

Is Moral Normativity Easier

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An Analysis of Stephen Darwall's Making the Hard Problem of Moral Normativity Easier

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1

Is Moral Normativity Easier	a
Analysis	3
(1) Blame depends on the existence of a moral obligation as reason and the existence of a moral obligation does not explain why agents should comply with moral obligations.	3
(2) The retrospective attribute of blame is incompatible with being a genuine source of reason for moral obligation.	4
(3) A warranted blames interrelationship with excuse creates uncertainty because the analysis of excuse turns back on the issue of moral responsibility.	5
Conclusion	5

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In his article titled Making the Hard Problem of Moral Normativity Easier, Stephen Darwall conceptually connects moral obligation to blameworthiness to address the problem of moral normativity. Moral normativity posits that there exist a code of conduct which moral agents ought to obey. The hard philosophical problem for moral normativity is to find the reasons for complying with the code of conduct, i.e. to answer the question why should one be moral, specifically why an agent should do what is morally obligatory if doing so is against her interest. Darwall argues that, in addressing this hard philosophical problem, it is harder to show that agents have reasons to do what is in their interest or what would fulfill their aims or desires, than to show that agents have reasons to comply with moral obligations. According to Darwall, it is harder to show that agents have reasons to do what is in their interest or what would fulfill their aims or desires because it is not conceptually guaranteed, i.e. not always true, that agents would do what is in their interest or what would fulfill their aims or desires even if there are reasons for doing so. On the other hand, it is easier to show that agents have reasons to comply with moral obligations because if an action is morally obligatory, then there must be a reason to do it. According to Darwall, the reason to do what is morally obligatory is found in warranted blame.

Darwall continues, an action is morally obligatory if failing to perform that action causes the agent to be blameworthy unless the agent has a valid excuse. It is so because moral obligation is conceptually connected to moral responsibility and moral accountability, and, therefore, blame. It is through blame that we hold someone accountable. Citing Peter Strawson in Freedom and Resentment, Darwall says that blame is a distinctive kind of attitude, a reactive attitude that is inter-personal (or second personal) in that there is an implicit relationship between the person doing the blaming and the person being blamed. Unlike third-person critical attitudes such as dislike or contempt, blame as a reactive attitude involves one person issuing a demand to the other, the demand of being acknowledged as an authority to hold the other accountable, the demand followed by the other holding herself accountable through the feeling of guilt.

With the distinctive characteristics of blame established, Darwall concludes: because blame presupposes a normative reason for an agent to do what she is morally obligated to do, an act can warrant blame only if there was a normative reason not to have done it; conceptually, an act is morally obligatory only if it would be blameworthy to omit the act without excuse; therefore, it is conceptually necessary that there is a normative reason to do what is morally obligatory. Because it is conceptually necessary to have a normative reason to do what is morally obligatory, unlike the harder case of showing agents having reasons to do what is in their interest, it is easier to show that agents have reasons to do what is morally obligatory. In short, the existence of a warranted blame indicates a normative reason and a warranted blame is conceptually connected to a moral obligation, leading Darwall to conclude that there is a conceptually guaranteed normative reason for agents to comply with a moral obligation. Therefore, he asserts, it is easier to show that agents have reasons to comply with moral obligations.

Analysis

In this analysis, I strive to examine the concept of blame and whether the normative reasons for blame can necessarily be translated into normative reasons for moral obligations. I accept Darwall's argument that moral obligation is necessarily connected to blame and that moral obligation is conceptually distinct from moral reason, i.e. normative reason. Even though Darwall addresses various criticisms at the end of his paper, I remain unconvinced that blame is necessarily a signpost for the existence of normative reasons for moral obligations. The objections that remain unresolved, as I see it, are as follows.

(1) Blame depends on the existence of a moral obligation as reason and the existence of a moral obligation does not explain why agents should comply with moral obligations.

In *Freedom and Resentment*, Strawson does not address the reasons for reactive attitudes such as blame. But it is important to examine the reasons for blame in order to validate Darwall's arguments. We need not look too deep to recognize that a warranted blame not just merely connects to blame conceptually, a warranted blame rests on the establishment of a moral obligation. For example, I can justifiably blame you for not taking care of your infant child because I take it for granted that taking care of your infant child is a moral obligation for you, whether or not I heed the reasons of why you should take care of your infant child. One cannot justifiably blame until after a baseline of what the other ought to do, i.e. a moral obligation, has been established. In this regard, blame is distinctive from other attitudes such as belief or desire in that belief or desire does not require the establishment of a moral obligation.

Darwall is right that there is a conceptual connection between blame and moral obligation. But he fails to identify that blame depends on the existence of moral obligation as reason. Suppose a child is told that parents ought to look after their children, the child can justifiably blame a friend's parents for failing to look after the friend, without understanding why parents ought to look after their children. On the other hand, so long as a moral obligation does not exist, even if reasons exist for a moral agent, an agent subject to a moral code of conduct, to act a certain way, the moral agent cannot be justifiably blamed for failing to act in that certain way. This is illustrated in the case of supererogation going above and beyond one's call of duty: it is not a moral obligation for a moral agent to risk his life to run into a burning building to rescue a group of children who desperately need help. Even though there are valid and strong reasons for the moral agent to risk his life, he cannot be justifiably blamed for failing to do so because doing so isn't a moral obligation for him.

Even if there are other reasons for warranted blame that are not based on the existence of a moral obligation, the existence of the moral obligation will remain the *raison d'être*

the reason for existence for blame, because no one should be justifiably blamed for failing to do something that is not morally required of them. Therefore, the normative reason in blame that Darwall seeks to be the reason for agents to comply with a moral obligation is the existence of the moral obligation. Thus, Darwall's argument that moral obligation is connected to warranted blame, and that there is a normative reason for warranted blame, therefore complying with moral obligation has a normative reason turns out to be a circular argument: the reason for complying with a moral obligation is the existence of the moral obligation.

(2) The retrospective attribute of blame is incompatible with being a genuine source of reason for moral obligation.

11

Another attribute of blame distinctive from other attitudes such as belief or desire which makes blame undesirable to be a signpost for the existence of normative reason for moral obligation is that blame is retrospective. One has to wait until after events have occurred to determine warranted blame. Some may argue that blame can be prospective because you may blame a potential act. However, blaming a potential act, with its uncertainty of whether the act will actually occur and whether there may be justified excuses, is not the kind of warranted blame in Darwall's argument where the aim is a conceptual guarantee.

12

Part of blame's retrospective feature is that it is consequence dependent. A moral agent is often not blamed if the consequence is benign. A drunk driver running a red light unobserved and without consequence may escape blame with the excuse that no one is hurt while the same act having the consequence of a tragic accident will likely result in a warranted blame. This retrospective, consequence dependent feature of blame may not in itself dissolve Darwall's argument that a warranted blame is a signpost for complying with a moral obligation because examination can be limited to the scenario where there is warranted blame. However, allowing blame to only signpost normative reasons for moral obligations with consequences may render a moral act consequence dependent, which risks challenging the most basic premise that Darwall relies on that moral normativity exists.

13

On the other hand, a moral obligation is prospective, its command providing guidance for how a moral agent ought to act. While attitudes such as belief or desire would have no issues being a source of reason for why a moral agent chooses to be moral, blame, as a retrospective reactive attitude, is incapable of being a source of genuine reason for why a moral agent complies with a moral obligation. If blame were to be the source of reason, owing to blame's nature of being adduced after the fact, the moral agent would have to take a look into the future before arriving at a reason to comply with a moral obligation. A source of reason that rests on the future is incapable of providing a conceptual guarantee.

14

(3) A warranted blame's interrelationship with excuse creates uncertainty because the analysis of excuse turns back on the issue of moral responsibility.

15

As Darwall establishes, blame is warranted when a moral agent fails to comply with a moral obligation without a valid excuse. Warranted blame by definition depends on the clear outcome of whether there is a valid excuse. The examination of excuse turns on the issue of whether the moral agent should bear the moral responsibility under the circumstances. It therefore turns on the issue of moral responsibility itself.

16

The debate on moral responsibility turns on the issue of free will and determinism, the difficulty of which has been demonstrated in our modern debates. In 1924, Clarence Darrow used the problem of free will and determinism to argue that Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb should not be given the death penalty. In 1979, the "Twinkie defense" advanced in Dan White's murder trial argued that White suffered from diminished capacity due to the consumption of sugary junk food. In 1982, John Hinckley Jr.'s lawyers successfully argued not guilty by reason of insanity using the image of Hinckley's brain scan in his trial for attempting to assassinate President Reagan. These legal cases demonstrate the difficult issue of adducing moral responsibility brought by the analysis of excuse. It would seem fair to conclude that, because the examination of excuse leads us back to the analysis of moral responsibility, free will and determinism, the problem of moral normativity Darwall hopes to solve under the framework of moral obligation and blame provides no conceptual guarantee, and is therefore not easier.

17

Conclusion

18

Darwall constructs a framework in which the normative reasons for complying with moral obligations are found in the normative reasons for warranted blame. The analysis of blame reveals that distinctive characteristics of blame, blame's *raison d'être* being the existence of moral obligation, blame's attribute of being retrospective, and blame's dependence on excuse, make blame neither a reliable nor a desirable source of normative reasons for moral obligation.

19