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Irrational Blame

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Abstract

I clarify some ambiguities in blame-talk and argue that blame's potential for irrationality and propensity to sting vitiates accounts of blame that identify it with consciously accessible, personal-level judgements or beliefs. Drawing on the cognitive psychology of emotion and appraisal theory, I develop an account of blame that accommodates these features. I suggest that blame consists in a range of hostile, negative first-order emotions, towards which the blamer has a specific, accompanying second-order attitude, namely, a feeling of entitlement – a feeling that these hostile, negative first-order emotions are what the blamed object deserves.

Keywords

blame; belief; emotion; irrationality; judgment

It is often remarked that blame carries a characteristic 'sting'. It can hurt to be blamed, even when we know we deserve it. It is less often remarked that blame can be irrational. Not only do we sometimes blame others when they do not deserve it, but we sometimes blame others when *we know* they do not deserve it. Blame is like the emotions in its potential for independence from considered judgments or beliefs about another's actual blameworthiness. Drawing on this analogy, I argue that the sting and irrationality of blame vitiates extant cognitive accounts of what blame is, and develop a positive account of blame that accommodates these features.

My discussion is structured as follows. First, I clarify some ambiguities in the phrase 'to blame' and offer an example of irrational blame, which reveals its similarity to the emotions. Secondly, I canvass some recent cognitive accounts of blame that identify it with consciously accessible, personal-level judgments or beliefs, and argue that these cannot accommodate the irrationality and sting of blame. The failure to accommodate irrationality is a common objection to pure cognitive theories of the emotions, and suggests the importance of considering sub-personal processing and 'appraisals' when theorizing about the emotions. So, thirdly, I apply this lesson to blame. To anticipate, I suggest that blame consists in a range of hostile, negative first-order emotions, towards which the blamer has a specific, accompanying second-order attitude, namely, a feeling of entitlement – a feeling that these hostile, negative first-order emotions are what the blamed object deserves.

1. Blame-talk is ambiguous. When we say another is 'to blame' we may mean one of three things:

- i. They are blameworthy.
 - ii. We should blame them.
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iii. We actually do blame them.

These three propositions are distinct. (i) is a judgement about another. Whatever the conditions of blameworthiness ultimately are, they fulfil them. It is possible to make such a judgement about another, without also judging that we should blame them, let alone judging that we actually do. For instance, we might judge a historical figure from the distant past blameworthy for harm perpetrated, but we neither blame them, nor judge that we should – the harm is too far removed.

(ii) is about us and what we should do. In this kind of context, 'should' can have three different meanings. First, we may be saying nothing more than that blame is *warranted* or *justified* in that the object of blame is genuinely blameworthy. If this is what we mean, (ii) collapses into (i). Secondly, we may be saying that blame is *appropriate*, relative to various norms governed by the nature of our relationship with the object and the circumstances. For instance, it may be appropriate for victims to blame perpetrators for harm, when it is not appropriate for legal advocates to do so, even when perpetrators are in fact blameworthy.¹ Thirdly, we may be saying that blame is *desirable* relative to a given end. Whether or not blame is warranted or appropriate, perhaps it would do us psychological good to blame, or perhaps it would serve an instrumental purpose, such as deterrence.

In all three senses, it may be true that we should blame another, and yet we find that we don't. (iii) is about us and what we actually do. Sometimes, to be sure, we blame others when we judge them blameworthy, and also judge that our blame is appropriate and desirable. But not always. Just as we may fail to blame others when we judge them blameworthy and also judge that blame would be appropriate and desirable, equally we may blame others when we know they are not blameworthy, and that our blame is neither appropriate nor desirable.² Blame, like the emotions, can be irrational.

Consider the following example. A couple come home from work exhausted and stressed, after a long, hard day. One has failed to see to a minor household duty, which annoys and inconveniences the other, but for which, let us suppose, they have a reasonable excuse. Nonetheless, a critical remark is uttered, and a blazing row ensues, in which each takes their exhaustion and stress out on the other. The inconvenienced party blames their partner for the inconvenience, even though they know at heart they have a reasonable excuse. The blamed party blames their partner for the unfair blame, even though they too know that the background of stress and exhaustion might excuse their partner for failing to better manage their annoyance at the inconvenience. As the fight develops, both parties become increasingly incensed, self-righteous and adamant that they occupy the moral high-ground. But even in the heat of the argument, both know that in truth the blame they feel towards the other is undeserved, and not good for their relationship. The point is that this knowledge does not, in the moment, moderate their emotions and their behaviour, blame included.

Not all episodes of occurrent blame are irrational as in this example. Equally, not all forms of blame are occurrent episodes, and so relatively short-lived. Blame can be a standing state, which may last for years, erupting only occasionally in occurrent, episodic manifestations of that state.³ Nonetheless, occurrent episodes of irrational blame are common.⁴ When things

¹The distinction between (i) and (ii) is akin to the distinction between 'correctness' and 'propriety' drawn by D'Arms and Jacobson (2000).

²Note that (ii) and (iii) address whether we should blame, and whether we actually do. This is different from (even if typically connected to) the issue of whether and how we should *express* or *act on* our blame, and whether and how we actually do. See §§2 and 3.

³For discussion of the distinction between emotions as standing states and emotions as occurrent episodes, see Goldie (2000).

⁴Wolf (2011) similarly draws attention to occurrent episodes of 'angry blame' within personal relationships, but she does not emphasize its potential for irrationality, but rather for rational justification.

go wrong for us – perhaps especially within personal relationships, but elsewhere, too – we often look for someone to blame, whether as a way of avoiding responsibility ourselves, or simply as a way of venting our frustrations. Sometimes, if this inclination takes hold, we may work ourselves up, eventually generating a self-serving belief that we are in the right, mistreated by others who are in the wrong. In such cases, this belief too may be irrational, in the sense that it is not appropriately sensitive to counter-evidence, and governed not by reason, but by emotion. Other times, we may not acknowledge what we are doing when we blame others irrationally. We may not consciously believe they are in the wrong, but equally, we may also fail to recognize that we are treating them as if they are: we deny or repress this truth. Finally, as the example of the rowing couple illustrates, we sometimes blame others with full recognition of what we are doing, even when we know that the person we are blaming is not at fault and that we shouldn't blame them. In such cases, we are rational enough not to generate a self-serving belief, or to take cover under a blanket of denial or repression with regard to our treatment of others, but our emotions are irrational nonetheless: 'I know it's unfair, they don't deserve it, but I can't help blaming them. I'm just so angry!'

In this respect, it is helpful to compare blame and a basic emotion, like fear. It is one thing to judge a situation dangerous (compare: that another is blameworthy). It is another to judge that fear is appropriate or desirable (compare: that we should blame them). And it is another again actually to feel it (compare: that we actually do blame them). The brave soldier judges a situation dangerous, so that they can respond rationally and effectively in battle. But, supposedly, they do not feel fear. Nor do they judge that they should: given their role and aim, probably better they should not. In contrast, the well-informed UK-resident arachnophobe feels fear even when they judge there is no objective danger: it is neither warranted, nor appropriate, nor desirable, to be pathologically afraid of UK spiders. Yet, despite this knowledge, they feel fear nonetheless.

Like the emotions, blame can be irrational: independent of our considered judgements or beliefs both about another's blameworthiness, and the appropriateness or desirability of us blaming them. This is not to deny that consciously accessible, personal-level judgements and beliefs can also be irrational, in the different sense of not being appropriately sensitive to counter-evidence. Certain religious or spiritual beliefs, self-deceptive beliefs or psychopathological states expressing gross distortions of reality or over-valued ideas, provide some examples. However, in such cases, the judgement or belief's lack of warrant is not typically also consciously accessible to the subject, otherwise we expect that the judgement or belief would be revised. Whether or not it is ultimately impossible, it is certainly extremely rare for people genuinely to make judgements, or hold consciously accessible, personal-level beliefs, that they know they shouldn't.⁵ This form of irrationality is special to the emotions.

2. Past philosophical accounts of blame have tended to draw on one of two ideas. Either blame is a form of punishment (Smart 1961). Or it is a sort of mental ledger or record of a person's behaviour, of use in assessing character or predicting behaviour (Feinberg 1970; Glover 1970). Neither idea suffices to account for blame. As has often been remarked, blame is a mental state, and punishment is an action (Boyd 2007; Wallace 2011). It is perfectly possible to blame someone but not express it, let alone act so as to punish them. Similarly, it is unclear what a mental ledger or record of a person's bad behaviour is

⁵Cf. discussions of how the norms governing belief may aim at truth or knowledge, e.g. Velleman (2000) and Williamson (2002). Importantly, we may yet self-ascribe *unconscious* beliefs that we know lack warrant, if we come to recognize that such beliefs are manifest in our behaviour. Sexism and racism provide common examples of this phenomenon: a subject may sincerely judge or believe that all people are equal regardless of sex or race, whilst acknowledging that they nonetheless display behaviour that is best explained by unconscious prejudicial beliefs.

supposed to be, other than a memory that they did it. Moreover, we can blame people for actions we consider one-off, and would not use for character assessment or prediction.

Partially in response to these deficiencies, more recent accounts of blame have focused instead on the idea that blame is fundamentally cognitive: partly or wholly identified with consciously accessible, personal-level judgements or beliefs. For instance, Hieronymi suggests that blame is the judgement that a person has shown disregard or ill will towards another (2004). Hieronymi locates the sting of blame in this judgement: it hurts when others so judge us, because we care about standing in relations of mutual regard. Hieronymi notes that such judgements are often accompanied by hostile, negative emotions which may also sting. But on her view, the sting particular to blame is contained within the judgement of disregard with which she identifies blame. Similarly, Sher suggests that blame is the belief that a person has acted badly or has a bad character, in conjunction with a desire that it were otherwise (2006). Like Hieronymi, Sher emphasizes how this belief and desire typically lead to a set of dispositions to feel and behave in certain ways towards the blamed. But blame itself is again identified with a belief (in conjunction with a desire). Finally, consider Scanlon's suggestion that blame occurs when we judge a person blameworthy, because they have shown impaired interpersonal attitudes, and so we consequently rationally revise our attitudes, especially our good intentions, towards them (2008). Scanlon shifts between identifying blame with the judgement of blameworthiness, and identifying blame with the attitudes and intentions that are rationally revised in light of this judgement. But either way, the judgement of blameworthiness remains a necessary component of blame. Hence, despite their differences, these accounts are united in their cognitive, rational focus. For this reason, they struggle to accommodate the irrationality and sting of blame.

Consider first irrationality. The failure to accommodate irrationality is a common objection to pure cognitive theories of the emotions. Cognitive theories hold that emotions just are consciously accessible, personal-level judgements or beliefs.⁶ The kind of example provided by the brave soldier shows that consciously accessible, personal-level judgements or beliefs are not sufficient for emotion, for one can judge or believe that a situation is dangerous, indeed, one can even judge or believe that fear would be appropriate or desirable, and yet feel nothing. The kind of example provided by the well-informed UK-residing arachnophobe shows that consciously accessible, personal-level judgements or beliefs are not necessary for emotion, for one can be terrified and yet sincerely judge or believe that there is nothing to be scared of. So consciously accessible, personal-level judgements and beliefs are neither necessary nor sufficient for emotions.

An analogous objection holds for blame. If we can judge or believe a person blameworthy and yet not blame them, as with historical figures, then such a judgement or belief is not sufficient for blame. If we can blame someone even though we judge or believe that they are not blameworthy and so know that we shouldn't, as in the example of the rowing couple, then a judgement or belief of blameworthiness is not necessary for blame. So blame cannot be identified with consciously accessible, personal-level judgements or beliefs.⁷

⁶For classic examples of cognitive theories of emotion, see Gordon (1987), Nussbaum (2001), and Solomon (1976). Prinz (2004) provides a comprehensive assessment of the evidence against such accounts.

⁷Note that it is not open to cognitive theories of emotion to claim that irrational emotions are characterized by conflicting judgements or beliefs, given that these are supposed to be consciously accessible, personal-level mental states. Not only would we expect the unwarranted judgement or belief to be revised if this were so (see §1). Moreover, subjects simply do not report such conflict in their judgements or beliefs. The arachnophobe is terrified, but judges or believes there is nothing to be scared of; they do not also report judging or believing the opposite. Similarly, the irrational blamer blames, but judges or believes the other is not blameworthy; they do not also report judging or believing the opposite.

The claim that emotions in general, and blame in particular, cannot be identified with consciously accessible, personal-level judgments or beliefs does not entail that judgments or beliefs can never bear on emotions, or that emotions are not *representational or responsive to representations*, broadly construed to include sub-personal states.⁸ Such states are often called ‘appraisals’.⁹ The cognitive psychology of emotional cognition and information-processing is not yet unified, but there is clear evidence that the kinds of representations involved in emotion operate at multiple levels of processing and across multiple, sometimes encapsulated, domains, from hard-wired and innate, to learned through training and association, to consciously accessible and responsive to rational considerations.¹⁰ The crucial point is that these representations are not all causally responsive to, let alone identical with, consciously accessible, personal-level judgments and beliefs, and so able to accommodate the irrationality of emotions as they operate partly outside of conscious, rational processing.¹¹

Consider next blame’s sting. The first complicating factor is that blame can only sting if it is expressed or acted on, however minimally, as we can only be hurt by others’ attitudes that are known to us. The second complicating factor is that individual differences in temperament and values mean that there can be no universal claims about what does and does not sting. Some people are more sensitive than others, and some people care more about interpersonal relationships, rights and wrongs, than others. For instance, a person with low self-esteem and a critical superego may be easily stung by blame, while a person displaying high levels of narcissism and psychopathic tendencies may be more immune. Assessing the extent to which an account of blame captures its sting is thus the task of assessing the extent to which an account of blame captures what prototypically stings when blame is manifest. Nonetheless, there is good reason to hold that personal-level cognitive accounts do not fare well in capturing this. For judgment and belief are commonly, indeed arguably prototypically, detached.

To make this vivid, consider first Hieronymi’s suggestion that blame is the judgement that a person has shown disregard or ill will towards another. To allow us to focus on the sting of the manifest judgment itself, suppose that no hostile, negative emotions accompany it. There are two obvious situations in which such a judgement is unlikely to sting. The first is if the person judged by the other to have shown disregard believes that the disregard was *called for or deserved*. For instance, perhaps it is a response to disregard originally shown by the other to them. In such a situation, the judgement is less likely to hurt, than to be met with a feeling of vindication. The second is if the person judged by the other to have shown disregard believes that the judgement is false. In such a situation, and given that there are no

⁸In other words, it does not necessitate the adoption of a pure sensory or affective theory of emotion, as James’ ‘bodily feeling’ account (1884) is sometimes interpreted.

⁹For a classic statement of appraisal theory, see Lazarus (1991). Scherer, Shorr, and Johnstone, ed. (2001) provide an excellent introduction and overview of contemporary appraisal theory. For a good general collection on the cognitive psychology of emotional information-processing, see Dalgleish and Power, ed. (1999).

¹⁰Appraisal theory is naturally paired with ‘affect programmes’ which are automatic, co-ordinated responses to emotional stimuli, involving distinctive facial and bodily expression and movement patterns, changes in voice tone and loudness, changes in hormone balance and level, and changes in the autonomic nervous system. The classic study of affect programmes is found in Darwin’s *The Expression of The Emotions in Man and Animals* (see the 1998 edition, with commentary by Paul Ekman). Affect programmes plausibly explain much of the nature of emotional affect and its cognitive and behavioural effect, as each type of basic emotion is thought to correspond with a distinctive array of physiological and neurological changes.

¹¹A different way of trying to accommodate the irrationality of emotions which does not engage with the science of emotions is to broaden the kinds of consciously accessible, personal-level mental states purportedly constitutive of emotions, so as to include states that are not truth-directed or evidence-based. Subjects can then experience emotions in virtue of having such states, even when they know that what is represented by the state is false or without sufficient warrant for judgement or belief. Such states are often called ‘construals’ and have been thought to include wondering, thinking, supposing, apprehending, imagining and perceiving-as. For classic theories of this form, see Armon-Jones (1991) and Roberts (1988). To my knowledge, no one has proposed a ‘construal’ theory of blame, but it is open to philosophers who are resistant to employing the cognitive psychology of emotion in the way suggested above to attempt to accommodate blame’s irrationality in this different way.

accompanying emotions, then if they are confident of their innocence, they may quite simply shrug the judgement off, for they do not believe they have done wrong. Together, this suggests that, considered in isolation, it is less another's manifest judgment that stings, rather than the fact that one accepts the implication of fault or reproof. The manifest judgement stings largely insofar as it corresponds with one's own assessment of one's conduct.

This contrasts with the sting of other's hostile, negative emotions. Even if one rejects another's judgement that one is blameworthy, it is yet typically unpleasant to be the object of such emotions, especially given their propensity to be expressed and acted upon in aggressive and punishing ways.

To illustrate this contrast, consider how a judgement that another has shown disregard can often be expressed or acted on so as not to sting if no hostile, negative emotions are present – and even if the person so judged accepts the judgement. For instance, good parenting routinely involves pointing out when a child has shown disregard towards a sibling, and indeed imposing negative consequences for it. That is part of bringing up children to treat others, including rivals, with consideration. Sometimes, no doubt, parents do this in such a way that the child feels bad and blamed. But a loving parent can often help a child understand that their behaviour towards a sibling is neither decent nor permitted – the child accepts the judgement – without the child feeling stung. Clinicians working with certain forms of psychiatric disorder often achieve a similar stance when addressing problematic behaviours with service users in therapy: they are caring and compassionate in holding patients responsible for immoral actions (Pickard 2011 and 2013). In sum, the judgement that a person is blameworthy in having shown disregard towards another need not sting if expressed and acted on without hostile, negative emotions – without blame, as it is natural to say.

Similar considerations tell against Sher and Scanlon. On Sher's account, blame is a belief that another has acted badly or has a bad character, in conjunction with a desire that it were otherwise. But, if the person blamed does not accept the truth of this belief, and if the set of contingent dispositions to feel and behave in hostile, negative ways is not in fact present in the blamer, then the belief and desire are much less likely to sting the blamed. On Scanlon's account, blame is either a judgement of blameworthiness, or the attitudes, especially the good intentions, that are rationally revised in light of this judgment. But, again, if either this judgement or the revised intentions are held apart from hostile, negative emotions and manifestations thereof, then they are much less likely to sting. Consider, for instance, two ways that a friendship can end. One friend can decide to stop spending time with the other because they have been offended one too many times, but enact this with consideration and respect. Or they can act with wrath and vengeance, writing the other person off with contempt and aggression. Although it is of course natural to be upset when good intentions are replaced with disregard or disapproval, much of the sting is yet likely to reside in the emotional manifestation of this change in attitude.

In sum, cognitive theories of blame cannot account for its potential for irrationality, and struggle to accommodate its sting. Judgements of blameworthiness are no doubt sometimes hurtful, especially if one accepts and regrets their truth. But judgements of blameworthiness typically sting far more if accompanied by hostile, negative emotions.

Hence, both in its potential for irrationality and in its propensity to sting, blame is like a hostile, negative emotion. Call blame which has these features 'affective blame'.¹² We need

¹²Cf. Smith (2007) on 'active blame'.

not deny that we sometimes speak of 'blame' in a more detached mode. As we saw above, blame-talk is ambiguous. Call this more rational, less stinging sort of attitude 'detached blame'. Detached blame can consist in consciously accessible, personal-level judgements or beliefs of blameworthiness. It can be accompanied by a consequent rational revision of intentions. It can also be accompanied by the imposition of negative consequences, or a just demand for accountability.¹³ The point is that it lacks affective blame's potential for irrationality, and has much less of its potential for sting. To account for the irrationality and much of the sting of blame, we must abandon a cognitive theory of blame, and treat it like an emotion.

3. If blame is like an emotion, then *which* emotion is it like? For, there is no 'basic' emotion of blame. Indeed, it seems that blame can be connected to a range of different emotions. Most obviously, these include anger, hate, and resentment. But the range can plausibly be extended to include certain other states that have an affective dimension without being uncontroversially identifiable as emotions, such as, for instance, disappointment, indignation and contempt. Moreover, as expected given this range, blame's manifestations can be equally various. Alongside punishing, blame can also be manifest in berating, attacking, humiliating, writing off, rejecting, shunning, abandoning, and criticizing, to name but a few behaviours. There is thus a challenge facing the suggestion that blame is like an emotion. The challenge is to unite these various emotions and manifestations thereof into a single account of blame. For, given that they can occur without counting as instances of blame, we must explain what makes them count, when they do, as instances of blame.

It is natural to be tempted by the idea that they are united in virtue of being caused either by a judgement or belief, or by an appraisal, of blameworthiness.¹⁴ But this cannot be right. On the one hand, judgements and beliefs of blameworthiness are not present when blame is irrational, so cannot unite all instances of blame. On the other, although appraisals are present whether or not blame is irrational, the appraisals that give rise to the various emotions connected to blame are themselves various, and indeed operate across multiple levels and domains of processing. From a scientific perspective, there is simply no good reason to think that there is a single type of antecedent state, an 'appraisal of blameworthiness', which can unite all and only those emotions connected to instances of blame.

A different approach looks not to what is prior to these emotions, but to what accompanies them. To illustrate this, consider again the rowing couple. At first, perhaps the inconvenienced party is only annoyed: they do not yet blame their partner. It is as the argument develops, and they become increasingly incensed, self-righteous and adamant that they occupy the moral high-ground, that they come to blame them. Their annoyance *develops into blame*. But, in so developing, their annoyance does not cease to exist. They do not stop feeling annoyed as they come to feel blame. Rather, the annoyance seems to become part of the blame.

What has occurred? Part of what is striking about the phenomenology of affective blame is that, when in its grip, one feels entitled to one's hostile, negative emotions, because of what the other has done. It feels as if they *deserve* these emotions in light of their actions, even if, as in cases of irrational blame, one knows in truth they do not. I suggest that this *feeling of*

¹³For discussion of the role of responsibility and 'detached blame' in clinical practice with disorders of agency, see Pickard (2011, 2013). For discussion of what such clinical practice might offer the theory and practice of criminal justice, and how in particular we can punish by the imposition of negative consequences but without affective blame, see Lacey and Pickard (2012).

¹⁴Cf. Sher who recognizes the need to solve a comparable challenge to his account, and unites the various dispositions towards feeling and behaviour associated with blame by appeal to the fact that they stem from a common cause: the belief and desire pair he identifies with blame.

entitlement – a feeling of being in the right, in relation to another's wrong – has the potential to unify affective blame. What makes a hostile, negative emotion count as blame is the accompanying second-order attitude the blamer has to it: their feeling that they are entitled to their first-order emotions because the other deserves them. This feeling of entitlement places responsibility for the hostile, negative emotions that constitute blame onto the person blamed. In effect it offers the blamer justification and freedom to inflict their emotions on the other – to vent and retaliate. Of course, if the blamer recognizes this feeling is irrational and judges or believes that, all things considered, their hostile, negative emotions are not deserved by the blamed, they may try to suppress or resist acting on them. Alternatively, in the grip of the feeling, they may not. The suggestion is that, either way, they nonetheless *feel as if* their first-order emotions are deserved by the other, and that it is the presence of this accompanying second-order feeling of entitlement towards their hostile, negative first-order emotions that unites these as instances of blame.¹⁵

Hence, the traditional account of blame as a form of punishment is, in one sense, vindicated. Blame is a mental state, not a kind of action. But it is a *punishing* mental state in that it is connected to feelings of entitlement and desert, and so too justice and retribution, in response to the actions of others. In this, affective blame inclines towards self-righteousness, for it involves experiencing oneself as occupying the moral high-ground.¹⁶

Note, for clarity, that it is important that the feeling of entitlement to one's first-order emotions not be confused with a consciously accessible, personal-level judgement or belief. Otherwise the account could not accommodate irrational blame without requiring that irrational blamers hold consciously accessible, personal-level judgements or beliefs that they know they shouldn't. For, if the feeling was identified with a judgement or belief, an irrational blamer would then be in the position of consciously judging or believing that they are entitled to their hostile, negative emotions towards a person because they deserve it, whilst consciously judging or believing that the person is not blameworthy. Although this is not quite the same as consciously judging or believing p and not-p at one and the same time, it is too close for comfort.¹⁷

Rather, just as the cognitive psychology of emotional cognition and information-processing can potentially help to explain the irrationality of first-order emotions, so too it can potentially help to explain the irrationality of second-order feelings. The UK-residing arachnophobe judges that spiders are not dangerous and yet feels fear. The basic explanation of how this is possible is that the representations connected with the fear response are not causally responsive to rational considerations. The more serious challenge for the science of emotion is to specify the exact cause and nature of the information-processing underlying phobias, and the mechanisms by which it impacts on other components of the fear response. The irrational blamer judges that another is not blameworthy and yet feels both anger, say, and a sense of entitlement to their anger – they feel that the other is blameworthy and so deserves their anger, even though in truth they know they shouldn't feel this way. The basic explanation of how this is possible is similar in outline. The irrational blamer's feeling of

¹⁵Note that this account naturally extends to self-blame. Self-blame can also be irrational. One can blame oneself even if one judges that one is not blameworthy: one can *feel* blame towards oneself nonetheless. The symmetry between self- and other-blame is not exact. For instance, we do not tend to think of ourselves as *entitled* to our first-order hostile, emotions about ourselves. Nonetheless, we can understand affective self-blame as a second-order feeling that the range of hostile, negative first-order reactive attitudes and emotions we feel about ourselves is in fact deserved.

¹⁶Especially given its potential for irrationality, affective blame can therefore function very effectively as a psychological defence that shields us from the need to acknowledge our own wrongdoing or take responsibility for our own part in interpersonal conflict. For discussions of blame that are sensitive to its perils but aim to articulate the way it may yet be a force for good, see Fricker (unpublished manuscript) and McGeer (2013).

¹⁷Note again the problem of self-contradictory beliefs arises only for beliefs that are consciously accessible from within the first-person perspective. See footnote 5.

entitlement is not causally responsive to rational considerations. When our understanding of the information-processing underlying this feeling and its connection to other dimensions of our moral, interpersonal, and emotional psychology is more developed, we will have a more serious theory of affective blame. Until then, cognitive psychology offers a promising placeholder.¹⁸

My focus in this article has been substantially confined to the irrationality of blame. That is because it has been neglected, to the detriment of an adequate account of what blame is. But it is important to end with the caveat that it is of course possible that episodes of affective blame can be rational. Ideally rational affective blame involves a complicated set of conditions: the blamed must be blameworthy and so justly deserves a hostile, negative response; the blamer must judge them blameworthy; blame must be appropriate to the nature of the relationship between the blamer and the blamed and the circumstances; blame must not actively undermine rational ends (even if it is too taxing, even given an ideally rational blamer, to demand that it always serves them); finally, the nature of the particular hostile, negative emotions and manifestations thereof constitutive of any instance of blame must be fitting and proportionate to the particular conditions obtaining, in kind and degree. Unless no one is ever blameworthy for a global reason, as, for instance, the threat of determinism is sometimes understood to be, then these conditions, complicated as they may be, can be met in practice. Two adults of equal standing are in a relationship. One harms the other, substantially, and without excuse. The other knows this, gets angry, and expresses the anger appropriately, because they wish to stand up for themselves and feel entitled to be angry given what the other has done: they deserve it. Rational affective blame is part of our interpersonal lives. But, as I have been at pains to emphasize, so too is irrational blame. We cannot understand what blame is unless we acknowledge not only its sting, but also its darker, irrational side.¹⁹

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¹⁸Alicke’s ‘culpable control model’ (2000) is a psychological theory of blame that connects in suggestive ways to the proposal here that affective blame is a second-order feeling of entitlement to first-order hostile, negative emotions. Alicke proposes a blame-validation model whereby, when we spontaneously react to wrongdoing or harm with strong evaluations and especially emotions, these lead to sub-personal cognitive and motivational biases causing us to validate our proclivity to blame the person who caused the wrongdoing or harm. These biases include altered evidential standards for judgements of blameworthiness, altered evaluation of the evidence and information searches biased towards confirmation of blameworthiness. Purely speculatively, the second-order feeling of entitlement may be generated by the operation of these biases – a kind of conscious by-product of them. Hence, when we feel both anger, say, and a sense of entitlement to this anger, even though we know we shouldn’t, we may retain some rational perspective on how our mental states are determined by the operation of underlying, irrational, sub-personal blame-validation biases which we cannot control. For philosophers who are adverse to employing cognitive psychology to shed light on emotion in this way, note again that it is open to them to offer a ‘construal’ theory of the second-order feeling of entitlement instead. See footnote 11.

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