

Don't Suffer in Silence: A Self-Help Guide for Self-Blame

Abstract

There are better and worse ways to blame others. Likewise, there are better and worse ways to blame yourself. And though there is an ever-expanding literature on the norms that govern our blaming practices, relatively little attention has been paid to the norms that govern expressions of self-blame. In this essay, I argue that when we blame ourselves, we ought not do so privately. Rather, we should, *ceteris paribus*, express our self-blame to those we have wronged. I then explore how this norm can contribute to our understanding of the ethics of self-blame as well as the nature of blameworthiness itself.

1. Introduction

There are better and worse ways to blame others. Likewise, there are better and worse ways to blame yourself. And though there is an ever-expanding literature on the norms that govern our blaming practices, relatively little attention has been paid to the norms that govern expressions of self-blame. But the conditions under which other-directed blame is appropriate are very different from the conditions under which self-blame is appropriate. Take, for example, work on the standing conditions to blame. Much of this research focuses on articulating the kinds of relationships potential blamers ought to have with wrongdoers, as well as their wrongs, in order for their blame to be appropriate.¹ But in the case of self-blame, the potential blamer and wrongdoer are one in the same, and the relationships we have with ourselves and our actions are very different than the relationships we bear to others and their actions. Given these differences, it should not be surprising that asymmetries can be found between the norms that govern self-blame and other-directed blame.²

Because it is not possible to read off the ethics of self-blame from the ethics of other-directed blame, it will be important to explore the norms that are unique to self-blame. In this essay, I explore one dimension along which self-blame can be better and worse. Of course, what follows is far from a complete ethics of self-blame, and in focusing on one set of factors that are

¹ Though I use the terminology of ‘wrongdoer’ and ‘wrong’ in this essay, I leave open the possibility that agents can be blameworthy, and appropriately blamed, for actions or attitudes that are not wrong. See Macnamara (2013) for discussion of this kind of blame.

² In this very volume, Dana Nelkin points to one such difference involving the degree of blame that is appropriate in cases of self-blame versus other-directed blame.

relevant to the appropriateness of self-blame, I've failed to attend to others. But even this truncated discussion can improve our understanding of the moral value of self-blame as well as the nature of blameworthiness itself.

My plan for this essay is as follows. In Section 2, I make some preliminary remarks about how to go about developing an ethics of self-blame. In Section 3, I present what I call the "Don't Suffer in Silence" norm of self-blame. According to this norm, agents who blame themselves should not do so privately. Rather, they should express their self-blame to those they've wronged. In Section 4, I address three questions about Don't Suffer in Silence in order to clarify its normative scope and how it relates to other norms governing the appropriateness of self-blame. Finally, in Section 5, I conclude by outlining how discussions of self-blame can inform our understanding of blameworthiness.

2. Preliminaries

What does it mean to blame oneself? Like other-directed blame, self-blame has proven to be the topic of controversy. Several accounts of the nature of self-blame have been put forward in this volume alone. Some have argued that self-blame is best understood as the experience of guilt (Carlsson forthcoming; Portmore forthcoming), while others argue it should be understood in terms of goal-frustrated anger (Shoemaker forthcoming). Still others argue that self-blame is not necessarily connected to a particular emotion and take self-blame to be a kind of protest against oneself (Pereboom forthcoming) or negative self-evaluation (McKenna forthcoming; Thomason forthcoming). I will remain (relatively) silent on these matters. In this essay, I'll focus on the *ethics* of self-blame, as opposed to its *nature*.

To construct an ethics of self-blame, we must determine the set of conditions under which expressions of self-blame are appropriate.³ When it comes to other-directed blame, these

³ I focus on the appropriateness of *expressions* of self-blame because, as Nelkin notes, expressions of blame are within our control and can thus be governed by norms of obligation and permissibility (forthcoming: 8). However, as Nelkin also notes, there is a degree of control we can exercise over our attitudes themselves, either in cultivating or discouraging them, so the ethics of self-blame may well govern both expressions of self-blame as well as self-blaming attitudes.

conditions are divided into three categories: those that apply to the target of blame, those that apply to the blamer, and those that apply to the act of blame (Coates and Tognazzini 2013). Conditions governing the target of blame typically address whether this agent is the object of fitting, appropriate, or deserved blame, i.e. whether the agent is blameworthy. Many of the essays in this volume do an excellent job of exploring the relationship between self-blame, fittingness, and desert, so I will focus on the second and, to a lesser extent, third categories of blaming norms in this essay.

In the context of other-directed blame, blamers must meet a range of norms in order for their blame to be appropriate, the most discussed of which are standing conditions. Having the standing to blame others depends on the blamer's relationship to the wrongdoer and their wrong. For example, if the blamer performed a relevantly similar action to that of the wrongdoer, and never apologised or rectified their wrong in any way, then the blamer would lack standing because their blame would be hypocritical. And, if the wrongdoer engaged in, or helped the wrongdoer commit, the very wrong that they blame the wrongdoer for performing, then the blamer would lack standing because they are complicit. Additionally, if the wrongdoer's actions are simply none of the blamer's business, then the blamer would lack standing because their blame would constitute meddling.⁴

It's hard to see how the above standing conditions could apply to expressions of self-blame. It's not clear that an individual could be complicit in their own wrongdoing, or that their wrongdoings were none of their business. And what it would mean for a wrongdoer to blame themselves hypocritically is presumably very different than what it means for an agent to blame another individual hypocritically.⁵ But just because typical standing conditions cannot easily apply to self-blame does not mean that there are no blamer-specific norms that govern how we blame

⁴ The standing conditions discussed in this paragraph are not uncontroversial. For critical discussions of these norms, see Bell (2013) and King (2019).

⁵ See Shoemaker's essay in this volume for a discussion of self-blame and hypocrisy.

ourselves.⁶ A wrongdoer can still express self-blame inappropriately even if they are in fact blameworthy and are the fitting, appropriate, or deserving target of (self-)blame. But in these cases, what renders the expression of self-blame inappropriate has little to do with the relationship between the blamer and themselves or their wrong. Rather, it has to do with *to whom* and *how* they express their self-blame. When we blame ourselves, we typically express our self-blame to others. But there are better and worse audiences for our expressions of self-blame. In the next section, I present the (self-)blamer-specific norm Don't Suffer in Silence and explore what kinds of audiences are appropriate for expressions of self-blame.

3. Don't Suffer in Silence

In this section, I will argue that when we blame ourselves, we ought not do so privately. Rather, our self-blame should have an audience. Furthermore, we should direct our expressions of self-blame to the victims of our wrongdoings. These claims can be captured in the following norm:

Don't Suffer in Silence: If A blames themselves for wronging B, then, *ceteris paribus*, A should express their self-blame to B.⁷

To defend this norm, I will centre my discussion around a paradigmatic form of expressing self-blame: expressing guilt.⁸ This is because most theorists accept that expressions of guilt are expressions of self-blame, even if they do not take self-blame to be identical to the experience of guilt. For example, though McKenna argues that guilt does not constitute self-blame, he takes the two to be importantly connected because guilt and the other blaming reactive attitudes “provide the medium within which we normally express our blame” (McKenna forthcoming: 9). In fact, McKenna goes on to argue that because our blaming practices developed around expressions of

⁶ This also does not mean that there are no standing conditions on self-blame. In “Hypercrisis and Standing to Self-Blame,” I argue that standing to self-blame depends not on how the blamer relates to herself, but rather on how the blamer relates to those she has blamed for relevantly similar wrongs (forthcoming).

⁷ Note that this norm does not govern self-blame for victimless wrongs. While there may be reasons to express self-blame for victimless wrongs, they will likely diverge from the reasons to follow Don't Suffer in Silence.

⁸ However, this is not to say that expressions of guilt are the only way to express self-blame or that a successful ethics of self-blame will only apply to expressions of guilt. After all, not everyone agrees that we express self-blame when we express guilt. David Shoemaker, for example, argues that guilt is not self-blame, but is rather a *response* to being blamed. On Shoemaker's account, a paradigmatic expression of self-blame is talking angrily to oneself (forthcoming). While my defence of Don't Suffer in Silence focuses on expressions of guilt, I take the norm to also apply to other expressions of self-blame, including expressions of angry self-talk.

guilt, resentment, and indignation, we ought to theorise about blame by attending to the expression of these reactive attitudes (McKenna forthcoming). I will heed McKenna's advice and focus on expressions of guilt when defending Don't Suffer in Silence.

When we feel guilty for committing a wrong, we do not usually keep it to ourselves. Rather, we tend to express our guilt to those we have wronged, typically via confession (Baumeister et al. 1994). In fact, while some philosophers tend to conceive of guilt as a purely self-regarding emotion (e.g. Macnamara 2015: footnote 1), many psychologists take guilt to be a fundamentally social emotion. Guilt has been characterised as “an interpersonal phenomenon that is functionally and causally linked to communal relationships between people” (Baumeister et al. 1994: 243). And Benjamin Parkinson recently argued that “...the self-accountability appraisals associated with guilt may be associated with taking on the interpersonal role of a culpable transgressor and communicating your blameworthiness to the victim.” (2019: 226). Of course, it does not follow that guilt *should* be expressed simply because guilty people tend to do so. Perhaps the guilt-ridden would do well to keep these feelings to themselves. To understand the moral importance of expressing guilt, it will be helpful to understand how expressions of guilt typically function.

Expressions of guilt do important interpersonal work. In confessing our guilt to those we have wronged, we begin the process of repairing our relationships with them. And confession is not the only means by which we express guilt. As many others have noted in this volume, guilt is characterised by a variety of reparative behavioural tendencies. When we feel guilty, we typically feel motivated to apologise, make amends, and minimise or eliminate the negative consequences of our actions (Baumeister et al. 1994; Greenspan 1995; Lazarus 1991; Nichols 2007; Parkinson 1996, 2019; Tangney et al. 2007). And, just as we express anger when we engage in the threatening behaviours that are characteristic of that emotion, we express guilt when we engage in the distinctive confessional and reparative behaviours that are associated with it. By focusing on these characteristic ways of expressing guilt, I will now build a case for Don't Suffer in Silence.

3.a. Victim-based reasons to express self-blame

When we engage in the confessional and reparative behaviours that are characteristic of guilt, it benefits those who we have wronged. Expressions of guilt can ease victims' suffering, restore something important that they have lost (or was taken from them), and re-affirm their standing in the moral community. In fact, many have argued that wrongdoers and blameworthy agents *owe* this kind of care and concern to their victims (Radzik 2009; Wallace 2019; Tierney provisionally forthcoming). Because it's morally valuable to express guilt to victims in this way, it follows that we should, all else being equal, express self-blame to the victims of our wrongs—they are the appropriate audience of such expressions. Something of moral importance would be lost if a guilt-ridden agent refused to express their guilt and insisted on engaging entirely in private self-blame. Victims would be left without restitution, apology, or even acknowledgement of the harm they have suffered.

Notice that private self-blame which violates the above norm can be morally deficient even if the guilt-ridden agent experiences a fitting (or deserved) amount of guilt in virtue of being blameworthy. Imagine that Rose promised to visit her friend Sophia, who is in the hospital recovering from a difficult surgery, but breaks this promise in order to paint her bedroom. Rose does not tell Sophia that she is not going to visit her, and Sophia is hurt when she realises her friend will not be coming. The next day, Rose reflects on her behaviour and comes to understand that what she did was wrong and feels quite guilty about not visiting Sophia. However, Rose does not express her guilt to Sophia or anyone else and she keeps her self-blame entirely private. Even if Rose feels adequately guilty for what she has done, there is still something criticisable about her self-blame. Though an *expression* of self-blame could serve a reparative function, merely blaming oneself cannot. While Rose's private self-blame may be fitting and/or deserved in light of her blameworthiness, this in and of itself does nothing for the person she wronged.

There are also instances of self-blame that violate Don't Suffer in Silence even if they are not entirely private. Imagine that Rose eventually expresses her self-blame, not to Sophia but to

their mutual friend Edna. A few weeks after the incident, Rose confesses to Edna what she's done and communicates to Edna that she is blameworthy for, and feels guilty about, her behaviour. While there is nothing morally objectionable about Rose expressing self-blame to Edna, and indeed expressing self-blame in certain public contexts can serve a morally important function, Rose should still express self-blame to Sophia. Without expressing self-blame to the person who she hurt, Rose fails to engage in the reparative behaviours that would benefit Sophia. Importantly, the reparative function of self-blame would not be served even if Sophia came to know that Rose blamed herself for what she did. Imagine that Edna reports to Sophia that Rose feels guilty for what she's done. While Sophia might take some solace in knowing that she and Rose are in agreement about one feature of what transpired between them, namely that Rose is blameworthy, there is also something upsetting about this development as well. Sophia would surely wonder why Rose failed to communicate her blameworthiness *to her*. Learning that the individual who wronged you blames themselves is not the same thing as receiving an apology or even acknowledgement of wrongdoing. And the relationship between the victim and wrongdoer will likely remain damaged even if both know that the wrongdoer is blameworthy *and* that they blame themselves. Thus, when we blame ourselves for how we have treated someone, we have good reason to express our self-blame to them. In so doing, we can begin the reparative process that benefits our victims.

3.b. Wrongdoer-based reasons to express self-blame

Expressing self-blame via the reparative behaviours that are distinctive of guilt not only benefits victims, it serves an important ameliorative function for wrongdoers as well.⁹ Philosophers and psychologists largely agree that guilt has a negative affect—to feel guilt is to suffer to at least some extent. But feelings of guilt can be resolved when one engages in the reparative behaviours that are distinctive of the emotion. That is, expressing guilt can reduce the experience of guilt. This has

⁹ Expressing self-blame can also benefit wrongdoers by improving others' treatment of them. For example, expressing guilt can stop victims from engaging in punishing and punitive behaviour towards wrongdoers (O'Connor 2016; Rosenstock & O'Connor 2018).

been noted in the empirical literature (Quiles & Bybee 1997) and demonstrated in studies with both adults and children (de Hooge 2012; Donohue & Tully 2019).¹⁰

Arguing that expressing self-blame can benefit wrongdoers by ameliorating their feelings of guilt is not to say that experiencing guilt is in and of itself bad or to be avoided. It's surely appropriate to blame oneself when one is blameworthy and it may very well be that feeling guilty when one is blameworthy is non-instrumentally good, as some in this volume have argued (Carlsson forthcoming; Portmore forthcoming). However, *privately* blaming oneself is maladaptive: experiencing but not expressing guilt fails to serve guilt's interpersonal function. And this can have very negative effects on the guilty party. Not only do agents who privately blame themselves continue to feel guilty for their transgressions, they also tend to feel *guiltier* for what they've done (Tilghman-Osborne & Cole 2012; Riek et al. 2014; Silfver 2007). This makes it more likely that those who privately self-blame experience more guilt than they deserve to feel because they experience guilt longer and to greater degrees than those who express their self-blame. And while it may be non-instrumentally good to experience *deserved* guilt, it's non-instrumentally bad to experience *undeserved* guilt. Furthermore, maladaptive and excessive guilt is associated with higher rates of depression and anxiety and lower rates of social functioning (Jones & Kugler 1003; Luby et al. 2018; Quiles & Bybee 1997).

In a recent interview with Conan O'Brian, Terry Gross noted something interesting about self-punishment.

You know, with self-punishment, I sometimes think there's a sense of... if you punish yourself and if you're penitent in some way, that it will avoid a harsher externally given punishment. Like, I know I did wrong. I've punished myself, so you don't have to do anything. I've taken care of it. It's almost like...[p]reemptive punishment. But it could be...so damaging.

While Gross doesn't articulate the ways in which pre-emptive self-punishment is damaging, given the context, I suspect she had in mind the destructive effects of private self-blame described above.

¹⁰ Interestingly, de Hooge (2012) found that transgressors' guilt-feelings decrease even if *others* repair the transgressors' wrongs.

If you punish or blame yourself, perhaps in order to avoid greater punishment or blame from others, this can ironically cause you to suffer much more in the long run. This is a result of both the elevated guilt one suffers over the particular wrongdoing as well as the more general suffering caused by the negative impacts on one's mental health that maladaptive and excessive guilt can cause.

Even if one's private self-blame does not calcify into depression or anxiety, I take it that many readers are familiar with the distinctive unpleasantness of private self-blame. Take Rose as an example. Imagine that Rose decides not to apologise or acknowledge her callous behaviour to Sophia because she is afraid of how Sophia would react. Perhaps she worries that Sophia's resentment will make her feel worse than she already feels and she wishes to avoid such suffering. So, she keeps her guilt to herself. But without expressing her guilt to Sophia, there is no way to alleviate her guilty feelings. Whenever she thinks about what she's done, she feels fresh pains of guilt. And while she may try to avoid these unpleasant feelings by attempting not to think about them, this is an all but impossible feat. Guilt, like other emotions, is not easily ignored. Even if Rose were to succeed in ignoring her guilt for a time, it would reignite as soon as she is reminded of her blameworthy behaviour. Eventually, Rose may very well suffer significantly more in virtue of experiencing excessive and maladaptive guilt than she would have had she expressed her guilt to Sophia and been the target of her resentment.

While it may be conceptually possible to privately blame oneself, it is not advisable. Expressions of self-blame can serve reparative and ameliorative functions, which are morally important both for victims and wrongdoers. Such expressions can have a restorative effect on the victim as well as their relationship with the wrongdoer, and these expressions can also help wrongdoers avoid the undeserved suffering and negative mental health effects that are associated with private self-blame.

4. Caveats and Clarifications

In this section, I will address three questions regarding Don't Suffer in Silence in order to clarify its normative scope and how it relates to other norms governing the appropriateness of self-blame.

4.a. Should we always express self-blame?

Simply put: No. Don't Suffer in Silence states that agents who blame themselves should, *ceteris paribus*, express their self-blame to those they have wronged. But other things are not always equal and so it will not always be appropriate to express self-blame. Like other norms that govern expressions of blame, there will be circumstances in which the morally best thing to do will be to violate Don't Suffer in Silence. It will be interesting to explore at least a few of the conditions under which Don't Suffer in Silence ought to be disregarded.

One of the most important reasons to express self-blame is because such expressions typically serve a reparative function. But there will be situations in which expressing self-blame cannot serve this function. The most straightforward situation in which this occurs is when the victim's relationship with the wrongdoer has already been repaired via some previous expression of self-blame. I will modify the Rose and Sophia case to illustrate this point. Imagine that Rose, upon realising that she was wrong to skip her visit with Sophia to paint her bedroom, blames herself and calls Sophia to express her self-blame. She apologises for letting her friend down and promises to visit the next day, which she does. Over the coming weeks, Rose works to repair her relationship with Sophia and eventually Sophia forgives Rose. But years later, Rose continues to blame herself for how she treated Sophia—she still feels guilty for what she did. In this situation, it's not clear that Rose should express her self-blame to Sophia. The expression of self-blame won't succeed in having a reparative effect, because there is nothing left to repair. In fact, it's imaginable that Sophia could be annoyed or even distressed by Rose's expression of self-blame all these years later. Perhaps it serves only to remind Sophia of a difficult time in her life, one in which she was in the hospital and mistreated by a friend. In this case, it could very well be inappropriate for Rose

to express her self-blame to Sophia because doing so would not serve a reparative function and could even cause harm.¹¹

However, it's possible that Rose's expression of self-blame, while it would not benefit Sophia, could benefit Rose. Recall that there are wrongdoer-based reasons to express self-blame in addition to victim-based reasons. Expressing guilt can help wrongdoers avoid the undeserved suffering and negative mental health effects that are associated with excessive and maladaptive guilt. One could argue that Rose is no longer blameworthy for her treatment of Sophia.¹² And perhaps if Rose expressed her self-blame to Sophia, she would cease feeling guilty for something that she ought not feel guilty for anymore. In this case, it may be permissible for Rose to express self-blame to Sophia. It could even be permissible to do so if it negatively affects Sophia. While it can be painful to be reminded of a difficult time in one's life, it could be worthwhile if it alleviates another individual's undeserved suffering.

However, just as expressions of self-blame do not always serve a reparative function, they can also fail to ameliorate feelings of guilt. Indeed, in the case of Rose, one might wonder why she continues to feel guilty for her treatment of Sophia even after she successfully repaired their relationship. It's possible that if Rose were to once again express her self-blame to Sophia this would not ease her suffering at all. Perhaps the guilt that Rose feels is both excessive and

¹¹ Another kind of case that is often said to have this structure is one in which the victim does not know that the wrongdoer has wronged them. For example, it's sometimes argued that individuals in monogamous relationships should not confess to cheating on their partners because doing so will only cause their partners to suffer. However, I am not confident that Don't Suffer in Silence should be violated in such cases. Even if a victim is unaware that they have been lied to or betrayed, they have still been wronged (according to most normative views) and this wrong should be repaired. And it's hard to see how a broken promise or betrayal could be repaired without first being confessed to. After all, the victim should have some agency in determining how the wrong is addressed, which cannot happen if they are kept in the dark about the wrong that occurred. Confessing to someone that you have wronged them will no doubt cause them to suffer, but the badness of this suffering may well be outweighed by the goodness of the reparative process that the confession initiates. Of course, there are bound to be exceptions. For instance, some individuals make clear to their partners that they would not want to know if they are cheated on. Confessing to such a partner would not give them agency in the reparative process, but would rather further violate their trust. In this kind of case, expressing self-blame would likely fail to serve the reparative function, and thus the best thing to do may be to violate Don't Suffer in Silence. Notice, however, that failing to confess would mean that the relationship would go unrepaired and the wrongdoer could experience heightened and maladaptive guilt. This is certainly a bad state of affairs, but may well be better than the alternative. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to discuss this kind of case.

¹² Whether and why Rose continues to be blameworthy for her treatment of Sophia is an interesting question and one I will return to in the conclusion of the essay.

recalcitrant. If this is the case, then it's not clear that Rose should express her self-blame to Sophia. Rather, she should take other measures to ameliorate her suffering. It's possible that her feelings of excessive and recalcitrant guilt are linked to underlying mental health issues that could be addressed with therapeutic and/or medical treatment.

The above are cases in which the reparative or ameliorative functions of expressing self-blame cannot be served and thus warrant the violation of Don't Suffer in Silence. But there are also situations in which these functions *ought not* be served, and would also require the violation of the norm. A case in which the power dynamic between the wrongdoer and victim is wildly out of alignment can have this structure. Imagine that the relationship between Rose and Sophia is quite fraught—Sophia has bullied and manipulated Rose for years and demanded a level of care from Rose that she herself does not reciprocate. On the day that Rose decided to paint her bedroom instead of visiting Sophia in the hospital, she had simply had enough of this treatment and decided to take a stand. Rose could still be blameworthy and fittingly guilty for her behaviour in such a case. Sophia, despite her flaws, was in a time of need and there are other ways to take a stand against a bully than to abandon them when they need you most. Nevertheless, if Rose were to express her self-blame to Sophia, perhaps by apologising, this would simply re-establish their toxic relationship. While some relationships are improved through the reparative processes initiated by expressed self-blame, some simply go back to how they were. And in the case of Rose and Sophia, it's not difficult to imagine that an apology from Rose will only feed into the unbalanced power dynamic between the two. However, if Rose refused to express her self-blame to Sophia without even an acknowledgement of her blameworthiness, then their toxic relationship could come to an end. In this case, it may be best if Rose violates Don't Suffer in Silence and keeps her self-blame private, ending her relationship with Sophia. This could be so even if it means that Rose would always feel a bit guilty for how she treated Sophia and Sophia would never receive an apology or acknowledgement for how she was treated. Such a scenario is certainly unfortunate, but the scenario that would arise if Rose expressed self-blame could well be worse.

Just as there are cases in which the reparative function of blame ought not be served, there will also be situations in which blame's ameliorative function should be avoided. A case where the power dynamic between the wrongdoer and victim is heavily asymmetrical can also illustrate this point. Imagine again that the relationship between Rose and Sophia is very dysfunctional, this time because Sophia is terrified of losing Rose as a friend and wants to ensure that Rose never feels discomfort in their relationship. Because of this, Sophia is quick to accept any of Rose's attempts at amends as sufficient to repair their relationship, no matter how meagre or half-hearted. Thus, if Rose were to express the slightest degree of self-blame to Sophia for failing to visit her in the hospital, Sophia would quickly forgive Rose and assure her that she should not feel bad about what she did. And while this would likely ameliorate Rose's guilt, it's not clear that this is a good thing. Those who take blameworthy agents to deserve to feel a particular amount of guilt will likely agree. One could argue that Rose experiences less guilt than she deserves because her expression of self-blame alleviates her guilt too quickly. But one need not be committed to the view that blameworthy agents deserve to feel guilty to think that there is something objectionable about this scenario. Feelings of guilt can lead us to improve our behaviour over time and become better, more respectful agents (Ketelaar & Au 2003). But if Rose only experiences an abbreviated bout of guilt because her expression of self-blame is met with forgiveness and grace by Sophia, then it's unlikely that Rose will be able to grasp the badness of her actions or be motivated to change her behaviour in the future, which is an unfortunate outcome. In this case, it might be best for Rose to delay expressing her self-blame to Sophia and spend some time blaming herself privately. While this will lead to more suffering on Rose's behalf, it will also allow her to come to see the seriousness of her wrong and truly commit to being a better friend.

This is far from an exhaustive discussion of the situations in which it could be appropriate to violate Don't Suffer in Silence. But the cases discussed above help to illuminate the moral value of expressing self-blame and provide a sense for when all else is not equal when it comes to these expressions. The moral value of expressing self-blame rests on the reparative and ameliorative

functions such expressions can serve. But this value can be outweighed, as in cases where reparation and/or amelioration ought not occur, or undercut, as in cases where expressions of self-blame cannot perform their paradigmatic functions.

4.b. Is there a wrong way to express self-blame?

The answer is surely yes. While I have focused on expressions of self-blame via the reparative behaviours that are characteristic of guilt, there are many ways to express self-blame, and some are worse than others. And though Don't Suffer in Silence, because it is a blamer-specific norm, cannot capture the dimensions along which expressions of self-blame can be better or worse, other conditions can. Just as there are norms that govern acts of other-directed blame, there are also norms that govern acts of self-blame. For example, it's often argued that blame ought to be proportional to the wrong in question, and this surely applies to self-blame as well. In addition to considerations of proportionality, philosophers also evaluate the vices and virtues expressed when we blame others. Gary Watson (2013) argues that blame should not evince the vice of judgmentalism, while Miranda Fricker cautions against blame that reflects a "controlling and censorious attitude towards others" (2016: 169). Similarly, there are likely virtues and vices that are distinctive of self-blame which we can evaluate.

For example, simply telling the person you have wronged that you blame yourself is not a particularly good way of expressing self-blame. Philosophers and psychologists have long noted that emotions, including guilt, are effective forms of communication because they convey both sincerity and seriousness (Frank 1988; McGeer 2013). After all, expressions of guilt, especially via reparative behaviours, are costly to the wrongdoer and hard to fake. But this is not so for an affectless statement like "I take myself to be blameworthy for how I have treated you." One could easily lie about taking oneself to be blameworthy and such a statement comes with little cost to the wrongdoer. Thus, non-affective statements regarding one's self-blame may very well be dismissed. And if these claims are not believed, then it's hard to see how they could fulfil the reparative function that makes expressions of self-blame morally valuable in the first place. So,

one could argue that non-affective expressions of self-blame exhibit the vice of coldness, which renders them inappropriate.¹³

A wrongdoer can also express self-blame poorly even if they express guilt over what they have done. Engaging in the reparative behaviours that are characteristic of guilt is one way to communicate that one feels guilty, but one could also communicate one's guilt by articulating, in great detail, the degree to which one is suffering. But expressing guilt solely by describing the quality and degree of one's suffering would not be a very good way of expressing self-blame. This is not because expressing guilt this way would fail to convince a bystander that one blames oneself—such expressions might very well be successful in this regard. Rather, these expressions of self-blame are criticisable because they do little to serve the reparative function that makes expressing self-blame valuable. Being told by the person who wronged you that they feel very bad for what they have done is a lot like a third-party report on the wrongdoer's guilt. While it might give a victim some comfort to know that the person who wronged them blames themselves for their behaviour, this alone cannot repair the relationship. Victims should be given moral attention and care in light of being wronged, but expressions of self-blame that focus only on the negative affect of feeling guilt cannot do this. Such expressions focus attention on the wrongdoer, not the victim, and self-blame should not be solely self-regarding. Thus, one could argue that suffering-forward expressions of self-blame exhibit the vice of self-centeredness.

There are likely many other virtues and vices that are exhibited by expressions of self-blame, and there are surely many other objectionable ways to blame oneself. I take this to be an interesting and promising direction for future research, but one that I will not explore further here.

4.c. What if the victim is unreachable?

¹³ This is not to say that the only appropriate way to express self-blame is by expressing an emotion like guilt. It's possible that an agent could blame herself without experiencing guilt, or any other relevant emotion, but express her self-blame by providing her victim with significant restitution or reparations. Because these behaviours are costly to the wrongdoer and hard to fake, they may well be accepted as sincere by the victim. Thus, though affectless, such expressions of self-blame would not exhibit the vice of coldness and could serve to repair the relationship between wrongdoer and victim. Thanks to Carrie Figdor for discussion on this point.

According to *Don't Suffer in Silence*, we should, other things being equal, express our self-blame to those we have wronged. But what if the victims of our wrongdoings are dead or otherwise inaccessible to us? *Don't Suffer in Silence* does not have much normative force in such cases, since it makes little sense to argue that an agent should communicate with someone they cannot reach. These are clearly cases where other things are not equal. Still, it's worth considering whether, and how, we should express self-blame when our victims are unreachable.

On first pass, one might argue that while there may be an ameliorative benefit to expressing self-blame in cases where the victim is unreachable, there is no reparative value. After all, expressions of self-blame clearly cannot benefit the victim in such cases. However, I think this would be too quick. Though I have largely focused on expressions of self-blame to victims in this essay, it will be worth briefly considering another audience for our self-blame: the public. Just as we can confess our wrongdoings to our victims, we can also confess them to other members of the moral community. And, public self-blame can serve a reparative function and mend the wrongdoer's relationship with these individuals. When we harm someone, though we only harm them, we also alter our relationship with the moral community at large (Scanlon 2008). Others come to see us as disrespectful and untrustworthy and alter their relationships with us in light of this fact. Public expressions of self-blame, even if they cannot be expressed to one's victims, could serve to repair one's relationships with the moral community.

But what would expressions of public self-blame look like? When we express self-blame to our victims, we typically do things like apologise, make amends, and remedy the negative consequences of our actions. But it would be ill-fitting and even impossible to engage in these kinds of reparative behaviours with those we have not wronged. Still, there are a variety of behaviours we can utilise to communicate to others that we feel guilty for what we have done. In fact, there is interesting empirical work on how agents express guilt when they cannot repair their relationships with their victims. Rob Nelissen and Marcel Zeelenberg (2009) found that guilt evoked self-punishing behaviours, but only if there was no way to compensate for the guilt-

inducing transgression. The researchers labelled this the Dobby Effect, a reference to the house-elf in the *Harry Potter* series who was forced to punish himself if he violated his masters' orders. While this kind of behaviour may seem maladaptive and morally suspect,¹⁴ Nelissen and Zeelenberg suggest that it could have an important function: "Self-punishment may signal appreciation of and future compliance with violated standards...The Dobby Effect then, is a public sign of reconciliation that occurs if actual reconciliation (by compensating the victim) is impossible" (2009: 121).

So, one could argue that wrongdoers should express self-blame to the public even if they cannot express self-blame to their victims. While distinct norms would no doubt govern expressions of public self-blame, it's interesting to note that the reasons to engage in this practice are very similar to the reasons to express self-blame to victims: both forms of self-blame can serve a reparative function. Indeed, reparative factors have played an important role in evaluating a number of the dimensions along which expressions of self-blame can be better and worse. Given the important role reparative concerns play in the ethics of self-blame, perhaps they play an important role in blameworthiness itself as well. I'll explore this possibility in the concluding section of this essay.

5. Conclusion: Insights into blameworthiness

Until now, I've focused on the ethics of self-blame and remained silent on matters of blameworthiness. But the two are intimately connected, and developments in the ethics of blame can shed light on the nature of blameworthiness (and vice versa). For example, when determining *to whom* and *how* agents should express self-blame, questions regarding reparations play a central role. Given the importance of reparative factors in the ethics of self-blame, they may also be relevant to blameworthiness as well. And, perhaps by developing an account of blameworthiness

¹⁴ One might raise Terry Gross's worries about pre-emptive self-punishment, for example. But pre-emptive self-punishment is very different from public self-punishment. When we engage in pre-emptive self-punishment, we do so in order to avoid engaging in the reparative process with our victims. But public self-punishment, when done well, is a way of engaging in the reparative process with the public, despite being unable to do so with our victims.

that makes room for reparations, we can begin to solve difficult problems that other accounts of blameworthiness have faced.

Take the puzzle of blameworthiness over time, which Andreas Carlsson considers in his contribution to this volume. On the one hand, if an agent is blameworthy simply because they performed some wrong action, then this fact will always be true of them, and thus one could conclude that they are blameworthy forever. But this seems counterintuitive—surely blameworthiness should diminish over time. But if blameworthiness doesn't depend solely on wrongdoing, what other feature is at play that allows blameworthiness to diminish? Given our discussion above, one potential answer is: reparations. If an agent is blameworthy for wronging someone, they will remain blameworthy for their wrong until they try to make reparations. This account can easily explain how blameworthiness can diminish over time—agents cease to be blameworthy when they repair their wrongs and the relationships they have damaged.¹⁵

This view has the interesting implication that two agents can perform qualitatively identical wrong actions but be blameworthy, and the fitting targets of blame, for drastically different periods of time. But this strikes me as quite sensible. If two friends each break a promise to me, but one apologises while the other never acknowledges the wrong, I find it perfectly appropriate to cease blaming the first friend while continuing to blame the second. This view also has the implication that some agents will be blameworthy forever. Recall the case of Rose and Sophia in which it was better, all things considered, for Rose to never express self-blame to Sophia because in doing so she could end their toxic relationship. In this case, Rose would continue to be blameworthy for

¹⁵ Carlsson provides his own elegant solution to this puzzle. First, he defends the Blameworthiness as Deserved Guilt DG view, according to which blameworthy agents deserve to suffer a particular amount of guilt. On this view, once an agent experiences the requisite amount of guilt, they will no longer deserve to feel guilty, and will thus no longer be blameworthy. There is a way of rendering the view sketched above as consistent with Carlsson's view. For example, one could argue that reparations play a role in determining how much guilt an agent deserves to experience. On this view, an agent would remain blameworthy, and thus deserving of guilt, until they try to repair their wrong. But there is also a way of rendering the two views distinct. One could argue that being blameworthy involves both deserving to feel guilty *and* owing reparations to one's victims (where reparations doesn't determine deserved guilt). On this view, an agent who doesn't attempt to make reparations would continue to be blameworthy *even if* they suffered the requisite amount of guilt. It's beyond the scope of this essay to exploring these views more fully, though doing so could prove to be an interesting future project.

how she treated Sophia for all time, since she never attempted to repair her wrong. While this is surely unfortunate, I also take it to be a defensible implication of the view. After all, Rose never acknowledged or addressed her wrongdoing to Sophia. It would be appropriate for Sophia to harbour resentment towards Rose just as it would be appropriate for Rose to feel guilty for what she had done.

The above is far from a full articulation of an account of blameworthiness, and much more would need to be said to make it theoretically palatable. This is merely an illustration of how insights from the ethics of self-blame can alter our understanding of blameworthiness. By coming to understand the important role reparations play in the ethics of self-blame, we can begin to develop accounts of blameworthiness that make room for reparations as well.

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