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ABSTRACT

In ‘Forgiveness: An Ordered Pluralism,’ Fricker argues that the function of forgiveness is to liberate the forgiver from redundant blame-feeling. Blame is rendered redundant when it no longer serves its purpose, so to understand the function of forgiveness, we must understand the function of blame. For Fricker, the paradigmatic function of Communicative Blame is to align the moral understandings of wrongdoers and their victims, which is accomplished by wrongdoers coming to feel remorse. In this paper, I argue that Fricker should adopt a broader view of moral understanding and sever the connection between remorse and the alignment of moral understandings.

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1. Introduction

In ‘Forgiveness: An Ordered Pluralism,’ Miranda Fricker [2021: 249] argues that the function of forgiveness is to liberate the forgiver from redundant blame-feeling. Blame is rendered redundant when it can no longer serve its purpose, so to understand the function of forgiveness, we must first understand the function of blame. For Fricker, the paradigmatic form of blame is Communicative Blame, and its function is to ‘inspire remorse in the wrongdoer as a matter of aligning both parties’ moral understanding’ [ibid.]. When this alignment of moral understanding through remorse is achieved, or when blame-feelings cannot accomplish this task, the victim’s blame-feelings are rendered redundant, and the victim can free herself from them through forgiveness. Fricker’s accounts of forgiveness and blame go a long way in capturing these two complex moral phenomena. Nevertheless, I’ll argue that Fricker’s view of blame, which provides the foundation for her view of forgiveness, requires revision.

2. Immediately Remorseful Wrongdoers

Fricker takes there to be a tight relationship between wrongdoers coming to have a shared moral understanding with their victims and wrongdoers experiencing remorse. In fact, she argues that ‘the culprit’s side of this shared moral understanding will be constituted by remorse’ [ibid.: 246]. However, the alignment of moral

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understandings can come apart from wrongdoers' experiences of remorse in important ways.¹

Consider a case in which an individual, upon breaking a promise to a loved one, immediately feels incredibly remorseful and fully understands that what they did was wrong. While it's certainly not the case that all agents are like the one described, this kind of case is not uncommon. Often, we come to understand the extent to which our actions were wrong, and suffer in light of this knowledge, simply by reflecting on our behaviour. Fricker is committed to arguing that victims' blame-feelings are redundant in such cases. She argues:

the point of Communicative Blame is to inspire remorse in the wrongdoer as a matter of aligning both parties' moral understanding . . . once the point of blame is achieved, if it is achieved, then continued blame-feeling can serve no further moral purpose [*ibid.*: 249].

And, once victims' blame-feelings have no work left to do, these agents are in the position to forgive their wrongdoers and release themselves from their redundant blame-feelings. So, in the case of immediately remorseful wrongdoers, victims will be in the position to forgive prior to expressing any degree of blame. But this is counterintuitive. Surely there are many cases in which it is important and morally valuable for victims to express blame-feelings towards those who have wronged them, even if these wrongdoers feel appropriately remorseful for their behaviour prior to being blamed. And while it may be laudable for victims to forgive immediately remorseful wrongdoers without ever having blamed them, such instances of forgiveness do not seem valuable in virtue of liberating victims from redundant blame-feelings. I submit that this is because there are still important ways in which Communicative Blame can work to align victims' and wrongdoers' moral understandings in such cases.

3. Expanding Moral Understanding

Fricker conceives of the moral understanding at issue in cases of Communicative Blame entirely in terms of the acknowledgment or recognition of fault. She argues:

the paradigm case of blame is Communicative Blame—where, if you wrong me, I react by communicating to you that you are at *fault*, and where my communication is charged with some kind of blame-feeling. We then ask . . . what's the point of Communicative Blame? And the answer offered is that Communicative Blame aims to inspire remorse understood as pained understanding of *the wrong one has done* [*ibid.*: 246, emphasis added].

But this fault-focused view of moral understanding is too narrow. Wrongdoers acknowledging that they are at fault is only one part of aligning their moral understandings with their victims'. It's also important that wrongdoers understand that their victims take *themselves* to have been wronged and to be deserving of better treatment than they received. But a wrongdoer's experience of remorse can come apart from understanding their victim's perspective on what's transpired between them. An immediately remorseful wrongdoer will fully understand that they've done wrong, but their experience of remorse alone cannot give them access into their victim's mindset. However, Communicative Blame can. By blaming wrongdoers, we provide them with insight into how we take ourselves to have been treated and our attitudes regarding this treatment. This is an important element of aligning moral

¹ I'm thankful to Theodore Ross Murray for conversation on this point.

understanding, and it can be accomplished even after wrongdoers feel remorseful for what they have done.

Additionally, though it's vital that agents who wrong us acknowledge that they are at fault, we often want much more from wrongdoers. We also take wrongdoers to *owe* us something, be it an apology, amends, or some other reparative act, in virtue of their wronging us. Indeed, many theorists take expressions of blame to be both findings of fault *and* calls for response from the wrongdoer (e.g. Walker [2006]). An essential feature of aligning victims' and wrongdoers' moral understandings involves the two parties coming to agree on what the wrongdoer owes the victim in light of their wrongdoing. But again, this feature of moral understanding can come apart from the experience of remorse. While an immediately remorseful wrongdoer might understand that they ought to do *something* to repair their relationship with the victim, remorse alone cannot shed light on what, in particular, they should do. This is because what is appropriate for the wrongdoer to do depends, at least partially, on what the victim takes to be appropriate. For example, it would be a grave mistake for a wrongdoer to offer a public apology to their victim in an attempt to make amends when the victim takes a private apology to be what's required of the wrongdoer. Victims are able to express what they take themselves to be owed through Communicative Blame, and perpetrators, in virtue of being the target of this blame, can come to understand which particular reparative behaviours they should adopt.²

In short, Communicative Blame serves to align moral understandings regarding the wrong done, the victim's stance towards the wrong, and what the wrongdoer should do in light of the wrong. Each of these features of moral understanding is important, and, interestingly, can be found in the very passage from Adam Smith that Fricker draws on to support her view of the function of Communicative Blame:

The object ... which resentment is chiefly intent upon, is not so much to make our enemy feel pain in his turn, as to make him conscious that he feels it upon account of his past conduct, to make him repent of that conduct, and to make him sensible, that the person whom he injured did not deserve to be treated in that manner ... To bring him back to a more just sense of what is due to other people, to make him sensible of what he owes us, and of the wrong that he has done to us, is frequently the principal end proposed in our revenge, which is always imperfect when it cannot accomplish this [Smith 1759 (2009): pt II, sect. III, ch. I; p. 115, emphasis added].

4. Expanding Moral Understanding Further

Once we expand the conception of moral understanding beyond the bounds of fault-recognition, it becomes clear that there is still important work for Communicative Blame to do in cases of immediately remorseful wrongdoers. And while this modification to Fricker's view will sever the connection between the experience of remorse and the alignment of moral understandings, Fricker can still argue that the paradigmatic function of Communicative Blame is to align moral understandings. Perhaps it will be possible to expand the conception of moral understanding further to overcome other objections to the view as well. In this section, I'll explore potential

² However, the perpetrator needn't automatically agree with the victim about what is owed. Rather, they may attempt to persuade the victim of their understanding of the wrong done and what is owed in virtue of it. I take this to be entirely in-line with Fricker's view, since she's argued that an increased alignment of moral understanding can be achieved even if the wrongdoer convinces the victim of their moral view [Fricker 2016: 173].

responses on behalf of Fricker to criticisms developed by Luke Russell and Lucy Allais in their insightful commentaries in this volume.

Russell argues that Communicative Blame does not have a single, paradigmatic, aim. In addition to generating remorse, Communicative Blame also serves ‘to encourage communal condemnation of the wrong and ostracism or punishment of the perpetrator,’ ‘as a protective warning to other members of the community,’ and ‘as a warning and deterrent to other potential perpetrators that actions of that type will not be tolerated’ [Russell 2021: 282]. Thus, Russell takes Communicative Blame to be polyfunctional. But these additional functions don’t fit neatly within Fricker’s account of Communicative Blame because they fail to (1) align victims’ and wrongdoers’ moral understandings, and (2) generate remorse in the wrongdoer.

As argued above, remorse and the alignment of moral understandings can come apart: Communicative Blame can serve to align moral understandings without generating remorse in wrongdoers. So, if we accept a modified version of Fricker’s view that severs the link between the alignment of moral understandings and remorse, (2) ceases to be a worry. But what about (1)? Notice that all of the additional aims that Russell specifies involve communicating messages not just to the wrongdoer but to the moral community at large. Perhaps Fricker could accommodate these additional aims by expanding her account of *whose* moral understandings come to align through Communicative Blame. Rather than argue that Communicative Blame aims to align wrongdoers’ moral understandings with their victims’, she could argue that Communicative Blame aims to align the moral understandings of victims, wrongdoers, *and members of the moral community*.³ By modifying her account in this way, Fricker could argue that Russell has simply articulated some of the many ways in which blame can achieve its function of aligning moral understandings.

In contrast, Allais [2021: 265] accepts Fricker’s view of Communicative Blame but argues that her account of blame-feelings is too narrow. Allais rejects Fricker’s assumption that the blaming reactive attitudes merely represent the wrongdoer as at fault. According to Allais [ibid.: 268], these reactive attitudes also represent something about the wrongdoer’s character or will, namely that they are the kind of person who wronged the victim in this way. This evaluation of the wrongdoer’s character remains accurate, and can inform the victim’s attitudes towards the wrongdoer in a variety of ways, even after the wrongdoer acknowledges that they are at fault and feels remorseful for what they’ve done. But this means that, contra Fricker, blame-feelings are not rendered redundant once a wrongdoer’s moral understanding aligns with that of their victim. Rather, blame-feelings’ work is finished only once the wrongdoer has changed in such a way that their previous wrongdoing no longer reflects on them as an agent.

Adapting Fricker’s view to capture Allais’ account of blame-feelings will be difficult. If blame-feelings really do represent wrongdoers’ actions as reflecting something about

³ In earlier work, Fricker [2016: 171] argues that Communicative Blame is essentially second-personal, while third-personal blame is a non-paradigmatic and derivative form of blame [ibid.: 178]. Thus, one may worry that in expanding the view of *whose* moral understandings we aim to align when we Communicatively Blame, I may be running these two distinct forms of blame together. However, in arguing that Communicative Blame can serve to align the moral understandings of victims, wrongdoers, and members of the moral community, I am not arguing that Communicative Blame is third-personal. Rather, the claim is that when victims engage in the second-personal activity of blaming those who wrong them, this can serve to align these agents’ moral understandings *and* it can affect the moral understandings of third parties as well.

them as an agent, then these feelings will only become redundant once a wrongdoer changes to such a degree that the wrongdoing no longer reflects on them. This will require Fricker to give up her claim that blame-feelings have no moral work left to do once victims' and wrongdoers' moral understandings are aligned and will require her to significantly modify her account of forgiveness.

Even though Fricker must reject Allais' account of blame-feelings, there are features of the view that can be taken on board. For example, Allais highlights the moral importance of a wrongdoer not only recognizing that they've done wrong but also changing their ways in light of this recognition. While Fricker's fault-focused view of moral understanding will struggle to capture the value we place on wrongdoers committing to change, an expanded conception of moral understanding can make sense of this. On the account proposed above, Communicative Blame serves to align moral understandings on a number of matters: the wrong done, the victims' attitudes towards themselves and the wrong in question, and the reparative behaviours the wrongdoer should adopt. Commitments to change fit nicely within this last category. When a victim blames a wrongdoer, they are, among other things, communicating what they want the wrongdoer to do to repair their relationship. Often this will include specific ways the wrongdoer should change. Once this message is communicated, and the wrongdoer agrees that these changes ought to be made, then Communicative Blame has served its purpose. There is no more moral work for blame-feelings to do and the victim is in the position to free herself from them through forgiveness.

On this view, notice that even if the victim's and wrongdoer's moral understandings come to be fully aligned, this in and of itself doesn't repair their relationship or protect the victim from future harm. After all, even if the victim and wrongdoer both agree that the wrongdoer *should* change, this doesn't guarantee that they *will* change or change in the ways that were agreed upon. So, Communicative Blame's function can be served, and the victim's blame-feelings rendered redundant, prior to the wrongdoer making any concrete changes or engaging in other reparative behaviours.⁴

While this is a very different view than the one Allais defends,⁵ I think it can assuage one of Allais' concerns regarding Fricker's original account. Allais is sceptical that forswearing redundant blame-feelings counts as forgiveness. She argues: 'Forgiveness is often seen as powerful, generous and even mysterious; giving up redundant blame-feeling does not seem to be any of these things' [*ibid.*: 267]. But if the function of blame-feelings is limited to aligning agents' moral understandings, then there is a very real sense in which letting these blame-feelings go is courageous.

On the proposed view, Communicative Blame and blame-feelings, even when paired with a broad conception of moral understanding, have a very limited function. They help us to express our moral understandings and align them with the moral understandings of wrongdoers and the moral community. While some may argue

⁴ There may be some cases in which agents' moral understandings cannot be aligned until one of these agents changes significantly. Perhaps an extremely self-centred person cannot truly understand why their self-centred behaviours are wrong until they come to be less self-centred, for example. In such a case, the victim's moral understanding won't be aligned with the wrongdoer, and her blame-feelings won't be rendered redundant, until the wrongdoer makes some changes to their character. These cases are surely possible, but not representative of all instances of blame. As I argue below, it will be important to maintain that the function of blame-feelings and Communicative Blame can be fulfilled even though the wrongdoer undergoes no changes.

⁵ This view is also at odds with Russell's [2021: 283] claim that blame-feelings are polyfunctional, though at least some of these functions may be accommodated by adopting the broad view of moral understanding. Unfortunately, space constraints prevent me from exploring this point further.

that this is an overly constrained understanding of what blame can do, I think this is a virtue of the view. After all, as much as we may want it to, blame cannot guarantee that wrongdoers will change their ways nor can it protect us from being wronged in the future. This can be difficult to accept, especially when we're in the precarious position of having recently been wronged or mistreated. There is both a sense of powerfulness and vulnerability in acknowledging that one's blame-feelings have done their job. It requires the victim to recognize that they've done all they can to protect themselves and trust the wrongdoer to do the rest. In short, giving up one's blame-feelings, even when they are redundant, requires courage. This is so even if, as Allais [*ibid.*: 266] notes, it is the thing that we 'ought, morally, rationally and prudentially, to do'.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I've argued that Fricker's fault-focused view of moral understanding is too narrow. In order to defend the claim that the paradigmatic function of Communicative Blame is to align moral understandings, Fricker should adopt a broader view of moral understanding. Doing so can make sense of immediately remorseful wrongdoer cases and address some of Russell's and Allais' challenges to her view. Of course, in focusing on the relationship between moral understanding and Communicative Blame, I've ignored several other important features of both Fricker's account and the commentaries in this volume. Rather than attempt to offer a complete analysis of Fricker's ordered pluralist view of forgiveness, my goal in this paper was simply to identify one possible avenue to pursue in expanding, and defending, the account.

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