to recognise that Gideon Rosen also distinguishes between these two types of responsibility, but uses 'original' and 'derivative' instead of direct or indirect⁵⁰. I prefer Pascal Willemsen's amalgamation of the two;

'Derivative moral responsibility refers to an agent's moral responsibility for an action or the outcome of an action by virtue of something else they did. Direct moral responsibility denotes an agent's moral responsibility without any intermediate, responsibility-transmitting element.'⁵¹

With that brief taxonomy out of the way, presume that I hear how my current approach to responsibility may close down any opportunities for future rewards. Don't worry about the details of this for now, only the effect it brings about in my behaviour, which is to put me in a state of worry, affecting me such that it alters my strategy to responsibility. Instead of claiming I was not involved at all, assume that I want to portray a lack of awareness for the work done, and because that awareness (I believe at the time) is crucial to my being responsible for it I cannot, therefore, be genuinely responsible. Maybe I now believe myself to have been somewhere else during the writing process, not physically perhaps, but mentally. Typical excuses of this sort might be referring to unusually productive bouts of sleepwalking or the results of stage hypnotism. It is an excuse that arises when one is only originally responsible. Putting it back into Rosen's terms, it is like admitting original responsibility but not derivative responsibility and because, morally speaking, the latter will override the former, it would not be right to blame me. But let us not forget that the initial pursuit was not just to shift responsibility off of my shoulders and out into the aether, but specifically onto the shoulders of a metaphysical being. It is not merely to say that I am not responsible in one way or another but to point to who or what is in my stead.

With that being so, in what sense would I mean that God was responsible? Did God somehow occupy my body while I slept? Was God's effect on me akin to being hypnotised or being given performance-degrading drugs? Rosen, I think, would be happy to agree that possession

⁵⁰ Rosen, G. (2004) 'Skepticism About Moral Responsibility', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 18(1), pp. 298–299. doi:10.1111/j.1520-8583.2004.00030.x.

⁵¹ Willemsen, P. (2020) 'Direct and Derivative Moral Responsibility: An Overlooked Distinction In Experimental Philosophy', *PsyArXiv*, p. 3. doi:10.31234/osf.io/bz38e.

of any sort is, at least in principle, an acceptable form of excuse⁵². In practice, although I may be willing to consider God's direct involvement in my affairs, must I also accept that God inhabited my body merely to write up an essay that is now being poorly received? I do not find that to be very persuasive, although others might. And so, for whatever reason let's assume that I give this up. Maybe I become aware of the absurdity, or, let's say I am just suddenly persuaded that grading works on the presumption of my having awareness of my involvement. Now, I ask you to let me keep that awareness and find another way to shift the responsibility. I could say that I was fully aware, but I still did it because God made me. Say, I heard God's voice and was simply following his commands. So, when I say God is responsible, what I mean is that God gave me no choice but to do it. I might not have liked that he made me write poorly and I might not understand why either. But, to go against his word was impossible for me.

It's doubtful that the sort of impossibility I refer to would be genuine in the sense that it refers to something physically prohibitive. I am not aware of any physical law that prevents people from writing good essays. It is not a refusal of direct responsibility. I would say, it is just that my circumstances were in such a mess that I felt stuck between a series of bad choices. I was torn between my desire to achieve good grades and God's wishes for the opposite. Add this to the punishment I believed I would receive if I defied him and my desire to be a good, God-fearing person and I am left with no choice but to acquiesce. And so, by impossible, I meant I was stripped of realistic choices, which in turn means that God, who took away those choices, was responsible for my bad grade instead of me. In other words, although I can be directly responsible for any action, I cannot be responsible in the sense that I think matters to my critics, due to an interfering factor that I am not directly responsible for, in God. So, with this, I am successful in keeping my awareness, and I am also aware that the action was wrong. I recognise that it would be right to blame me for it were it not for the fact that I was coerced into doing it. It is the coercer who should be blamed because they are, as Rosen puts it, a 'locus of original responsibility'⁵³.

In this, who exactly is responsible and to what degree? Presently, I admit that I am originally responsible for the work I produce, but I say I am not to be blamed for it. Is it because someone else is derivatively responsible for it? Which is to say that I was bullied into doing it, I did not want it and I would not choose to do what I did. Is it that to be derivatively responsible for compelling me to do what I am originally responsible for is to accuse something else of being originally responsible for it? Or, is it that, because I committed the action, they are only derivatively responsible for my actions and directly responsible for their own? I think it is this latter sense that makes more sense. I remain directly responsible for my actions but I hold God derivatively responsible for them.

⁵² Rosen, G. (2004) 'Skepticism About Moral Responsibility', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 18(1), pp. 295–313. doi:10.1111/j.1520-8583.2004.00030.x.

⁵³ Rosen, G. (2004) 'Skepticism About Moral Responsibility', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 18(1), p. 299. doi:10.1111/j.1520-8583.2004.00030.x.

Intentions

I think it is worth pointing out that phrasing responsibility in terms of competing causal histories can become, at some stage, a bit confusing. It also misses important details from our common moral exchanges. Rosen himself, in the same text, expresses that much of the issues surrounding direct or indirect responsibility could be resolved by knowing whether our actions come from a place of akrasia (although he details why it might be difficult to identify these acts of genuine akrasia)⁵⁴. Others, with similar ideas, have phrased it somewhat differently. I have mentioned the more influential work of Strawson who wrote that blaming exchanges are about the 'quality of will'⁵⁵ one possesses, which might relate to the attitudes or desires one has. One extension of this idea that has great bearing on this essay comes from Harry Frankfurt.

Frankfurt cases are those that begin with a principle, that a person is only responsible for their actions if they could have done otherwise. This principle of alternative possibilities (often abbreviated to PAP⁵⁶) has, he writes, 'generally seemed so overwhelmingly plausible that some philosophers have even characterized it as an a priori truth'⁵⁷. In practice, what this amounts to is that so long as I am free to choose whether or not I write this essay, I can be responsible for its production. If I am not free to choose, say if it were true that God himself interfered, then I could not have done otherwise meaning I could not be responsible. Despite common agreement around the principle, Frankfurt, finds this to be false. It is possible, according to Frankfurt, to contrive a scenario, in which a person could not have done otherwise that casts doubt on the viability of PAP.

Let us admit that there are a number of possible ways to motivate a particular outcome. As it applies to the different variations of my earlier example, my good writing could come from a place of desire, such that I want to produce something well-written or it could come in response to a threat of punishment from God. To have multiple motivations that drive towards the same result is to demonstrate the principle of alternative possibilities. If I followed my heart then I would write well but if I didn't then God was still there to make me do it anyway. I really could not have done any differently. Frankfurt's upshot is that we are likely to judge these two scenarios quite differently, despite the similarities of outcome⁵⁸. That is, that it is whatever drove me to write a good essay that is morally significant. Now, I think that there is another takeaway from Frankfurt's writing. When we are deliberating about responsibility we should not be so quick to draw a conclusion based exclusively on the

⁵⁴ Rosen, G. (2004) 'Skepticism About Moral Responsibility', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 18(1), pp. 308–311. doi:10.1111/j.1520-8583.2004.00030.x.

⁵⁵ Strawson, P.F. (1962) 'Freedom and Resentment', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, p. 8. Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/STRFAR> (Accessed: 02 August 2023).

⁵⁶ Frankfurt, H.G. (1969) 'Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 66(23), p. 829. doi:10.2307/2023833.

⁵⁷ Frankfurt, H.G. (1969) 'Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 66(23), p. 829. doi:10.2307/2023833.

⁵⁸ Frankfurt, H.G. (1969) 'Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 66(23), pp. 829–839. doi:10.2307/2023833.

outcomes of a moral event. It is important to check the intentions that drove a person to those outcomes too.

I find this is easier to illustrate when those outcomes are negative, say, if I am back to searching for a way to excuse myself for bad writing. The outcome itself can only ever be singular because there is only one causal timeline available to me, such that I can only produce one piece of work, which in my example, turned out to be poor. The causal inputs here could be divided into two with desires I may or may not have on one side and external forces that may or may not have desires of their own on the other. In this instance, I refer to the desires of God who wanted a different outcome to the one I did, which produced the outcome in question. Remember, I had said that I was directly responsible and God was derivatively responsible. Frankfurt had said that 'it is incorrect to regard a man as being coerced to do something unless he does it because of the coercive force exerted against him'⁵⁹. For me, this best captures the idea I have in mind quite well. In this example, the mere existence of a coercive force is not sufficient to excuse me for bad writing. It must also be my specific reason for doing it. In practice, when I have done something wrong, it will matter to my critics whether I desired the outcome that has come about. And, if I didn't want that outcome, then it would also matter who did want it. Would it still be right for me to hold God derivatively responsible if he did not want or intend the events that I was directly responsible for? It is not clear that we would but at the very least it confounds the matter. You might also think me responsible for my bad writing if indeed my idea all along was to produce bad writing. It would not matter a jot whether God had involved himself in my affairs as I'd already made my mind up about the matter. You could probably even say that I would not do otherwise even if I could and even if I should. You might judge me quite differently, even if the outcome is the same; had I wanted to do well. If I had tried my best, but God, being the mischief that he is, just couldn't help but interfere and ruin my plans. For that, you might be willing to say that God is responsible for the outcome.

The principle of alternative responsibilities simply cannot recognise this distinction. We end up with a reformulation of PAP, as offered by Frankfurt, wherein 'a person is not morally responsible for what he has done if he did it only because he could not have done otherwise'⁶⁰. The net effect is that we can now admit that responsibility is not just a question of whether that person could have done otherwise. It is also about *why* that person did it. Frankfurt opened his writing by claiming that PAP is false⁶¹, although I find this to be somewhat excessive, and I think, given his slight, but critical reformulation later on, that Frankfurt comes to accept this too. I have, therefore, been quite charitable in my interpretation of his writing to account for that progression of thought. As I read him, it only seems that Frankfurt is unhappy with those who have become enchanted or indoctrinated by PAP, and have therefore considered the case of moral responsibility closed. I agree that this is

⁵⁹ Frankfurt, H.G. (1969) 'Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 66(23), pp. 833. doi:10.2307/2023833.

⁶⁰ Frankfurt, H.G. (1969) 'Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 66(23), p. 838. doi:10.2307/2023833.

⁶¹ Frankfurt, H.G. (1969) 'Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 66(23), p. 829. doi:10.2307/2023833.

a little premature, possibly even reckless. By failing to appreciate quite basic facts about people, that we are intentional agents with individual wants and desires, the doctrine practically ensures it will always fall short when it comes to ascertaining who is responsible for what and why. I am reminded of a series of quotes from Strawson, who wrote; ‘we are not to suppose that we are required, or permitted, as philosophers, to regard ourselves, as human beings, as detached from the attitudes which, as scientists, we study with detachment.’⁶²

It is worth taking a brief moment to appreciate this sentiment as it does, I think, mirror Frankfurt's criticisms quite well. Strawson's view was that moral responsibility often fell prey to 'over-intellectualisation'⁶³. That is, by emphasising abstract concepts such as free will and its possible connection to moral responsibility we miss the more important, inalienable aspects of moral responsibility. Those aspects are, as Strawson sees it, a 'framework of attitudes'⁶⁴ that 'are given with the fact of human society'⁶⁵. He suggests the term moral sentiments⁶⁶ to cover this network of attitudes, (although he uses other terms at times). As inalienable as they are one might still object to all this. Intentions are, as qualia, often mysterious and often inaccessible to us. The trouble, as Rosen points out, is that it can be very difficult to read the intentions of any person ‘given the opacity of the mind—of other minds and even of one's own mind’⁶⁷. This is true, but there is a degree to which our intentions, although not directly viewable, are in some way visible both through actions and the attitudes one has. So, if I genuinely want to produce something worth reading then you might expect that to appear in my attitude to my work. Perhaps I am eager to do it, I am industrious and engaged and as a result, I am generally on schedule. In this, you can also say that my intentions are written into my actions such that I would only perform some actions if I had the appropriate intentions. It would be quite the ruse to want one thing, to write well, while doing the opposite, by appearing bored and disengaged from the project, for example, or by being constantly late for classes. That is not to say that some will not still find the ruse more appealing than the synchronicity of action and intention. Nor does it say that those actions cannot prevent a good piece of work from being delivered.

Of course, the usual kind of freedom that we attribute to people can account for this. We are free to act in accordance with our own intentions or not. We can lie, if we choose, or we can be honest. This remains so, even if there is a sense in which people can not do otherwise. If we are determined, in the metaphysical sense, it is still fair to want people to do good things over bad ones and it is this expectation; a commitment to moral responsibility by holding

⁶² Strawson, P.F. (1962a) ‘Freedom and Resentment’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, p. 15. Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/STRFAR> (Accessed: 02 August 2023).

⁶³ Strawson, P.F. (1962a) ‘Freedom and Resentment’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, p. 14. Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/STRFAR> (Accessed: 02 August 2023).

⁶⁴ Strawson, P.F. (1962a) ‘Freedom and Resentment’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, p. 14. Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/STRFAR> (Accessed: 02 August 2023).

⁶⁵ Strawson, P.F. (1962a) ‘Freedom and Resentment’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, p. 13. Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/STRFAR> (Accessed: 02 August 2023).

⁶⁶ Strawson, P.F. (1962a) ‘Freedom and Resentment’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, p. 14. Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/STRFAR> (Accessed: 02 August 2023).

⁶⁷ Rosen, G. (2004) ‘Skepticism About Moral Responsibility’, *Philosophical Perspectives*, 18(1), p. 308. doi:10.1111/j.1520-8583.2004.00030.x.

people responsible for what they do that ensures good actions are encouraged ahead of bad ones.

The Global Excuses

There is one final defence to consider. It could just be that when I say God is responsible I do not mean to claim that God interfered so directly in my life at all. Rather, I am pointing to a technicality. I might argue that God is responsible because God is ultimately responsible for everything. In other words, if everyone's actions are the result of God's hand then my actions must be too. And so again, although I can be directly responsible for the actions I bring about, I cannot be responsible, in the sense that I think matters, because all of my direct actions, must have been brought about by the prior actions of a metaphysical being. A metaphysical being who, quite unlike us, can be directly responsible for its actions, because those actions were not predated by any others. Now, I expect you will recognise the association between this and the deterministic argument against moral responsibility. Applying Rosen's terms, if derivative responsibility presupposes original responsibility then the existence of an agent who has ultimate derivative responsibility ensures that no other agent can be responsible in either way, for anything they are involved in. It would be to give an excuse that operates more like an exemption. A pseudo-excuse.

But, here is one issue. If derivative responsibility depends on the existence of earlier events to derive responsibility from, but there are no earlier events, then to a metaphysical agent like God, the concept of derivative responsibility has no function or meaning. It makes no sense. To God or any other metaphysical being that is conceived as being without a causal past, it would seem that there can only be original, direct responsibility. Yet, God is quite capable of being derivatively responsible for someone else's actions. Not only in the usual way but in an extremely stretched-out, delayed kind of way, that moral agents might not be accustomed to. Consider the different sorts of responsibility once more. God could be directly responsible for my essay if indeed he had written it himself. I could hold him derivatively responsible in the usual sense, had he directly spoken to and influenced me. He would then be directly responsible for his own actions and derivatively responsible for mine. To be attributed with ultimate derivative responsibility only means that God needn't have interacted with me in any way at all. I am directly responsible still, but God, due to ultimate derivative responsibility assumes all moral responsibility as his by virtue of his status as the original causer. Some of these examples require a lot from God, who would essentially need to be in superposition, both here and now, speaking with me, while also being present at the earliest point of time and space, setting everything else into motion. Of course, this is how some conceive of God and for them, I expect there is no puzzle to fret over. In other examples, it only requires that God is self-caused. If God accepts these tremendous burdens then there is little left for moral agents to shoulder. In other words, moral agents, according to this kind of reasoning would be incapable of ever being responsible in a meaningful way for any of their actions.

And so again, although the claim starts as being about a metaphysical agent and the responsibility it has for everything, what it implies is a different claim about moral agents

who can never be responsible for anything. To me, this begs another question about whether a metaphysical agent, who is up to this point predominantly theoretical, can be capable of being morally responsible. This will likely depend on a true depiction of what moral responsibility happens to be. If it is all about causal determinism then perhaps God can be held morally responsible. If instead, moral responsibility is something that arises in or between moral agents it is less clear how it could arise between a metaphysical agent and a moral agent for the same reason it could not arise between a moral agent and an inanimate object. That is, although I might blame the furniture that stubs my toe, I do not hold it morally responsible. I might occasionally act as if it is morally responsible, in a superficial way, but on some deeper level, we all understand that it is only responsible in a weaker sense.

The point is aided by the fact that inanimate objects cannot have bad intentions nor can they choose their actions. Thus, we can only accuse them of getting in the way of our intentions or actions. Although they cannot be directly responsible, they can be derivatively responsible for what we do. A malfunctioning oven can be the cause of my bad bake and not the baker. Now, this also leaves open the possibility of them being morally responsible for my actions. Those who are taken by the doctrine of PAP, in its original formulation, can of course dismiss this with ease. For, the basis of moral responsibility is assumed to be freedom and inanimate objects also lack it. In that, a piece of furniture and a moral agent is no different. Of course, this does also imply that a follower of PAP will also be uncertain as to whether the chair is morally responsible for tripping us up because chairs, like humans, are incapable of free choice. There is a solution to this, again, in the work of others. McKenna took moral responsibility as something we held each other to. This clear-headed reason to regard a chair as being different from a person is that a chair, like any other inanimate object, is not a member of a moral group and it is not a moral agent. Because inanimate objects are not moral agents, in fact, they lack even the illusory kind of agency that PAP proponents claim we have, we cannot hold them morally responsible.

Moral responsibility exchanges also include blame and excuses such that when we do hold someone responsible, or when we blame them we expect an excuse or an apology to follow along shortly after. Given this is not impossible for exchanges that take place between moral agents and non-moral agents we can be reassured that responsibility has something to do with expectations moral agents have for one another. Those expectations, when applied to a piece of furniture, make no sense. This attitude towards inanimate objects can indeed be applied to other non-moral agents. If I cannot hold a chair morally responsible because it is not a moral agent then it follows that I cannot hold God morally responsible because he too is not a moral agent. He is a hyper-capable, superpositioned metaphysical agent. In other words, what God is, must transcend what a moral agent is capable of being thereby transcending the conditions necessary to make one capable of being morally responsible. If moral responsibility is for moral agents then we cannot hold a metaphysical agent morally responsible. Perhaps we could hold him metaphysically responsible still, but I do not know what that would mean.

Conclusions

The original purpose of this essay was to draw our attention to some of the issues with the metaphysical approach to responsibility and blame. To that, I have meandered here and there in pursuit of a general, but rough thesis, that blame, excuses, and our moral responsibility practices have less to do with metaphysics than much of modern philosophy would have it. There is a role for causal responsibility, but it is much less limited in scope. I had often felt moral responsibility required something else; something about our moral norms and expectations. Pleasantly, I found along the way that other philosophers had already come to appreciate this. Metaphysics only tells us what we are limited to due to the sorts of beings we are and the sort of universe we exist in. It does not tell us what we should do. In that it is familiar to Hume's well-known problem of 'ought' from 'is'⁶⁸. We can know what we are able to do but there is a gap between that and what we should do. I propose that the gap can be filled - or explained by - moral expectations.

Aside from all this, I have stumbled into an epistemic condition for responsibility that I had hopes of pursuing in more detail. When I blame or excuse you it is not only because you could or could not do something and it was not just because you should or should not do it. Nor, is it to just to do with the traditional epistemic conditions. I must have the knowledge that you could or could not do something and until then, I will blame you or hold you responsible. If I learn differently then I might excuse you. If I lack that knowledge then nothing will change, even if you were not responsible and it was wrong to blame you. This essay, I hope, will prompt further interest in the area.

⁶⁸ Cohon, R. (2018) *Hume's moral philosophy*, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume-moral/#io> (Accessed: 02 August 2023).

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