

The Moral Emotions and Epistemic Accountability

Or, Don't Get Mad, but There is No Such Thing as (Purely) Epistemic Blame

Common assumption: There is something worth calling *epistemic blame*, and the way in which it is expressed is similar to *moral blame*.

My contention: (1) Nearly every case of epistemic blame is just a special case of moral blame.
(2) Purely epistemic blame is rare, cannot take the same form as moral blame.

Rettler's (2018) examples:

- A. Aaron blames Sam for believing that Aaron ate the cereal. Aaron *resents* Sam for this belief.
- B. Brette blames Seth for a belief based on the gambler's fallacy. Brette feels *indignant* that Seth has such an unreasonable belief.
- C. Cassia blames herself for believing that her coworker is incompetent. Cassia feels *guilty* for misjudging her colleague.

Rettler's claim:

These are cases of *epistemic blame*:

- Not merely judgements about causal responsibility for the beliefs in question
- Not judgements about harm produced by faulty beliefs
- Not judgements about bad epistemic habits or practices
- "The blame specifically targets the faulty belief of another agent"

McCormick's (2011, 2015) claims:

- We hold people accountable for their bad beliefs by *admonishing* them.
- As in moral blame, as people's capacity to be responsible for their beliefs diminishes, admonishments become less appropriate.

Standard View of Epistemic Blame:

- There is an epistemic form of blame that is distinct from moral blame in that it targets agents for their epistemically bad (i.e., false or unjustified) beliefs, and *not* for moral failures.
- Epistemic blame is felt and expressed in ways that are otherwise similar to moral blame.
- These feelings and rebukes are how we hold people accountable for epistemically bad beliefs

Strawson (1962) on reactive emotions:

- When an agent acts wrongfully, we feel anger, resentment, etc. at their lack of goodwill towards others.
- In so doing, we partially withdraw our own goodwill towards them.
- This enables the expression of our blame in punitive ways, e.g. admonishments.

Is there such an absence of goodwill among the epistemically blameworthy?

- Yes, when the epistemically bad belief is *also* a moral failure. Cf. Clifford (1877): a shipowner who believes, against evidence, that his vessel is seaworthy; the ship sinks killing all aboard.
- Otherwise: No. Cf. Reese (2017), who made a joke about sharks being smooth (sharks are actually rough).

Conclusions:

- In purely epistemic blame, it is not appropriate to rebuke the blamee.
- Most cases of "epistemic blame" are actually special cases of moral blame.
- Might be that even feeling anger is not appropriate in purely epistemic blame.
- *Unless*: ethics and epistemology are themselves less distinct than is usually assumed.