

# The Moral Emotions and Epistemic Accountability, or, Don't Get Mad, but There is No Such Thing as (Purely) Epistemic Blame

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## ***Abstract***

It has become common for epistemologists to refer to something called ‘epistemic blame’. In this paper, I argue that there is no such thing—or, if there is, that it is so thin as to be unhelpful. After outlining how several epistemologists have used the idea of epistemic blame, I argue that the reactive emotions they think are paradigmatic of epistemic blame are actually more at home in moral blame. Moreover, purely epistemic errors lack the absence of goodwill that licenses the expression of these reactive emotions in rebukes. There is little left for purely epistemic blame to be.

*Ethics as a subject has been more exhaustively investigated, and the tendency has been for epistemologists to use for their own purposes results which they take to have been established on the other side. Since they are commonly ill-informed about the solidity of these ‘results’, the resulting epistemology is often unstable.*

(Dancy 1992, 119)

## ***1. Introduction***

It has become a commonplace in epistemology to refer to something called *epistemic blame*. We are told that we blame people for having epistemically bad beliefs, where that might mean beliefs that are unjustified, false beliefs, beliefs that fail to be knowledge, or beliefs that were acquired through epistemically vicious behaviour. Many recent papers have attempted to analyze this concept, or nearby relatives. To take just two examples, Miriam McCormick uses John Fischer and Mark Ravizza’s view of responsibility as guidance control to inform her account of epistemic blame (McCormick 2011; see also McCormick 2015, Fischer and Ravizza 1998), and Lindsay Rettler

offers a reflective control view of doxastic responsibility that she argues enables a distinctively epistemic form of blame (Rettler 2018).<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I argue that these attempts to explicate epistemic blame are based on a faulty assumption. Namely, these accounts of epistemic blame all assume that moral blame and epistemic blame have some significant overlap in how they are expressed, that is to say, that how we hold one another epistemically accountable bears some resemblance to how we hold one another morally accountable. In the process, I contend, these authors have imported too much from the moral to the epistemic. But this error is understandable, for, as I argue below, nearly every case of putatively epistemic blame is in fact a form of moral blame. The only thing worth calling epistemic blame *proper* is so uncommon and so thin that it is barely worth acknowledging.

Here is the plan. In §2, I outline the accounts of epistemic blame presented by McCormick and Rettler. In §3, I note the ways in which their accounts foreground reactive emotions and expressions thereof that are typical of *moral* blame. Feeling and expressing these emotions would be appropriate in cases where the agent's epistemic error is also a moral failing. But, as I argue in §4, when an epistemic failing is not accompanied by a moral failing, these reactive emotions and their expression are not appropriate after all. In cases of purely epistemic failings, the blamee would not have demonstrated the lack of goodwill which we usually take to be necessary to warrant these emotions and their expression. The only thing left for purely epistemic blame to be is private feelings of frustration. In §5, I conclude with some remarks about what collapsing the barrier between moral and epistemic blame shows about the putative distinction between moral and epistemic norms.

## **2. Epistemic Blaming**

Rettler opens her discussion of epistemic blameworthiness with three examples of epistemic blame (Rettler 2018, 4). In the first, Aaron blames one of his roommates, Sam, for believing that Aaron ate the last of Sam's cereal. Aaron *resents* Sam for this belief, and makes a point of avoiding him. In the second example, Brette blames Seth, a student in her first-year critical thinking course, for believing that because he has never met a celebrity before, his chances of

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<sup>1</sup> Other recent entries in the literature on epistemic blame that I lack space to discuss include Cameron Bouldt's use of T. M. Scanlon's account of moral blame as relationship modification (Bouldt forthcoming, see also Scanlon 1998), Jessica Brown's use of George Sher's theory of moral blame as a belief-desire pair (Brown 2020; see also Sher 2005), Antti Kauppinen's argument that epistemic accountability operates via reductions of epistemic trust (Kauppinen 2018).

meeting one must be quite high. Brette feels *indignant* that Seth has this belief, and that her students in general tend to have similarly unreasonable beliefs. In the third example, Cassia finds herself judging the work of one of her coworkers, Danielle, much more harshly than the others, and comes to believe that Danielle is incompetent. Cassia's friend then points out that she has been prejudiced in her interpretation of the evidence, and Cassia feels *guilty* for misjudging Danielle.

Blaming people (including ourselves) for their beliefs—what Rettler calls *doxastic blame*—is a broad phenomenon that may include moral considerations (one way for a belief to be bad is for it to be immoral). However, she claims that her focus is on the more specific case of *epistemic blame*, ‘a response that amounts to holding an individual responsible for failing to meet an *epistemic standard*’, that is to say, for holding doxastic attitudes that are ‘unjustified, unsupported, unreasonable, inconsistent, incoherent, and so forth’ (Rettler 2018, 6, my emphasis). Rettler takes the form of blame showcased in her cases to be of this latter sort:

the blame in question is not a mere causal judgment that this person rather than someone else authored the belief. Nor does the blame target any harmful actions caused by the faulty beliefs. Nor does the blame target what might be called epistemic actions, such as gathering the wrong evidence. Instead, the blame specifically targets the faulty belief of another agent. *The blaming agents hold others responsible for their beliefs by feeling resentment, indignation, and guilt*, respectively. (Rettler 2018, 4, my emphasis)

In her examples of resentment, indignation, and guilt, then, Rettler takes herself to be presenting cases of what I will call purely epistemic blame, that is, a form of blame directed at someone specifically for failing to meet epistemic norms of belief, and for no other violations of norms particular to other domains, such as moral or prudential norms.

To motivate her own view of epistemic blameworthiness, McCormick observes that we hold one another responsible for what we believe by issuing *admonishments* to those with bad beliefs: ‘we ask in an incredulous tone, “How can you believe that?” or exclaim, “What a ridiculous thing to believe!”’ (McCormick 2011, 169). As in cases of moral responsibility, McCormick observes, an account of epistemic responsibility should tell us when such rebukes are warranted, and what kinds of conditions might excuse the subject from blame or modulate our way of expressing it. For example, McCormick asks us to imagine a subject progressing through stages of Alzheimer’s disease. At the onset, the disease does not impact his memory very badly,

so, on her view, we might still admonish him for forgetting or misremembering. ‘But as the disease progresses’, McCormick says, ‘such admonishments seem less and less appropriate’ (176), eventually reaching a point where he is entirely excused from responsibility for his memory-based beliefs, and thus, is no longer a proper target of epistemic blame for what he can or cannot remember. For McCormick, then, admonishing the blamee, through an expression of anger or incredulity, is a paradigmatic case of epistemic blame.

### ***3. The Reactive Emotions***

For both Rettler and McCormick, emotional reactions and expressions of those emotions through an admonishment, a rebuke, an incredulous question, and so on, are paradigmatic expressions of epistemic blame. These emotional expressions are important. While feeling such emotions may partially constitute epistemic blame, it is only via their expression that any form of blame can serve its purpose as a means of holding people accountable for norm violations. This is why the moral reactive attitudes have pride of place in P. F. Strawson’s highly influential account of moral responsibility (Strawson 2008). On his view, expressions of anger, resentment, disappointment, incredulity, and so on, are one of the principal ways in which we hold each other responsible for moral wrongdoing. These reactions, when expressed, can spur the wrongdoer to consider the moral reasons that they have ignored or flouted in acting wrongly. As such, the moral reactive attitudes can correct morally bad behaviour and moral vices of character without engaging in a problematic form of behaviour modification that bypasses the wrongdoer’s rational faculties. In other words, holding wrongdoers accountable using one’s moral reactive emotions is a way of respecting fellow members of the moral community who have gone astray.

Indeed, as some of the most direct ways of expressing the moral reactive emotions, rebukes and similar speech acts have a special place in our moral practices. As Linda Radzik argues, ‘[r]ebukes are communicative, but they are also penalizing because they express resentment or indignation, attitudes with which it is unpleasant to be targeted’ (Radzik 2014, 645). On the one hand, a rebuke tells the wrongdoer that they have transgressed a moral norm, and may suggest the specific moral reasons that the wrongdoer has ignored or flouted. On the other, a rebuke is unpleasant to experience; in rebuking, one usually aims to make the wrongdoer *feel bad* for their

actions. No one likes to be criticized, but rebukes, admonishments, and reprobations are meant to *hurt*.<sup>2</sup>

However, when we employ expressions of the moral reactive emotions as a means of holding people *epistemically* accountable, we run into trouble. This is because of how the moral reactive emotions become licensed as appropriate reactions to wrongdoing in the first place. As Strawson writes, when an agent is culpable for a moral wrong, this shows that the agent lacked goodwill towards those affected. The blamer's moral reactive emotions towards the wrongdoer are then justified by a reciprocal withdrawal of the blamer's goodwill towards the wrongdoer: 'The partial withdrawal of goodwill which these attitudes entail, the modification they entail of the general demand that another should, if possible, be spared suffering, is... the consequence of continuing to view him as a member of the moral community' (Strawson 2008, 23). In other words, because it is unpleasant—even painful—to be on the receiving end of the moral reactive emotions, in order for the blamer to be justified in employing them against the blamee, the blamee has to *deserve* it.

Can we make a parallel move in the case of epistemic blame? We can in cases where the blamee's epistemically bad belief is *also a moral failing*. For example, consider W. K. Clifford's example of the shipowner who sends a poorly maintained old boat out to sea with a load of emigrants, utterly convinced—despite the ample evidence to the contrary—that the ship is seaworthy, only for the ship to sink, killing all aboard (Clifford 1877). The shipowner's mistake is not just epistemic, for in ignoring the evidence he also commits a moral wrong by not properly considering the risk to his passengers. The shipowner thus shows a lack of goodwill in coming to believe badly, and deserves to be blamed: it would be quite appropriate to express one's anger, resentment, indignation, and so forth, that in forming and maintaining an epistemically bad belief, the shipowner took a decision that was ethically disastrous.

#### **4. There Is No (Purely) Epistemic Blame**

However, we could easily interpret the blame we might feel towards Clifford's shipowner as just an instance of moral blame for the harm caused by his negligence. That the shipowner's moral

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<sup>2</sup> Not every rebuke need express a moral reactive emotion like anger or resentment. One could imagine a serene guru dispassionately rebuking a neophyte for acting against their teachings. But these cases are not paradigmatic of rebuke, and still have the punitive and communicative elements identified by Radzik. Thanks to Cameron Bouldt for pointing out this kind of case to me.

failing follows from an epistemic failing does not seem to bear overmuch on our judgement of him: had he conducted a thorough inquiry into the ship's condition, found it to be questionable, and sent the ship out anyhow, I'm not sure it would alter the tone or tenor of our reprobation of him. The question we need to ask is this: could there be a *distinctively epistemic* form of blame that accompanies our moral reactive attitudes? For it is this kind of blame—something that is specifically applied to agents with epistemically bad beliefs—with which epistemologists like Rettler and McCormick are concerned.

As it happens, it is challenging to come up with cases where an epistemic failing is completely insulated from moral failings. For, as Clifford observes, '[it is not] truly a belief at all which has not some influence upon the actions of him who holds it' (1877, 291). That is to say, because beliefs are usually action-guiding, it is hard to find a belief that could not be implicated in any possible wrongdoing. Still, let's try to find one that is relatively insulated from moral misconduct.

Consider Figure 1, a comic posted to Twitter in April 2017 by comedian and podcaster Branson Reese. In the comic, which is captioned THE PERSON WHO DISCOVERED SHARKS, a man wanders into the ocean, saying 'I am going into the big wetness'. He sinks below the surface, then burbles 'Smooth lions are eating me'. The comic went viral, with many repliers pointing out that sharks are not, in fact, smooth: their skin is rough because of the tooth-like shape of their scales, particularly if stroked towards the shark's head. A few respondents went so far as to rebuke and insult Reese for the error, calling him an 'ignoramus' and 'proof that not all people are intelligent'. For his part, Reese played the fool and doubled down: he repeatedly insisted, despite all evidence to the contrary, that sharks are 'smooth as hell'.

Reese's error seems about as close as we can come to a purely epistemic failing while still being interesting enough to attract rebuke. Which epistemic norms did he transgress? For one thing, the belief that sharks have smooth skin is false. For another, Reese obviously did not do much to inquire into the actual texture of sharkskin before drawing the comic. It would have been quite easy for him to do a simple internet search to find out the actual texture of sharkskin, with plenty of reliable sources to draw upon.<sup>3</sup> (Or, if he did do such research, he chose to ignore

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<sup>3</sup> Such searches are now polluted with coverage of how Reese's comic and his response to critics went viral.



Figure 1. The Person Who Discovered Sharks (Reese 2017).

it.) Finally, though it is perhaps a stretch, we might think that because he posted the comic publicly, he risked spreading his error to others.

Could there be a moral element to Reese's error? It seems doubtful. We could construct a possible scenario wherein knowing the actual texture of sharkskin becomes morally important—perhaps we could imagine Reese becoming deserted on a remote Pacific island, and needing a substitute for sandpaper in order to construct a shelter or tool or weapon from the local timber in order to save the lives of his fellow castaways. But this kind of fanciful scenario is wildly improbable, making it a strange thing to use in deciding whether Reese violated any moral norms. One might take issue with how he responded to his critics; certainly, not everyone enjoys engaging with a joker who refuses to admit that he has said something incorrect, and if taken too

far such joking might amount to disrespect of one's interlocutors. But at the same time, we could interpret Reese's response to the critics as a justified withdrawal of goodwill in the face of their inappropriate reprobations of his quite minor intellectual mistake, which was itself made, after all, in the context of a joke.

In short, Reese's case shows an instance of an epistemic failing where the expression of anger, resentment, or frustration in a rebuke, admonishment, or reprobation seems inappropriate. And I suggest that what makes these emotional expressions inappropriate is just what is missing to license the moral reactive emotions: *an absence of goodwill* on the part of the blamee. Reese demonstrated no apparent lack of goodwill in making and sharing his comic, or in antecedently coming to believe that sharks have smooth skin. Engaging in the punitive practice of rebuke is, therefore, not enabled by the kind of error he made. He may have transgressed one or more epistemic norms, but this does not suffice to warrant admonishment.

What cases like Reese's show is that McCormick and others who consider rebuke, admonishment, and reprobation to be characteristic expressions of epistemic blame are in error. Unless McCormick is concerned with instances where moral and epistemic errors come together, as in the case of Clifford's shipowner, these ways of holding the agent epistemically accountable are not appropriate. Because the agent has not shown any absence of goodwill in believing badly, we cannot be justified in expressing any anger or resentment we may feel in response.

We could extend this result to conclude that even *feeling* the moral reactive attitudes in response to purely epistemic failings would not be appropriate. Strawson, for his part, seems to run together the feeling and expression of the reactive attitudes in his discussion of how it is appropriate to respond to wrongdoing. This would tell us that Rettler is mistaken when she claims that the agents in her vignettes are engaged in epistemic blame. Recall that she explicitly says that her cases are meant to highlight a form of doxastic blame that is specifically about the agents' beliefs and those beliefs' epistemic value, not the actions or character of the agents, and not any harm to which their false beliefs may lead. But if that is so, what about the cases permits Aaron to resent Sam, Brette to feel indignant toward Seth, or Cassia to feel guilty for misjudging Danielle? Nothing, we might think—though I suspect a more plausible reading of Rettler's cases is that the reactions of Aaron, Brette, and Cassia *are* warranted, but only because the epistemic failings to which they are responding are, as in Clifford's shipowner case, *also moral failings*. Aaron resents Sam not just because Sam has made an epistemic mistake, but because Sam is being *petty*.

Brette feels indignant not just because Seth is making an intellectual error, but because it is a sort of error—namely, a failure of critical thinking—that could cause *harm*. Cassia feels guilty not just because she got the facts wrong, but because she was *unfair* to Danielle.

That said, there may be some epistemic reactive emotions that remain even after shooing away those which have snuck in from the moral realm. *Frustration* is one. On Jessica Brown's account, epistemic blame takes the form of a belief that the agent believed badly, paired with a desire that the agent not have believed badly (Brown 2020).<sup>4</sup> Since we usually feel frustration when our desires cannot be fulfilled—as the desire in Brown's version of epistemic blame *cannot* be—it makes sense that we might feel frustration towards those who we think have epistemically bad beliefs. But if the foregoing is correct, any expression of this frustration would likely go beyond what is appropriate. So if this is all that is left for purely epistemic blame—private feelings of frustration—I contend that it is so thin as to be theoretically and practically unhelpful. *Either there is no purely epistemic blame, or there might as well not be.*

### **5. Conclusion**

In this paper, I have argued, contrary to assumptions across much of the epistemological literature, that there is no purely epistemic blame. I started by observing that the reactive emotions appealed to in accounts of epistemic blame are more typical of moral blame. Furthermore, without the absence of goodwill that licenses feeling resentment and issuing rebukes in moral blaming, purely epistemic blame has no appropriate means of being expressed beyond private frustration.

Reflecting on this result, combined with the noted challenge in finding instances where epistemic failings are completely insulated from moral failings, we might wonder if this suggests anything about the putative distinction between moral and epistemic norms. I suspect that when examined closely, this distinction turns out to be misleading—an effect of which is the running together of moral and epistemic accountability practices in attempts to explicate epistemic blame. It would be better, I suggest, to approach epistemic blame not as a distinctive subject that has similarities to moral blame, but as a practice that is *continuous* with moral blame. I leave the development of this line of argument for future work.

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<sup>4</sup> Brown is drawing on Sher (2005); see fn.1.

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