

# The Ethics of Blame: A Primer

Abstract: It's widely held that if an agent is not morally responsible for her action—i.e., if she is not deserving of blame—then we have a (decisive) reason to refrain from blaming her. But though this is true, the fact that someone *is* deserving of blame isn't clearly sufficient for there to be most all-things-considered reason for blaming that person. Other considerations bear on this question as well. In this paper I offer an account of some of these considerations—particularly those that can serve as deontic constraints on blame. I also offer a reply to those skeptical of the “ethics of blame” on the grounds that such theorizing invariably appeals to the “wrong kind of reasons.”

## 1. Introduction

The domain of ethical inquiry is concerned with not only how we act but also with how we engage with the world more generally. And much of our engagement with the world occurs in our own minds. Our commitments, values, hopes, concerns, loves, and dreams are all mental states that affect how we interact with our environments, and each of these states can be more or less rational, as well as better or worse morally speaking.<sup>1</sup> As a result, an “ethics of mind” seeks to understand how moral considerations bear on our own mental states and activities.

Since our emotions in particular play such an outsized role in our mental lives, it seems that an adequate ethics of mind must attend to the value of certain emotions, emotional episodes, and the variety of dispositions and tendencies we have to be emotionally exercised by what we encounter in our environments. For example, we might sensibly ask whether we have a distinctively moral reason to be more trusting or more emotionally vulnerable in our interactions with others. Or alternatively, we might be concerned, say, that the *schadenfreude* we feel in response to a rival's suffering is unwarranted. This concern might be rooted in the thought that *schadenfreude* can never be a *fitting* emotion, but the concern might also be anchored in a sense that independently of whether *schadenfreude* is ever a fitting response to another's suffering, it's often a morally *unworthy* one. Or perhaps we

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<sup>1</sup> For one especially trenchant challenge to this claim, see George Sher, “A Wild West of the Mind,”

*Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, forthcoming.

might think it reflects poorly on our characters that we don't really admire someone who clearly deserves it.

These questions loom especially large when we consider blame-manifesting emotions like resentment, indignation, and guilt. How we navigate and police the moral community, how we relate to one another as equals, and how we conceive of ourselves and others as being worthy of respect all depend in some crucial ways on our proneness to these emotions.<sup>2</sup> Given their importance in our lives with others, the fact that one of these emotions is fitting seems to, at the very least, license blame (if not telling strongly in favor of blaming). Yet these emotions are often the source of a great deal of suffering, not only on the part of those who are gripped by feelings of say, resentment, but also on the part of those to whom expressions of these emotions are directed. Moreover, these emotions seem at odds with other moral values that we purport to care about: tolerance, civility, generosity, and mercy to name just a few. How these competing values interact is a delicate matter of no small controversy, but it's a controversy we cannot ignore. A full ethics of mind must pay careful attention to these emotions and to the normative considerations that bear on them. In other words, no ethics of mind can be complete without an *ethics of blame*.

## 2. On blame and its ethics

The question of what blame is is one that's proven difficult to answer satisfactorily.<sup>3</sup> But whatever blame is, it seems plausible that certain emotional responses to others' behavior *manifest* an agent's blame: these are the blame-manifesting emotions of resentment, indignation, and guilt.<sup>4</sup> Since these emotions so clearly manifest blame (even if they cannot be *identified* with what it is to blame), I will focus exclusively on them. As a result, I'll necessarily be less than comprehensive in what I have to say here, since it's plausible that

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<sup>2</sup> This picture of the role that blame-manifesting emotions play in regulating our lives with others has its source (at least in the contemporary literature) in P.F. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*, London: Methuen & Co. Ltd. (1974).

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed account of this difficulty, see D. Justin Coates and Neal A. Tognazzini, "The Contours of Blame," *Blame: Its Nature and Norms*, eds. D. Justin Coates and Neal A. Tognazzini, New York: Oxford University Press (2013).

<sup>4</sup> There are perhaps other blame-manifesting emotions, including disappointment, contempt, disdain, shame, and rage.

other mental states or attitudes and outward expressions of these states or attitudes also manifest blame. Nevertheless, I think that the general taxonomy that I'll offer will apply *mutatis mutandis* to other blame-manifesting attitudes and behaviors.<sup>5</sup>

A central task of an ethics of blame, then, will be investigate what general kinds of considerations bear on the all-things-considered propriety of blame. That is, an ethics of blame will offer an account of the facts that are typically relevant to assessing whether an episode or expression of blame is all-things-considered warranted—i.e., facts that can, in many circumstances, serve as deontic constraints on blame. This set of facts includes, but is not limited to, agents' culpability for their actions, the standing relationship would-be blamers have to those to whom their blame is directed, turpitude or involvement in the transgression on the part of the would-be blamer, the epistemic status of would-be blamers, the values of mercy, generosity, and forgiveness, prudential considerations, and how well blame (and its expressions) serves to protect, promote, and honor important interpersonal values. Only when we consider each of these issues in turn will we be in a position to offer something approaching an ethics of blame.

### 3. Does the ethics of blame rest on a mistake?

Suppose that you discover that a friend has betrayed your trust. Suppose now that it wasn't an accident, and that instead, he knowingly and intentionally revealed something that he had previously promised to keep secret. Without some shocking further discovery—that, for example, an assassin had credibly threatened to kill his family members if he didn't betray your trust—it's natural to think that your friend is blameworthy for his transgression. What

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<sup>5</sup> One possible exception to this are judgment theories of blame. On these theories, to blame someone is to judge that their behavior speaks poorly of them. If blame can be reduced to a judgment or a belief, then it would seem that it would be governed exclusively by the norms of belief. If such norms are exhausted by epistemic norms, then it's hard to see how the fact that I would be a hypocrite to blame you for *x*-ing could be a reason to refrain from blaming. Since such facts seem to many to be such a reason, that puts pressure on either the claim that blame can be reductively analyzed in terms of belief *or* the claim that the norms governing belief are exhausted by epistemic norms. For reasons to doubt the former claim, see George Sher, *In Praise of Blame*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2006) and T. M. Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, Blame*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (2008). For reasons to doubt the latter claim, see Miriam Schleifer McCormick, *Believing Against the Evidence: Agency and the Ethics of Belief*, New York: Routledge (2015) and Susanna Rinard, "No Exception for Belief," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 94.1 (2017): 121-143.

this means is that he *deserves* blame. And he not only deserves blame in the form of your resentment (which is fitting since *you* were the person he betrayed) but he also deserves blame in the form of feeling guilty for what he's done and indignation from third parties who witness his disloyalty. But how do the facts concerning what he deserves bear on the all-things-considered propriety of blame? That is, does the fact that he deserves to be blamed mean that you *must* blame him, or only something weaker, that it would be appropriate or (weaker still) permissible if you did so?

On one view, the question of whether someone deserves blame-manifesting emotions exhausts the list of things one must consider when determining the all-things-considered propriety of blame. If the person in question deserves blame-manifesting emotions, then we should have (and perhaps express) those emotions, and if not, then we shouldn't. The ground for thinking this is that non-desert-based considerations provide agents with the *wrong kind of reasons* for blaming (or for refraining from blame). In other words, those who accept this view insist that the only bases for an agent's being warranted or unwarranted in experiencing an emotion are simply the considerations that go into making that emotion *fitting* (or, in the case of praise- or blame-manifesting emotions: *deserved*). Any other basis for or against blaming would be analogous to reasons for or against believing that *p* that are grounded in how happy or sad the truth of *p* might make you. But such considerations aren't relevant to belief—one should simply believe according to the evidence. And so too, one should blame according to what's deserved. On this view, then, taking there to be substantive questions about whether one should be resentful or indignant that go beyond the facts that make actions *blameworthy* is simply a mistake.

The problem with this view is that it's quite doubtful that all non-desert bases grounds for refraining from blame-manifesting emotions are on a par with refraining from believing that *p* because the falsity of *p* would make you happy. For one thing, wishful thinking is of dubious value, but the goods that can be secured from minimizing or eliminating your resentment in the face of some acts of wrongdoing are often quite significant. To see this, suppose you come to discover that just before your friend betrayed you, he had found out that his partner was cheating on him and was deeply distraught and insecure. In that light, his betrayal makes more sense, since we often gossip about others and betray their confidence as a way of boosting one's confidence. However, the fact that his betrayal of you was itself a manifestation of the insecurity he felt in response to his own

betrayal doesn't excuse him from what he did. It doesn't undermine the claim that he deserves your resentment and that he deserves to feel guilty for what he's done as well. But now suppose that upon discovering all this you tell yourself, "he's been a real jerk, yes, but now's not the time for anger—now's the time to be supportive of your friend," and that in light of this you don't resent him for what he's done. Here you've refrained from resenting someone who deserves it, and yet it seems that you're within your rights for having done so. Moreover, you've decided not to resent him *not* because he doesn't deserve it but because it would be all-things-considered better that you not do so. But in this case, the latter doesn't look like the wrong kind of reason at all. Indeed in this case, there seems to be no better—no more *right*—kind of reason for acting than the one that's supplied by the value of your friendship.

This, of course, isn't yet to say that it would be objectionable for you to decide instead to resent your friend for his betrayal. But the former course of mental action certainly seems to be genuinely admirable, which means it must have *something* going for it rationally speaking. And even if you're not willing to concede that it's the uniquely admirable or preferable way of interacting with you friend, it seems hard to deny that that course of action would be rationally *optional* for you in the circumstances. Yet even that would mean that non-desert based reasons can bear on the question of whether you should all-things-considered experience some fitting emotional response to an agent's act of wrongdoing.

There's also a second reason why worries about the so-called "wrong kind of reasons" are misguided here. Even if we accept that any particular episode of a blame-manifesting emotion is made all-things-considered appropriate only on those grounds that make it fitting or deserved, there are still substantive moral questions about what kinds of dispositions to blame that we should cultivate. And if it's true that we should be disposed to blame-manifesting emotions to a degree different than that which we actually are disposed to these emotions, then episodes issuing from recalcitrant dispositions will be objectionable. So because the question of whether one will blame depends on one's dispositions, and there are substantive moral norms governing which dispositions one has (and which dispositions one has reason to cultivate), the question of whether it is all-things-consider appropriate to experience blame-manifesting emotions isn't exhausted by the question of whether the particular attitude is fitting in the circumstances it arises.

And finally, there is a third reason to doubt that only facts that ground desert bear on the propriety of blame-manifesting emotions. The question of whether you should believe that *p* often depends on the practical stakes of being wrong about *p*.<sup>6</sup> But if pragmatic considerations bear on what we should believe, even if only in this indirect way, it seems plausible that the all-things-considered propriety of our emotions—including our blame-manifesting emotions—can similarly depend on the practical stakes. Of course, as I’ve stated it here, I haven’t specified *which* practical considerations bear on the question of whether to blame (indeed, this is, to a great extent the main task that I will take up in the remainder of this paper). Instead, I only mean to suggesting a parity principle: given that practical considerations (particularly practical *stakes*) can bear on the question of what to believe, practical considerations can bear on whether to blame. If such a reason holds, then we shouldn’t be concerned that appeals to non-desert based considerations are *of the wrong kind* when thinking about the propriety of blame any more than we should be concerned about appeals to practical stakes when asking ourselves what to believe.

This all means, of course, that the very idea of an ethics of blame does not rest on a mistake. So having sorted that out, we can now turn to some of the considerations that bear on the question of whether any particular instance of a blame-manifesting emotion is all-things-considered appropriate.

#### 4. Justice and blame-manifesting emotions

Although I’ve just argued that considerations of desert do not *exhaust* the set of considerations that are relevant to assessing the all-things-considered propriety of any particular instance of a blame-manifesting emotion, they are surely *relevant* to any such assessment. After all, it is *unjust* to blame someone who doesn’t deserve blame. Considerations (or *reasons*) of justice thus bear on the all-things-considered propriety of blame.

Two of the key justice-related considerations that are widely accepted to be constraints on the all-things-considered propriety of blame-manifesting emotions

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<sup>6</sup> One way to spell this thought out is to say that justification or knowledge are “pragmatically encroached,” but one can reject this claim and still think that the practical stakes of being wrong about *p* give you reason to be more reticent in assenting to *p*. For more on pragmatic encroachment, see Jason Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Stakes*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2005).

correspond to exempting and excusing conditions. If an agent is *exempt* from blame—if she is not, in general, a morally responsible agent—then it is because she lacks some general capacity that is required for full participation in our responsibility practices. For example, very young children, adults suffering from the late stages of dementia, and those who suffer from severe developmental disorders are all thought to be exempt from moral responsibility. Such individuals, while undeniably agents, lack the rational capacities (e.g., sensitivity to moral reasons) that are required for fully morally responsible agency.

By contrast, if an agent is *excused* from blame, it isn't because she is not, in a general, a morally responsible agent. Rather, on some particular occasion she is not, for whatever reason, morally responsible for performing *that* action (perhaps because, e.g., she was coerced, hypnotized, factually mistaken, etc.).<sup>7</sup> In such cases, the agential capacities that ground our status as morally responsible agents are temporarily impaired (and the agent herself is not responsible for their impairment). Yet in *either* of these cases, the thought goes, there is an especially weighty (perhaps even *decisively* weighty) reason that's grounded in the value of justice *against* blame-manifesting emotions. To experience, say, resentment in either of these cases would essentially be to blame the innocent.

This suggests two distinct ways in which the considerations of justice bear on the all-things-considered propriety of blame-manifesting emotions.

#### *Exemption*

If *B* is not, in general, a morally responsible agent, then there are weighty *pro tanto* reasons against *A*'s having blame-manifesting emotions in response to any of *B*'s actions.

#### *Excuse*

If *B* does not deserve to be blamed for *x*-ing because *B* has an excuse for *x*-ing, then there are weighty *pro tanto* reasons against *A*'s having blame-manifesting emotions in response to *B*'s *x*-ing.

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<sup>7</sup> For more on this way of framing the distinction, see Gary Watson, "Responsibility and the Limits of Evil: Variations on a Strawsonian Theme," *Responsibility, Emotions, and Character*, ed. Ferdinand Schoeman, Cambridge University Press (1987): 256-286.

Together, *Exemption* and *Excuse* circumscribe the circumstances in which exempting and excusing conditions constrain the propriety of blame. And to violate one of these norms is to act unjustly towards the innocent targets of our blame.

Of course, as you have no doubt noticed, as I've stated them here neither *Exemption* nor *Excuse* are hard and fast prohibitions. Instead, these norms identify very weighty *pro tanto* reasons against blame-manifesting emotions that arise whenever the antecedent conditions are met. This means that although *Exemption* and *Excuse* are almost certainly decisive reasons against blame-manifesting emotions in ordinary contexts, they could potentially be outweighed. Yet because such contexts are rare, the *pro tanto* reasons in question are of sufficient weight that it will almost always follow that *A* has most all-things-considered reason to refrain from blaming *B*. However, even in cases in which *A*'s *pro tanto* reason is outweighed by countervailing reasons of sufficient weight, *Exemption* and *Excuse* still place normative burdens on would-be blamers, since they identify weighty reasons against blame that cannot simply be ignored. For suppose that there really is some circumstance in which it is all-things-considered appropriate to blame someone who does not deserve to be blamed (imagine, for example, a situation of the sort consequentialists sometimes point to). If we blame in such a case, then even though it is all-things-considered permissible, it's plausible that we nevertheless *owe* the blamed an explanation of why the reasons grounded in justice are outweighed. In other words, in such a situation we would be obliged to say something like, "hey look, I know this isn't entirely fair, but in this case..." or as we sometimes say to children, "I know you can't understand this, but it's for your own good." What this means is that *Exemption* and *Excuse* play an important role not only in determining when blame-manifesting emotions are all-things-considered appropriate, but also what form that blame can legitimately take (since even when they are outweighed, they ground the need for further explanation in such cases).

It's not enough that we attend to the reasons provided by *Exemption* and *Excuse*, since attending to these considerations only guarantees that our blame-manifesting emotions don't run afoul of justice by being directed at an agent who doesn't deserve blame. More is needed for these emotions (and their expressions) to be all-things-considered appropriate. Angela Smith makes the point nicely: "whether it would be appropriate for any particular person to have and express any particular [blaming] attitude to the agent will depend on many considerations *in addition* to the agent's responsibility and culpability," (Smith 2007,

477).<sup>8</sup> To know when it's all-things-considered reasonable to blame, we must identify further considerations that bear on the propriety of any particular instance of a blame-manifesting emotion.

## 5. The jurisdiction of blame-manifesting emotions

Just as the legal notion of jurisdiction, which concerns “how far the arm of the law can reach,”<sup>9</sup> bears on the authority of a government to prescribe and enforce its laws, so too, jurisdictional-like considerations bear on the all-things-considered propriety of blame-manifesting emotions. These are considerations that are relevant to the question of whose place it is, normatively speaking, to blame wrongdoers. In other words, jurisdictional considerations fix the conditions under which agents have the normative power or authority to legitimately blame. Thus, when we respond to blamers (as we so often do) by saying, “It’s not *your* place to blame me!” or by saying, “You have no *right* to blame her!” we are implicitly invoking jurisdictional considerations. For just as it isn’t Canada’s place to punish me for failing to pay United States federal taxes, it’s often not our place to blame agents whose wrongdoing falls outside of the scope of our moral jurisdiction. But what facts are relevant to determining the scope of one’s jurisdiction? That is, what facts bear on the all-things-considered propriety of blame in this way?

### 5.1. The Business Condition

One thing that’s relevant for all-things-considered appropriate blame is that there’s the “right” kind of relationship between would-be blamers and would-be blamees. In particular, it seems to matter whether the transgression in question was any of the would-be blamer’s “business.”

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<sup>8</sup> Angela Smith, “On Being Responsible and Holding Responsible,” *Journal of Ethics* 11.4, (2007): 465-84.

<sup>9</sup> As Antony Duff puts it, “the law’s claim to jurisdiction over conduct committed within the territory of the state whose law it is involves two claims: that it can define such conduct as criminal; and that its courts have jurisdiction to try the alleged perpetrator of such conduct,” Duff, *Answering for Crime*, Hart Publishing (2007): 44.

*Business*

If *B*'s transgression *x* is none of *A*'s business, then there is a *pro tanto* reason against *A* having blame-manifesting emotions in response to *B*'s *x*-ing.

The simple idea here is that one way in which it can be “not my place” or “no right of mine” to blame is when the transgression in question occurs outside the sphere of human relations that I am privy to. For example, if I lack a standing relationship to another individual—say, with the people sitting next to me at the coffee shop—then if I were to overhear that one of them was leaving her husband for a co-worker, there seems to be a reason that tells against me pushing my way into the conversation in order to express my opprobrium. As I would quickly be told, these matters are “none of my damn business!”

Of course, here you might note that this case involves *expressed* blame-manifesting emotions. But there's also a reason in this case to refrain from getting indignant towards the person. After all, I might criticize *myself* for getting hotly indignant in the situation even if I didn't express my indignation on the grounds that *Business* identifies. That such self-criticism is reasonable is remarkably easy to demonstrate. Suppose for *reductio* that *Business* is false, such that the fact that another's transgression is none of your business is *no* reason at all to refrain from blaming. If so, then you would be no more reasonable for refraining from indignation in these circumstances than you would for refraining from indignation because you found the wrongdoer physically attractive—at fact that pretty clearly does not provide you with a reason to refrain from indignation. But clearly you would be *more* reasonable for refraining on the basis of the former fact than on the basis of the latter fact. So the former fact—that the wrongdoing is none of your business—must provide you with some reason to refrain from indignation in the circumstances.<sup>10</sup>

However you might be worried that this lionizes privacy and a nebulous notion of “one's business” in a way that silences criticism of serious wrongdoing. For example, if Doug hears his neighbor verbally and possibly even physically abusing his partner, then it's entirely appropriate for Doug to intervene, to call the police, and to cut off his relations with the neighbor. So too, it's pretty clearly appropriate that Doug feels indignation towards his neighbor. Yet if we suppose that Doug doesn't know his neighbor, then we might worry that

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Mark Schroeder's argument that we are unreliable detectors of negative reasons existentials. Schroeder, *Slaves of the Passions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2007).

the abuse is, in some sense, none of Doug's business. Of course, if this is right then that tells against *Business*, since it entails that Doug has some reason to refrain from blame-manifesting emotions in this case. However, it's plausible that Doug has *no* reason against having blame-manifesting emotions in response to his neighbor's action. So *Business* must be false.

This objection to *Business* fails. As I stated it above, the sense in which some failing—moral or otherwise—is “none of *A*'s business” is to be understood in terms of whether the failing occurs outside the sphere of human relations that *A* is privy to. And plausibly, the general wellbeing of the neighbor's partner *is* something that falls within the sphere of relations that Doug is privy to, even if Doug doesn't know his neighbor or his partner. After all, there is a general concern that we owe to *everyone* in virtue of their standing as *persons*: we are our neighbors' keepers. So when a moral fault constitutes an imminent and grave threat to another's wellbeing, as is the case when Doug hears his neighbor abusing his partner, it *becomes* Doug's business; *Business* does not even apply in such a case. The fact that Doug should, without thinking twice, not only blame his neighbor, but take positive steps towards preventing him from abusing his partner, is no threat to the truth of *Business*.

Moreover, even if it were possible to construe the case in such a way as for the domestic violence not to be Doug's business, it doesn't follow that that would give us grounds for rejecting *Business*. After all, *Business* is silent as to the strength of the *pro tanto* reason against blame-manifesting emotions in cases in which the transgression isn't your business. It's very doubtful that this reason at all approaches the strength of the reasons identified in *Exemption* and *Excuse*. So given that such a reason is relatively weak even in the best of circumstances, it's no stretch to think that it would be *silenced* in the sort of situation described above.

But though cases like the above do not teach us that *Business* is false, they do serve to remind us of the rather limited scope of some of considerations that bear on the all-things-considered propriety of blame. Relatively minor faults can be “none of our business,” and in such cases, we'll have a reason against blame. But serious moral failings *are* plausibly part of our business, and even if they're not, their gravity might nevertheless silence the reason against blame-manifesting emotions that *Business* identifies. Thus, the scope of *Business* is

constrained.<sup>11</sup> Yet this doesn't mean that *Business* isn't significant. It constrains blame-manifesting emotions in the case of relatively minor foibles and faults, and so, it puts real constraints on our tendency to be judgmental busybodies. And if nothing else, that's something.

## 5.2. The standing to blame

*Business* is not the only, or even the most prominent, jurisdictional consideration that bears on the all-things-considered propriety of blame. For example, when we're critical of Tom Buchanan's anger towards his wife Daisy and her lover Gatsby, it's not because their affair was none of Tom's business.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, it is his business. Rather, we seem to be thinking that Tom, who was having his own affair with Myrtle Wilson (and who seems generally unconcerned with his marriage), lacks what's sometimes called "the moral standing to blame." That is, we seem to endorse something along the lines of:

### *Standing*

If *A* lacks the moral standing to blame *B* for *B*'s transgression *x*, it there is a pro tanto against *A* having blame-manifesting emotions in response to *B*'s *x*-ing.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This ties into Angela Smith's (2007) suggestion that the gravity of the wrongdoer's fault is a consideration that, in addition to the culpability of the wrongdoer, plays some role in determining whether it is all-things-considered appropriate to blame a wrongdoer. But rather than understanding this as an *independent* consideration, I am suggesting that we understand the gravity of the fault as being relevant to the propriety of blame in virtue of its role in determining whether some piece of behavior is or isn't any of my business.

<sup>12</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, Scribner (1995): 136-7.

<sup>13</sup> Versions of *Standing* have been defended by G. A. Cohen, "Casting the First Stone: Who Can, and Who Can't, Condemn the Terrorists?" *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 58 (2006); Smith (2007); R. Jay Wallace, "Hypocrisy, Moral Address, and the Equal Standing of Persons," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 38.4 (2010); and Patrick Todd, "Manipulation and Moral Standing: An Argument for Incompatibilism," *Philosophers Imprint* 12 (7) (2012). For more discussion (including critical discussion) of this principle, see Macalester Bell, "The Standing to Blame: A Critique," *Blame: Its Nature and Norms*, eds. D. Justin Coates and Neal A. Tognazzini, New York: Oxford University Press (2013); Kyle G. Fritz and Daniel Miller, "Hypocrisy and the Standing to Blame," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* (forthcoming); and Patrick Todd, "A Unified Account of the Moral Standing to Blame," *Nous* (forthcoming).

Among those considerations affecting when it is all-things-considered appropriate for  $\mathcal{A}$  to have blame-manifesting emotions in response to  $B$ 's action(s), *Standing* has perhaps received the most attention. Despite this, it's not altogether clear what "the moral standing to blame" is. Nor is it clear why  $\mathcal{A}$ 's lacking the moral standing to blame might undermine the all-things-considered justification of her blame-manifesting emotions.

In response to these questions, I'll simply stipulate that the notion of standing I have in mind is relatively thin. A person has standing to blame in the relevant sense when nothing about that person undermines the force of their blame. This means that "standing" is the presumed or default position of all moral agents; it is not something that, at least in the first, must be earned or merited. However, when there is something about the person that undermines the force of their blame, then that person will either have less standing to blame or lack the standing to blame altogether, depending on how significantly weakened the force of their blame would be. And according to *Standing*, in these circumstances, the agent with impaired or no standing will have a *pro tanto* reason against blame-manifesting emotions.

Although this idea is somewhat sketchy, it will do our purposes, since we do not need a full *analysis* of the moral standing to blame to capture the intuitive idea above: Tom Buchanan has fairly weighty reasons against having the blame-manifesting emotions that he does in the circumstances, and plausibly, this is because something about him (*viz.*, his own affair) severely undercuts the force of his blame. To better motivate *Standing*, then, I now turn to perhaps the two clearest threats to the force of one's blame: (i) hypocrisy and (ii) complicity.

### 5.2.i. Hypocrisy and standing

We're told very early in our moral development that pots shouldn't call kettles black, that people living in glass houses shouldn't throw stones, and that we should judge not, lest we be judged ourselves. The simple idea behind these commonplaces is that  $\mathcal{A}$ 's status as a hypocrite—as being guilty of some transgression  $t$ —provides  $\mathcal{A}$  with a weighty reason to refrain from blame-manifesting emotions in response to  $B$ 's  $t$ -ing. To illustrate the pull of this familiar idea, consider a fairly straightforward case of hypocrisy:

### *Tony's Hypocrisy*

Bill and Tony are good friends who have coffee every Thursday. Bill is always there at the time they decide, but Tony is reliably late. Since it's not too big of a deal, Bill doesn't really mind, so he never says anything about it. On this particular Thursday, however, it is Bill who is 10 minutes late. Tony is very upset and in an accusatory but somewhat passive aggressive manner, he says, "Glad you could make it..."

If you're like me, then you think Tony's anger, which is expressed in the comment he directs towards Bill, is all-things-considered inappropriate. But of course, Bill's tardiness is Tony's business, since they had an agreement to meet, so *Business* cannot explain the impropriety of Tony's blame. Better, we can explain the impropriety of Tony's blame by appealing to his hypocrisy. Because Tony's a hypocrite who regularly shows up late to his meetings with Bill, something about his own character and actions have undercut his complaint—they reveal that he doesn't care about tardiness per se, only tardiness that adversely affects himself. This severely weakens the condemnatory force of his blame. Tony is therefore shown to lack the standing to have blame-manifesting emotions in response to Bill's occasional tardiness.

Of course, not everyone is convinced that *Standing* provides the best explanation of what goes wrong in *Tony's Hypocrisy*. Tony is a jerk to Bill, for sure, but unless Bill has an excuse for his tardiness, Tony's blame might itself be appropriate (even though the history of behavior surrounding it is not) and valuable. For standing-skeptics of this sort, the idea that we can blame only if we're not ourselves hypocrites puts undue constraints on would-be blamers. After all, who among us can honestly said they've never lied, broken a promise, or belittled someone without cause? Surely the fact that I bullied someone as a teenager doesn't render it wholly inappropriate that I blame bullies now. But though all of us are ourselves sinners, this alone can't obviate blame-manifesting emotions—particularly in light of how important these emotions are for our lives with others.

In response to this objection to *Standing* I will first note that as I've articulated it, *Standing* does *not* entail that it's all-things-considered inappropriate for Tony to blame Bill—only that he has a pro tanto reason to refrain from doing so. This cuts against the standing-skeptic's concern that all (or almost all) of us would be normatively barred from blaming in a wide range of cases. The fact that I too was a bully can be a reason for me to refrain from blaming another bully even if it is nevertheless all-things-considered appropriate to blame.

*Standing* thus offers a weaker normative constraint on legitimate blame than some skeptics imagine. However, if a standing-skeptic insists that the fact I would be a hypocrite in blaming someone is *no reason at all* to refrain from blaming, then I can only recommend the same argument I offered in defense of *Business* earlier in this chapter: surely the fact that he'd be a hypocrite to blame Bill gives Tony a better reason to refrain from blaming Bill than does the fact that Bill is wearing a blue shirt, or the fact that it's Tuesday, or the fact that ... (facts such as these, I take it, really do provide Tony *no* reason to refrain from blaming Bill). But if there is more reason to refrain from blaming Bill on the grounds that doing so would be hypocritical than on other, arbitrary grounds, then Tony's past behavior (his tendency to be unreliable) must be provide him with some reason to refrain from blaming Bill. This is precisely what *Standing* posits. Moreover, it's imminently plausible that even if it is all-things-considered appropriate for Tony to blame Bill, it's plausible that he'll have reason to express his blame differently in light of the fact that he too has made Bill wait. And the best explanation for this is simply that even in cases in which the reason identified by *Standing* is outweighed, it still puts normative constraints on blame. But it can do this only if facts about would-be blamers matter for the all-things-considered propriety of blame.

#### 5.2.ii. Complicity and standing

Hypocrisy is not the only threat to our moral standing to blame. Another threat is complicity. To see this, consider the following instance of complicity:

##### *Giving Orders*

Otto is a lieutenant who orders a private, Erich, to kill a group of wounded prisoners. Erich carries out the order and guns down the enemy soldiers. Later, a colonel asks Otto about the prisoners. Otto blames their death on Erich, saying to the colonel, "he's the idiot that killed them."

Here again, it seems that Otto's blame is inappropriate, even though Erich is morally responsible for murdering the soldiers, and plausibly deserves to be blamed. However, when Otto blames Erich for the murders, he is not a hypocrite; after all, he didn't actually kill the prisoners. Despite this, Otto is *involved* in the killings in such a way that there is also blood on his hands. And this fact about Otto seems to undercut his blame. It seems, therefore, that it

is extremely inappropriate for Otto to blame Erich. And the best explanation for this, it seems to me, is that, like hypocrisy, complicity undermines an agent's moral standing to blame. *Standing* thus seems vindicated by our judgments in *Tony's Hypocrisy* and *Giving Orders*: when facts about us undercut the force of our blame, then we have reason to minimize or eliminate blame-manifesting emotions.

## 6. Transactional norms of blame-manifesting emotions

Besides justice-based or jurisdictional considerations, there is another distinct class of considerations that affect the all-things-considered propriety of blame. For example, sometimes we object to blame-manifesting emotions by pointing out that in the circumstances, those emotions weren't suitably responsive to epistemic reasons, or by reminding would-be blamers not to get carried away in their opprobrium, or because the blamer have failed to take seriously the response of the wrongdoer. In such cases, we're suggesting that unless blaming transactions have certain properties, we have reasons for refraining from blame. In other words, we're recognizing that, in addition to justice and jurisdictional norms of blame, there are also transactional norms of blame. It's not enough that your blame-manifesting emotions are directed at someone who deserves it and that it's "your place" to feel such emotions, you must also blame well, and you do so, I contend, only if your blaming transaction is suitably structured.

### 6.1. An epistemic norm for blame

One transactional norm has a very familiar analog in the domain of the criminal justice system.

#### *Reasonable*

If  $A$  is not reasonable in her belief that  $B$  is morally responsible for  $x$ -ing (and so, deserving of blame-manifesting emotions), then there is a weighty *pro tanto* reason against  $A$ 's having blame-manifesting emotions in response to  $B$ 's  $x$ -ing.

If *Reasonable* is true, then even if  $B$  is morally responsible for  $a$ -ing, it may still be inappropriate for  $A$  to hold  $B$  responsible—at least until  $A$  acquires evidence of the sort that

renders her beliefs about *B*'s blameworthiness reasonable. As a general principle, this seems fairly plausible, but we can further motivate *Reasonable* by considering the following case:

*Keyed Car*

Andrew has been fighting with a coworker about how to best pursue a new client. The fight got pretty heated, and they both decide to take a break for the day. As Andrew is leaving, he notices that someone has keyed hateful words into his car. Getting very angry, he quickly jumps to the conclusion that it was his coworker, even though the coworker has no history of vandalism or pettiness. Without seeking any further evidence, he takes a screwdriver from a toolkit in his trunk and punctures the coworker's tires. "That'll teach him," he thinks to himself.

In this case, Andrew's blame manifests itself in his anger, and in the actions that his anger motivated. But plausibly, Andrew's blame-manifesting emotions (and the actions that Andrew took them to rationalize) were inappropriate. Leaving aside legal implications for petty vandalism, Andrew's blame isn't obviously sensitive to evidence. And because his action shows a disregard for having a reasonable basis to blame, it reveals that Andrew is insufficiently concerned with only blaming those who deserve to be blamed.

There is another reason for thinking that there are reasons against having blame-manifesting emotions in the absence of reasonable belief about the purported wrongdoer's moral guilt. This argument bootstraps *Reasonable* from the norms of assertion. To see this, consider that there are reasons for *A* to refrain from asserting that *p* if it is not reasonable for *A* to believe that *p*. But if assertion requires reasonable belief, then plausibly, there are reasons for *A* to refrain from implicating that *p* if it is not reasonable for her to believe that *p*. However, our blame-manifesting emotions (and particularly their natural expressions) implicate that their target is blameworthy, that they have done wrong, that they have a bad character, etc. Therefore blame must also be subject to the requirement of reasonable belief. In other words, if *A* is not reasonable in her belief that *B* is blameworthy, then there is a pro tanto reason for *A* to refrain from blaming *B*. The truth of *Reasonable*, then, is grounded both

in the weighty value of protecting the innocent from blame and in the norms of assertion and implicature.<sup>14</sup>

## 6.2. The right amount of blame

But *Reasonable* is not the only transactional norm of blame. There is also:

### *Proportionality*

If *A*'s blame-manifesting emotions in response to *B*'s *x*-ing would not *proportional* to the gravity of *B*'s wrongdoing, then there is a *pro tanto* reason against *A*'s blame-manifesting emotions in response to *B*'s *x*-ing having either the intensity, duration, or significance for *B* that they would otherwise have.

*Proportionality*, then, simply formalizes the old adage that the punishment must *fit* the crime. It might be appropriate to fine Vanessa for rolling through a traffic stop, but it would be extremely inappropriate to sentence her to 5 years in prison for the same crime. The same is true blame-manifesting emotions as they occur within our interpersonal relationships: a minor insult might warrant some resentment, but it certainly doesn't license overwrought expressions of anger, violence, rage, or significant revisions to one's relationships.

More concretely, let's imagine that you're in a busy parking garage and that you've been waiting patiently for a car that's backing out of its spot. Now imagine another person driving in from the other direction and taking the parking spot that you were clearly waiting for. If this has ever happened to you, you'll know that it's an infuriating experience. And while it's plausibly appropriate to blame the space-thief—maybe by glaring at him or by expressing your indignation to those in the car—it seems inappropriate to pull in behind him, get out of your car, yell at him for 10 minutes, scream, cuss, and cause a huge scene. It also seems inappropriate to go on your way, all the while seething with anger for hours after the fact. These blame-manifesting responses greatly exaggerate the degree to which the space-thief has insulted you. He has, to borrow a phrase from Adam Smith, “made little account of you.” But he hasn't made *that* little of an account, since there are other spaces, and he only wasted a few minutes of your time. That we shouldn't be too exercised in such

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<sup>14</sup> For a full defense of *Reasonable*, see D. Justin Coates, “The Epistemic Norm of Blame,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* (2016).

cases, even though many of us have a natural tendency to do so, is plausibly explained by the truth of *Proportionality*.

### 6.3. Blame's end

A third transactional norm relates the role that the aim or function of blame-manifesting emotions play in determining the conditions under which those emotions are all-things-considered appropriate.

#### *Aim*

If *B*'s response to her own wrongdoing has led her to sincerely undertake the reconciliatory responses to wrongdoing that blame-manifesting emotions aim for, then there is a *pro tanto* reason against *A*'s having blame-manifesting emotions in response to *B*'s *x*-ing *as if* *B* hasn't recognized the significance of the wrong.

Since that statement of *Aim* is somewhat obscure on its own, let's consider the following case:

#### *Sergio's Sabotage*

Because they once clashed at a conference, Sergio purposefully writes Clark a bad tenure letter even though Sergio recognizes Clark's work to be good. However, before the tenure decision has been made, Sergio has a change in heart. He realizes that he wasn't fair to Clark, and that it is petty and underhanded to destroy someone's career because of one bad experience. So Sergio writes a second letter on Clark's behalf. On the strength of the second letter, Clark is granted tenure.

Now suppose that after he is awarded tenure, Clark learns of Sergio's multiple letters. I think it's fair to say that he is within his rights to be very upset with Sergio and to blame him for potentially ruining his career. But, it also seems that it would be inappropriate for Clark to respond to Sergio as if he had been wholly unrepentant. That Sergio took positive steps to rectify his transgression cannot be discounted. In other words, in *Sergio's Sabotage*, it's plausible that Clark should not respond to Sergio *as if* Sergio has done nothing to acknowledge his fault. Angela Smith develops this idea when she argues that:

When we do need to decide what [blaming] attitude to take toward another on the basis of a moral fault, we should always take into consideration the person's own response to her failure. If someone has an objectionable attitude toward me, for example, but is already reproaching herself for it and making efforts to change, then I may judge that I have no reason to adopt or express any blaming attitudes toward her at all. Her own self-reproach shows to me that she already recognizes that I have moral standing and deserve better treatment, and therefore I may no longer see her attitude as posing a challenge to me or my status (Smith 2007, 482).

That is, given that repentance and reconciliation are among the aims that blame clearly has, the reasons for blame-manifesting emotions are considerably weakened when those aims are met independently of your blame.

Additionally, notice that *Aim* is weaker in its claims than the other structural norms. *Reasonable* and *Proportionality* entail that there are *pro tanto* reasons against blame-manifesting emotions when the antecedent conditions are met. But *Aim* only claims that there are *pro tanto* reasons against *A*'s having blame-manifesting emotions in response to *B*'s *x*-ing that are the same as they would be if *B* hadn't already recognized her fault and taken steps to atone for it. That means it is consistent with *Aim* that if Clark's blame-manifesting emotions for Sergio are sufficiently mitigated, they can still be all-things-considered appropriate. So *Proportionality* tells us that blame must fit the transgression, and *Aim* tells us that blame must also fit the wrongdoer's own response to her transgression.

What holds *Reasonable*, *Proportionality*, and *Aim* together as a class is that if our transactions with wrongdoers are not structured according to these norms (i.e., if would-be blamers are not sensitive to the reasons identified here), then our blame-manifesting emotions are being conscripted in the service of *lashing out*. Like blame, we lash out in response to wrongful, harmful, or unwelcomed treatment. But unlike blame proper, lashing out apparently aims at bringing others down and at inflicting vengeful harms not only on those who are responsible for the wrongs but also on those unfortunate enough to be in our orbits. And although lashing-out responses to wrongdoing are natural, they are also damaging and disrespectful, and prone to excess and self-indulgence. It is only by having our blame-manifesting emotions structured in accordance with *Reasonable*, *Proportionality*, and *Aim*

that we avoid this and maintain a healthy and all-things-considered defensible response to wrongdoing.

## 7. Blame-manifesting emotions, all-things-considered

In the previous three sections I have introduced several distinct considerations that bear on the all-things-considered propriety of blame-manifesting emotions: *Exemption*, *Excuse*, *Business*, *Standing*, *Reasonable*, *Proportionality*, and *Aim*. But an obvious question arises here: how exactly do these considerations combine to yield substantive answers to the question of whether its all-things-considered appropriate to experience blame-manifesting emotions? That is, how do these various norms, which all generate *pro tanto* reasons of differing weights, interact with one another in such a way as to determine when it is that *A* should, all-things-considered, blame *B* for *x*-ing?

The first thing to note here is that if *A* were to ignore *all* of these considerations, the thing which would seem to be most inappropriate about *A*'s blame-manifesting emotions is not that it was none of *A*'s business or that *B* had already taken steps to rectify her wrong. Instead, the thing that would bother us the most is that *A* is blaming *B* even though *B* doesn't deserve to be blamed (either because she is not, in general, a morally responsible agent or because she is not morally responsible for the action under consideration). This suggests that in an intuitive ordering of these considerations, we should give the most weight to *Exemption* and *Excuse*. We can make this point more precisely. To see this, consider that there will be many cases in which the all-things-considered impropriety of blame-manifesting emotions is overdetermined. For example, suppose that *B* isn't morally responsible for *x*-ing and that *A* is herself guilty of *x*-ing. It seems then that both *Excuse* and *Standing* can provide a normative basis for thinking that there would be weighty *pro tanto* reasons against *A*'s having blame-manifesting emotions towards *B* in this case: *B* is excused and *A* is a hypocrite. However, in this case, it seems like the more *fundamental* normative basis for *A* refraining from blaming *B* is that *B* isn't morally responsible for *x*-ing. Once that fact is established, *A*'s hypocrisy does very little or nothing to tell against the all-things-considered propriety of blame-manifesting emotions. Thus, it seems considerations of justice are normatively prior to jurisdictional and transactional considerations.

But even though I think *Excuse* and *Exemption* have priority over the other considerations, I do not mean to suggest that the other considerations I've discussed aren't

normatively significant. For example, *Business*, which holds that it is inappropriate for us to blame others for moral faults if the fault in question is none of our business, is plausibly tied to the value toleration. Since toleration is such an important value, we should expect that considerations that facilitate toleration are of considerable weight. The same is true of *Reasonable*. Because it is grounded in the value of protecting the innocent, which is quite important, it's plausible that *Reasonable* generates weighty pro tanto reasons to refrain from blaming in cases of ignorance.

Of course, you might worry that attention to the various jurisdictional and transactional norms of blame invites a kind of pernicious quietism. Given all of these considerations, many of which are putatively of significant normative weight, it might seem as if we should, in general, refrain from blaming lest we be guilty of all-things-considered inappropriate blame. However, a world in which wrongdoers deserve to be targeted with blame-manifesting emotions but in which those responses are systematically muted or withheld is not an attractive one. After all, by not blaming those who deserve to be blamed, we encourage further entrenchment of injustices: imagine for example that liberal democracies had not sanctioned apartheid-era South Africa.<sup>15</sup> And we allow similar injustices, albeit on a much smaller scale, when we don't blame bullies and bigots for their treatment of the less well off. Yet if we take seriously jurisdictional and transactional considerations to the degree I am suggesting here, you might think that it's the world we create for ourselves.

This is a legitimate concern. But ultimately, I do not think it is decisive. First, you might think that even if the jurisdictional and structural norms do render it all-things-considered inappropriate to have blame-manifesting emotions in a great number of cases, it doesn't follow that we must therefore acquiesce to injustice, since blame is just one of the ways in which we can respond to serious wrongdoing.<sup>16</sup> It's possible, after all, to object to wrongdoing without blaming wrongdoers. To take but one very famous example, consider the Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc's act of self-immolation in response to Diem's

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Bell (2013) on the way a failure to blame risks condonation of serious wrongs.

<sup>16</sup> As Derk Pereboom rightly points out, the practices of moral answerability (e.g., calling on wrongdoers to answer for their transgressions, to repent, to make restitution, etc.) can also serve to respond to wrongdoing. See Pereboom, "Free Will Skepticism and Criminal Punishment," *The Future of Punishment*, ed. Thomas Nadelhoffer, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2013).

heinous anti-Buddhist policies. This act is clearly a significant response to injustice. Yet in his last words, Thich Quang Duc writes:

Before closing my eyes and moving towards the vision of the Buddha, *I respectfully plead* to President Ngo Dinh Diem to take a mind of compassion towards the people of the nation and implement religious equality to maintain the strength of the homeland eternally. I call the venerables, reverends, members of the sangha and the lay Buddhists to organize in solidarity to make sacrifices to protect Buddhism (emphasis added).<sup>17</sup>

Here Thich Quang Duc is clearly objecting to Diem's unjust regime. He "respectfully pleads" that Diem change his policies, and he shows his commitment to that plea in his subsequent actions. But it doesn't seem as if Duc is evincing any blame-manifesting emotions.<sup>18</sup> This suggests that it is possible to hold wrongdoers to a high moral standard without blaming them should they fail.<sup>19</sup> On a smaller scale, then, we too can respond to injustice without blame, by pleading with wrongdoers to rethink their ends and by calling on others to stand in solidarity with us. Consequently, even if we concede that blaming strictly in accord with the jurisdictional and transactional considerations I've adduced here severely limits the range of cases in which it is all-things-considered appropriate to blame, it doesn't follow that we are impotent in the face of wrongdoing.

But second, unless there is a general argument against human persons being morally responsible for their actions, I'm doubtful that adherence to these norms will severely limit the range of cases in which blame is appropriate. As I've already pointed, in cases of significant wrongdoing, particularly directed towards those who are less equipped to stop the

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<sup>17</sup> See Jonathan H.X. Lee, Fumitaka Matsuoka, Edmond Yee, and Ronald Y. Nakasone, eds., *Asian American Religious Cultures*, Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC (2015).

<sup>18</sup> Charles Goodman has argued that many strands of Buddhism embrace hard determinism, which is the view that blame is never appropriate. If this is right, then Thich Quang Duc might very well have conceived of his protest not as a form of blame, which would be irrational *by his own lights*, but as a definitive statement of the value of Buddhism, its adherents, and religious toleration. See, Goodman, "Buddhism on Moral Responsibility," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 39 (4) (2002): 359-372.

<sup>19</sup> Gary Watson (1987) makes a related point when he references the ways in which Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. held wrongdoers responsible without resentment or indignation.

wrongdoing, it *is* our business to blame. This means that a proneness to indignation in response to the suffering of the oppressed is morally important. *Business* identifies a reason not to be judgmental busybodies, not a reason against being prepared to wade into the mess created by serious wrongdoing. Similarly, since *Standing* only constrains the blame of those who are hypocritical or complicit in any serious wrongdoing, there will be many in the moral community who can legitimately blame wrongdoers. Moreover, in general, when we see agents act wrongly we have sufficient evidence to be reasonable in our belief that they are blameworthy for their action. So in standard cases, *Reasonable* will also be satisfied. Finally, neither *Proportionality* nor *Aim* would, if true, really put *pro tanto* constraints on blame of the sort that would invite pernicious quietism. Accordingly, while I appreciate the concern that we should not let wrongdoers use these norms to shield themselves from deserved blame, I do not think these norms could actually serve to hide or protect wrongdoers in this way.

## 8. Conclusion

Of course, the considerations that I've identified here are surely not the only ones that are ultimately relevant to the all-things-considered propriety of blame-manifesting emotions, though they do seem to be the ones that arise given the very nature of these emotions. Other considerations that arise more generally might matter as well. It might be, for example, that virtue itself requires us to be generous towards others, including our assessment of their actions. If this is true, then maybe we'll have a *pro tanto* reason against blame-manifesting emotions whenever generosity is apt. Similar points might be made of other virtues—virtues like mercifulness or forgivingness. But these considerations, while important, are aretaic in nature, whereas the considerations I've focused on above are deontic ones. This means that the way they bear on blame-manifesting emotions is importantly different. Deontic considerations, when weighty enough, seem to place real constraints on the all-things-considered propriety of blame. On the other hand, aretaic considerations seem to bear on how we evaluate people *qua* blamers. We might think that a forgiving person is better than an unforgiving one without also thinking that a blamer who has the trait of being unforgiving is *eo ipso* all-things-considered unwarranted in having blame-manifesting emotions in response to another agent's wrongdoing. A full ethics of blame (and so, a full ethics of mind) requires that we have more to say on this point, since we have reason to care not only about deontic considerations but about aretaic ones as well. This chapter doesn't

settle the question of when blame is both right and good, but hopefully by identifying considerations that bear on the all-things-considered propriety of blame-manifesting emotions, it puts us on the right track.