

Blame's Role in Political Polarization: How it Prevents the Aims and Values of Blame from
Being Realized and a Potential Solution

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Blame is prevalent in all facets of our lives and most agree that it is morally important. That being said, there is debate over how we should blame, when blame is appropriate, and the potential harms of blame. One example of a potential harm of blame is its role in political polarization. I argue that blame's role in political polarization prevents its own aims and values from being realized, and thus that appropriate blame in the political realm must require something in addition to a true judgement of blameworthiness; I propose Nussbaum's (2015) 'transition anger'. I will begin this paper with a discussion of Bell's (2012) critique against the 'standard account' of blame, and what she proposes to be the moral aims and values of blame. I will then introduce the problems blame may be causing in society, in particular focusing on political polarization, where I will differentiate between two forms of this phenomenon. I will then demonstrate blame's role in political polarization and how this role prevents blame's aims and values from being realized. I will then argue that if blame in the political realm is preventing us from benefitting from its aims and values, but the standard account's conception of a standing to blame is not an effective way to moderate blame, then blame in the political realm should instead be tempered with Nussbaum's 'transition anger'. I will then anticipate and respond to an objection to this argument.

There are various accounts of blame, but for the purpose of this paper, I will adopt an emotional account, as Bell does (Bell, 2012). This type of account proposes that blame is emotional; when a person has acted in a way that is thought to be wrong, and we judge that person as blameworthy, blame is felt like an emotion and is accompanied by various other negative emotions, such as "resentment, indignation, or contempt" (Bell, 2012, p. 205). There are also accounts of blame which suggest that blame should require something in addition to a

target's blameworthiness. One such account argues that in order to have morally appropriate blame, in addition to the target's blameworthiness, the blamer must also have a standing to blame. Bell refers to this as the standard account, and notes that those who defend it usually have the intent of limiting the use of blame (Bell, 2012, p. 264). The standard account limits blame by providing conditions which must be met before blaming and in doing so, limits who is able, or has the standing, to blame. For the purpose of this paper I will not go into detail about these conditions, but note that Bell successfully dismantles each one, and thus the standard account cannot successfully moderate blame.

In addition to specifically challenging the arguments for each condition, Bell is skeptical of the idea of determining a standing to blame in general. She notes the concern of those who defend the standard account, namely that "if we give up the idea that blame has strict standing conditions, our moral lives will be overrun with blame" (Bell, 2012, p. 279), and thus that standing conditions protect us from moralism and overusing blame. Bell argues that the standard account results in moralism itself, by suggesting that only the 'morally pure' are able to blame (Bell, 2012, p. 279). She suggests instead, that blame should be understood as a tool that "we may all use to learn from one another and express our moral values, no matter how blemished our moral records may be" (Bell, 2012, p. 279). For Bell, using blame as a tool has several important aims and values.

Bell argues that blame has five aims and "corresponding modes of value" (Bell, 2012, p. 264). First, "blame marks the damage done to our relationships through wrongdoing" (Bell, 2012, p. 267). Second, "it educates the target about the norms violated through wrongdoing"

(Bell, 2012, p. 267). Third, it is motivational; “being criticized is psychologically painful...moral criticism may motivate some offenders to do what they can to avoid future blame” (Bell, 2012, p. 267). Fourth, blame does not only affect the direct agents involved, but has effects for others in the moral community. The second and third aims and values can thus be extended to those who witness the wrongdoing and resulting consequences. Finally, “blame is a valuable way for standing up for one’s values” (Bell, 2012, p. 268); by blaming someone for a wrongdoing that goes against our morals, we are showing the importance that those values hold to us. Bell emphasizes that these aims and values are forward-looking in addition to being backward-looking, but that not every effect of blame will be one of these aims (Bell, 2012, p. 269). The problem with this evaluation of blame is that in practice, it seems that blame’s unintended effects may at times prevent its own aims and values from being produced.

Although Bell does concede that not all of blame’s effects are its aims, some of these unintended effects have over time have been a significant contributor to undesirable parts of our culture; “[o]ur schools are broken, a new generation of kids has been lost, our prisons are crammed with petty offenders whose lives we have ruined in the name of a war on drugs that has been a total failure. And judging from the current mood of the country, the guilty pleasure of blaming others has not proved all that pleasurable.” (Fried, 2013, para. 50). While our propensity to blame is not be the sole cause of these issues, it has played an important role. We see in these areas that blame culture has in part led to events which seem to go against the very aims and values we want it to produce. Another realm in which blame’s effects may be damaging, and what will be the focus of this paper, is political polarization.

Political polarization is a broad phenomenon, and is better understood by separating it into two forms. The first is ideological extremism (Grubbs, Warmke, Tosi & James, 2020, p. 2). This form of polarization refers to “the extent to which people report extreme political or ideological views at either end of the political spectrum” (Grubbs et al., 2020, p .2), and the term ‘ideological polarization’ refers to “the process by which an individual becomes more ideologically extreme” (Grubbs et al., 2020, p 2). Thus ideological extremism denotes the gap in ideology, on either ends of the spectrum; between ‘the left’ and ‘the right’. The second form is affective polarization; “the phenomenon of demonstrating extreme positive affect toward members of one’s preferred political party and extreme negative affect toward members of opposing political parties” (Grubbs et al., 2020, p). This phenomenon has been greatly studied; humans in general, both in the political realm and outside of it, “show strong antipathy toward outgroup members and strong preference for ingroup members” (Grubbs et al., 2020, p 2). While blame may play a role in both of these forms of polarization, I will be focussed on affective polarization, because of the two, this is where blame is likely be causing more harm. Concerning blame, the actual gap in ideology is less important than what we do with it. The increasing prevalence of ingroup versus outgroup mentality in politics is worrying because it may draw our attention away from the issues we are concerned with and towards dividing people further into sides that are becoming less and less able to communicate and work together.

While affective polarization has less to do with ideological differences and more about belonging to one group or another, ideological differences are still relevant. Ideology comes into play when determining what the ingroups and outgroups are for a person. Belonging to ‘the left’ carries with it certain moral values. While these may fluctuate over time, and will have a variety

of views within it, there is still some core to it, and this is also true of ‘the right’. Thus while affective polarization is concerned with outgroup versus ingroup mentality, because ideology determines what the group stands for, ideological views and moral values are still an important part of affective polarization. As Bell (2012) notes, we blame in part to show our moral values and thus in affective polarization, a key part of our contempt towards others is the blame we feel towards to them for going against our own moral values, despite how it can become more about one ‘side’ against another rather than righting a wrong.

So how is blame contributing to affective polarization? When we feel someone has wronged us, or has violated one of our moral principles, we judge them to be blameworthy, blame them for their actions, and this is usually accompanied by other negative emotions such as anger and contempt (Bell, 2012). This is true in the political realm as well. We may blame party leaders, policy makers, or fellow citizens who belong to a different political party, for violating our moral values. This can occur as outrage against a new law or policy, or calling someone out for racist views. In this sense, blame plays a very important role and as Bell notes, it helps us stand up for our moral values. However, blame does not always function in this way. When it comes to affective polarization, blame may be contributing to the divide between two groups, rather than demonstrating our moral values, standing up for what we think is right, and showing people they’ve harmed us. This is because along with showing our moral values, blame also carries with it the negative emotions addressed previously. It seems as though the contempt that accompanies the blame that each side has for the other is often taking precedence over the actual moral wrongdoing. This contempt is not so much about the actual ideas, but the people who have them; “the unsullied conviction for the worthlessness of another” (Schopenhauer in Brooks, 2019, para.

5). The divide is fed by “divisive politicians, screaming heads on television, hateful columnists, angry campus activists and seemingly everything on the contempt machines of social media” (Brooks, 2019, para. 6) and caters to “one ideological side... feeding our desire to believe that we are completely right and the other side is made up of knaves and fools” (Brooks, 2019, para. 6). This blame and contempt is thus contributing to polarization, further dividing us.

If blame is contributing to this polarization, by further dividing people and contributing to a ‘culture of contempt’ (Brooks, 2019), then it seems as though the aims and values of blame which Bell proposed are not being met in arguably one of the most important areas of our moral community. Blame is supposed to do five important things; mark the damage done, educate about violation of norms, motivate people to learn from others’ mistakes, demonstrate these effects for the moral community as a whole, and give us a way to stand up for what we believe in (Bell, 2012). But by blaming with contempt, in many cases these values are lost, because the focus gets turned away from the moral wrongdoing, and about the ‘other side’. Bell emphasizes the aims and values of blame as being forward-looking, but right now we are stuck, unable to move forward as “[c]ontempt makes political compromise and progress impossible” (Brooks, 2019, para. 7). Rather than being a way to truly stand up for what we believe in, or demonstrate to the community what we should or shouldn’t do, it is all getting lost in this muddle of anger, resentment and contempt. In the realm where our morals are directly reflected in the laws and policies that govern our society, this is arguably the most important place for blame to produce these values and aims, and it may be failing.

If the unintended effects of blame are in part hindering the aims and values that blame should be producing in the political realm, it seems that blame must be tempered with something in this context. I would argue that in order for the aims and values of blame to be realized in the political realm, blame requires what Martha Nussbaum calls “transitional anger” (Nussbaum, 2015). Nussbaum notes that most conceptions of anger propose that anger is a response to some damage that is wrongfully inflicted and also contains a desire for payback or retribution (Nussbaum, 2019, 18:43- 19:25). She argues, however, that these features can come apart; “we can feel outrage at the wrongfulness of an act or an unjust state of affairs without wanting payback for the wrong done to us” (Nussbaum, 2019, 20:59). This is what she calls ‘transition anger’, which maintains the protest element but eliminates the desire for payback (Nussbaum, 2019, 34:50). Though Nussbaum refers to this as ‘anger’, the references she makes to Strawson’s reactive attitudes and Wallace’s reactive emotions, as well as the description of anger as a reaction to “wrongful injury” and resulting in “desire for retribution” (Nussbaum, 2015, p. 43) makes this concept directly applicable to blame. Blame functions in the way she describes; outrage resulting from the feeling we have been morally wronged, and often accompanied by a desire for resolution, for someone to right their wrong. So this ‘transition anger’ works well in cases of blame. It is an emotion based on what Nussbaum calls ‘The Transition’, which is the transition from anger to compassionate hope (Nussbaum, 2015, p. 52). Nussbaum draws on an example of how this functions in the political realm by looking at Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous speech. She emphasizes that rather than “demonizing white Americans... he calmly compares them to people who have faulted on a financial obligation” (Nussbaum, 2015, p. 52), and notes that although there is still anger present in King’s speech, he “reshap[es] retributivism into work and hope...he wants reconciliation and shared justice” (Nussbaum, 2015, p. 53). She

argues that transition anger is thus beneficial for democracy as it is focused on solutions, moving forward, and seeking justice rather than the desire for payback, or seeing one side as bad and the other as good.

Transitional anger could thus be an important part of the solution and may be able to moderate blame without the negative consequences that Bell demonstrated result from requiring a standing to blame. Blame is not the sole cause of political polarization, nor does political polarization completely hinder the aims and values of blame. However, blaming attitudes may be playing a more significant role in this matter than they previously have, and this polarization prevents compromise and problem-solving, as well as contributing to our moral values getting lost. Thus in the political realm, and in discussion with those who may hold different ideologies than us, when blame is necessary it should be done with transition anger. This way, we are still blaming, still demonstrating our moral values, but instead of the contempt for the 'outgroup' that is evident in affective polarization, the focus would be more steadily maintained on the actual moral issues in question. The role of blame in polarization has become more about contempt for the outgroup than resolving these issues. Therefore by tempering our conception of appropriate blame in the political realm to require transition anger in addition to blameworthiness, we may be able to eliminate some of the focus on division, which would allow us to use blame more effectively as a tool for the moral aims and values that Bell argues it has.

A potential objection to this argument could arise in response to adding a requirement to blame other than a target's true blameworthiness. As I have adopted an emotional account of blame, one might argue that if blame is emotional, and our emotions are often not ruled by

reason or rationality, it may not be possible to supplement blame with transition anger. If blame functions like an emotion, and carries with it these other negative emotions like contempt and resentment, one could argue that to sever these other emotions from blame seems implausible. This, I think, is a fair point. It may be a key reason why this problem has arisen in the first place; people often react with their first emotions, or don't challenge their emotions when they feel they are justified by someone having wronged them. With our close interpersonal relationships, I concede that it may be unfair to ask of people who have been directly harmed to have this adjustment in their blame. With one's friends or family members, or where a great harm is done to someone personally, it seems fair to allow blame to function with its full range of emotions. However, I would argue that there is an important difference between blame in the political sphere from blame in the close personal sphere. In the political realm, and in affective polarization, the target of blame is usually the outgroup; this is a much more broad target, and one who we have distance from. The topics are often less personal, they are more general moral values we blame others for not having, and it is happening on a much larger scale; over social media, news outlets, and policies or laws. In comparison to blame in interpersonal relationships, where the wrongdoing is usually directly, or closely done to you. Therefore when it comes to political blame, it seems that we may have more time and space to process our emotions before reacting. If it is disagreement with a political party's policies, or seeing a news article referring to the left or right by derogatory words, there is usually some distance before any direct interaction. Because of this distance from the personal within the political context, it may be more reasonable to ask of people to temper their blame with transition anger and not seek payback; just maintain their outrage against what they see as a moral transgression. This is not to say the political isn't

personal, just that we often have space from the transgression which may give us more time to process.

In conclusion, blame's role in political polarization prevents its own aims and values from being realized, and therefore appropriate blame in the political realm should be tempered with transition anger. The contempt and anger resulting from blame for the 'outgroup' which is evident in affective polarization prevents people from being able to communicate, problem solve, and work together, and this results in the loss of the aims and values of blame that it should produce. I have conceded that Bell is right in her criticism of the standard account, and thus requiring a standing to blame is not an effective solution. Instead, I have proposed that in the political realm in order to appropriately blame, in addition to blameworthiness, one must have Nussbaum's transition anger, that is, anger without the desire for payback. In requiring that transition anger accompanies blame when it comes to politics, we may actually be able to benefit from the aims and values blame is supposed to produce because it is the desire for payback and contempt for the 'outgroup' which has been so divisive. This way, we maintain our right to blame, we maintain the outrage we have when we see our moral values being wronged, but without contempt and desire for payback we can keep our focus maintained on these genuine issues rather than contempt for others, and thus see the moral benefits of blame realized. In addition, while some might argue that if blame is emotional we may not be able to sever the negative emotions that accompany it, because of the distance we often have when it comes to issues relevant to affective polarization, there may be more time to process the emotion and moderate our blame with transition anger. We can still be angry, we can still fight for what we

believe is right, but if we want to get anywhere and see the benefits of blame, the desire for
payback and contempt for others must be minimized.

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