

Ordinary and Detached Blameworthiness

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Elinor Mason argues that there are different kinds of blameworthiness: ordinary and detached. In the following, I summarize the key aspects of both kinds, and critically discuss the exact boundaries between them. According to Mason, we should not blame wrongdoers in the ordinary way if they do not know that their conduct is problematic. This is plausible insofar as the function of ordinary blame is to remind wrongdoers of values that they already share, but I will suggest that we need a slightly different account if its function is to learn them about values that they do not share yet.

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One of the key messages of Elinor Mason's book *Ways to be Blameworthy* is that we should not confuse two forms of blameworthiness: "ordinary" and "detached" blameworthiness.¹ To illustrate, consider one of Mason's cases:

"Imagine an agent, Hal, who does not grasp Morality.² Hal routinely litters: he throws his rubbish out of the car window, out of boats, and onto the street as he is walking along. Hal does not know this is wrong. He does not pay much attention to what other people think, and Hal is a big scary looking guy, so people tend not to challenge him. ... If challenged, he would not say, 'oh sorry, I thought that was a rubbish bin'. He would say, 'yes, I threw my rubbish onto the street'." (p. 113)

Is Hal blameworthy? Many will say: yes, of course he's blameworthy. After all, he doesn't care at all about his mess! Mason disagrees. Even though she agrees that Hal may be blameworthy *in some way*, she denies that he is blameworthy *in the ordinary way*.

To see this, contrast Hal to his counterpart—Hal*—who performs the same conduct, but knows that it is wrong what he does. If we blame Hal*, our blame will be communicative: we expect that he will recognize his fault and

¹ In her final chapter, Mason also discusses a third variant that I will not consider here, namely "extended" blameworthiness (roughly: taking responsibility for things one is not ordinarily blameworthy for).

² Morality with a capital "M" is a placeholder for the correct morality, broadly taken (p. 37). All page references in this essay are to Mason's book.

apologize. Hal, in contrast, will *not* recognize his fault, and in his case our blame will not be communicative. As Mason clarifies: “because [he] is not acting badly by [his] own lights, an attempt at communicative blame would be pointless—we would not be latching onto any receptors or recognition in [him]” (p. 114). Instead, we will merely react with repugnance to Hal’s conduct.

What goes for Hal, moreover, goes for all wrongdoers that fail to see that their conduct is wrong or even problematic (a subset of sexists, racists, exploiters, polluters, dictators, etc.). They are detached rather than ordinarily blameworthy.

Mason calls the overall project “normative responsibility theory”, and she describes it as follows: it “enables us to think clearly about what our responsibility practices are actually like, and what we want from our responsibility practices.” (p. 213) Thus, the aims are both descriptive and normative. To some extent it should describe our everyday practices, namely, of how we respond to one another’s wrongdoing. But, it should also *tell us how to do it*, so that our practices actually do what they are for.

But, what should we want from our responsibility practices? According to Mason, the primary function of blame and praise is not, for example, to ventilate our frustration. Rather, we should engage in responsibility practices for a more positive reason: *to remind each another of the values we share*.

Yet, the details differs here for ordinary and detached blame, and these details are crucial. Here is Mason:

“Ordinary blame is a practice that makes sense in the context of a moral community, reminding each other of the values we share. But our moral community is not an entirely isolated community, it is not entirely homogeneous. Individuals sometimes slip through the cracks, and end up with no recognizable morality at all. There is no point in trying to communicate with such people, but we are bound to react to their trampling on the values we hold dear. When reacting to people outside our moral community, our reactions are more for the benefit of each other than for the benefit of the people blamed. We demonstrate to each other our commitment to our values.” (p. 122)

I have summarized these and further features of ordinary and detached blame in the following table:

Blame	Ordinary	Detached
Target group?	Agents in our moral community, that share our value system (p. 105)	Agents outside our moral community, that do not share our value system (p. 122)

Communicative to the wrongdoer?	Yes, an expectation that the agent will recognize her fault (p. 103)	No, just emotions of repugnance, anger, hurt, disdain, contempt (pp. 116-9)
Response wrongdoer?	Emotions of guilt or remorse, an apology, and/or amends (pp. 103-4)	Not applicable
Relationship modifier?	No	Yes, you will give up on the agent, and avoid her in the future (p. 121)
Function?	Reminder for the wrongdoer of the values we share (p. 122)	Reminder for people in one's moral community of the values we share (p. 122)

Let me illustrate this table on the basis of Hal* (who knows that his conduct is problematic) and Hal (who does not know this). The possible targets for ordinary blame are Hal* and others who share our value system (e.g. according to which littering is wrong). Our blame will be communicative. Specifically, we start a so-called “blame conversation”, where we expect that they will recognize their fault, that they feel guilt or remorse, and that they apologize in response (and perhaps make amends, and clean up their mess). At the end of this conversation, we may forgive them and continue on the same terms as before. The function of this type of blame is to remind the wrongdoers of their own values.

In contrast, the possible targets for detached blame are Hal and others who do *not* share our values. This time, we won't start a blame conversation with the wrongdoers. Since the latter will not see that they did anything wrong, it would be pointless to start the conversation. In response to their conduct, we will just express emotions of repugnance, anger, hurt, disdain, or contempt, and do not expect any response. Moreover, we won't continue as before, but give up on the wrongdoers as members of our moral community and will try to avoid them in the future.³ The function of this type of blame is not to remind the wrongdoers of anything, but to remind *others* in our moral community of *our* values.

I consider Mason's account of these two forms of blame, and their different functions, eye-opening. I fully agree that agents like Hal and Hal*—and everyday counterparts—should *not* be treated in the same way. Others have made distinctions into this direction (P.F. Strawson in particular), though not in such a concrete way as Mason does it.

³ This is still a form of blame, Mason argues (p. 115), as long as we still treat Hal as an *agent* (rather than a mere product of the circumstances), albeit an agent with a different set of values.

In the remainder of this review essay, I will consider the question of how detached blameworthiness *exactly* differs from ordinary blameworthiness, and discuss two accounts:

One is saying—following Mason (esp. pp. 114, 122)—that Hal is not blameworthy in the ordinary way because he does not share our values according to which his conduct is problematic, and it would be pointless to expect him to recognize his fault.

The other, that I will suggest, is saying that Hal is not blameworthy in the ordinary way because he is not even partially concerned about environmental issues and it would be pointless to expect him to have done better.

These accounts may sound very similar at this point, but, as we will see, they yield different analyses of selected cases.

To understand Mason's account better, let me say something about what's *new* about it, contrasting it to the two main existing views: volitionism and attributionism. Volitionism focusses exclusively on, what Mason calls, "conscience respectworthiness", i.e. on acting rightly by one's own lights. Attributionism, in contrast, focusses exclusively on "motivation esteemworthiness", i.e. on acting from the right kind of concern, namely a concern about what matters in fact morally. Mason disagrees with both views, as she considers both aspects relevant (p. 80).

Volitionism comprises a strong epistemic condition, according to which one is blameworthy only if one is aware—*at the time of acting*—that one is acting impermissibly. Mason endorses an epistemic condition for ordinary blameworthiness, though a weaker one (pp. 85-9). It is merely required that one knows—*at some level*—that one's conduct is problematic. To take a well-known case, suppose you forgot about a birthday party of a close friend. Assuming you were supposed to show up, you are ordinarily blameworthy for failing to do so, because even if you were unaware at the time that you were at fault (after all, you forgot about the party), you still *know* you had to show up, and are able to acknowledge your fault.

Important on Mason's account, it seems to me, is not so much what you are aware of at the time of acting, but rather what values you reflectively endorse. If you endorse values according to which, for instance, littering is wrong, you are in a position to acknowledge your fault, and you can be considered blameworthy (in the ordinary way). If you do *not* share such values—like Hal—you are not able to acknowledge your fault, and you are not blameworthy (in the ordinary way).⁴

⁴ At one point, Mason makes an interesting claim: "Crucial here is the claim that we are entitled to expect that [she] will come to recognize her own fault. She may not come to that immediately: it may take some convincing her, or even educating her." (p. 104) This suggests that the epistemic condition has no clear boundaries. For

Since Mason endorses some epistemic condition, her account also differs from attributionism. According to attributionism, one can be blameworthy even if one does not know at some level that one's conduct is problematic, namely when one's conduct is due to an inadequate concern for what matters morally. For example, Hal would be blameworthy on this view because his littering is the result of his indifference to the environment (which, we assume, matters morally). Given that Hal does not know that his behaviour is problematic, however, Mason would not consider him blameworthy, at least not in the ordinary way. If Hal is blameworthy, he is detached blameworthy.

To summarize, according to Mason, one is only ordinarily blameworthy for one's conduct when one knows at some level that it is problematic (and detached blameworthy otherwise). Praiseworthiness is supposed to work in a similar way. One is only ordinarily praiseworthy for one's conduct when one knows at some level that it is right (and detached praiseworthy otherwise).

Next, I will consider a series of cases. In these cases, our protagonist—Huck—wrongfully eats meat (or rightfully refrains from doing so), or wrongfully keeps a slave (or rightfully lets one free).⁵ Mason discusses some of the following cases, but not all, and my aim in the following will be three-fold, namely (i) to examine what her framework would say about these cases, (ii) to illustrate the differences with the existing accounts, volitionism and attributionism, and (iii) to suggest an alternative distinction between ordinary and detached blameworthiness (especially relevant in the final cases 7 and 8).

Case 1

Huck does not eat meat, because he is concerned about animal welfare, and believes that meat consumption is problematic.

In this case, Huck is conscience respectable (and so praiseworthy according to volitionism), as he acts rightly by his own lights. He is also motivation esteemworthy (and so praiseworthy according to attributionism), because he acts from the right sort of concern. Given that Huck is in a position to acknowledge that his act was right, Mason would consider him ordinarily praiseworthy.⁶

even when Hal is unable to acknowledge his fault, given that he does not accept our values now, he may still be able to do so *after some education*. I will return to this issue below.

⁵ We will just assume that these acts are wrong because of certain welfare considerations. The story may well be more complicated, cf. e.g. my 'Participation and superfluity', forthcoming in this journal.

⁶ You may think that it is no big deal skip animal products. So why give Huck any credits? Perhaps *some* kind of praiseworthiness requires supererogatory or extraordinary effort, but Mason makes no such assumption.

Case 2

Huck does not eat meat because it is too expensive for him. He knows that meat consumption is wrong (others told him so), though he could not care less about animal welfare.

In this case, Huck is conscience respectable, as he does nothing wrong by his own lights. Yet he is not motivation esteemworthy, given that he does not act from the right sort of concern. What would Mason say about this case? In principle, Huck is in a position to acknowledge that his act was rightful, and if the function of praise is to remind the agent of this, we may well praise him, and move on. In such a case, then, we would praise Huck for his act (irrespective of its underlying motive).

Case 3

Huck lets some slave free. He cares about the slave, though also lives in a context where slavery is legal, and believes that it is wrong to let the slave—someone else's property—free.

In this case—the classic version of the case—Huck is motivation esteemworthy (and praiseworthy according to attributionism) because he acts from the right sort of concern. However, he is not conscience respectable (indeed, he is blameworthy according to volitionism) as he acts wrongly by his own lights. Given that he does not know at some level that he did the right thing, Mason (pp. 123-4) argues that Huck is detached praiseworthy in this case.

Yet, I do not think that we should praise Huck in a merely detached way and only send others in our community a reminder of the values we share (i.e. according to which slavery is wrong, and Huck's intervention right). Rather, some sort of "proleptic" praise may also be appropriate.⁷ Proleptic praise is communicative, and in that way similar to ordinary praise. Yet, it does not communicate to Huck an expectation that he acknowledges his accomplishment (after all, he does not yet "speak" the same moral language), but rather communicates to him *that his concerns are of the right kind, and that he is welcome to our moral community*.⁸

Case 4

Huck lets some slave free because he hates the slave's owner, and not because he cares about the slave. He lives in a context where

⁷ Mason mentions this type of blame (referring to Bernard Williams and Miranda Fricker, pp. 123-4), though she does not say if she fully endorses this analysis.

⁸ Throughout this essay, I am using the term "moral community" in the *local* sense (see Mason, e.g. p. 139), e.g. the community of people who take slavery to be wrong. But, we may also use the term in a more global sense, namely where people share many, though perhaps not all, of their values.

slavery is legal, and believes that it is wrong to let the slave—someone else's property—free.

In this case, Huck is neither conscience respectable (as he acts against his own conscience), nor motivation esteem-worthy (as he is motivated by the wrong kind of concern). Hence, he is blameworthy on both volitionism and attributionism.

What would Mason say about this case? I see at least two possibilities. First, we may focus on Huck's motives, and consider him blameworthy for acting on his hatred. Moreover, our blame will be detached so long as he does not know that acting on such a motive is morally problematic (which would depend on further details of the case). Second, we may focus on Huck's act of letting the slave free (irrespective of its underlying motive), which is, we assumed, objectively right. Plausibly, Huck should not be considered blameworthy for acting rightly, in the ordinary or detached way, since this will neither constitute a reminder for Huck of the values he does not grasp, nor any reminder for others in our community for that matter.

Case 5

Huck eats meat, though he is concerned about animal welfare, knows, or at least suspects, that what he is doing is wrong, and feels bad about himself concerning his conduct.

In this case, Huck is not conscience respectable (and so is blameworthy according to volitionism) given that he acts wrongly by his own lights. But he is motivation esteem-worthy (and praiseworthy according to attributionism) since he has the right sort of concern. Given that Huck is able to see his fault, Mason would consider him ordinarily blameworthy.

Case 6

Huck eats meat, because he could not care less about animal welfare, and does not know that what he does is wrong.

In this case, Huck is conscience respectable as he acts rightly by his own lights. Yet he is not motivation esteem-worthy, given that he acts from the wrong sort of concern. Given that Huck is unable to see his fault, Mason would consider him detached blameworthy. This means that, if we blame Huck, we give up on him as a participant of our moral community (at least *locally* regarding animal welfare issues, and potentially more *globally* regarding further moral issues as well).

Thus far, we saw a series of cases where Mason's framework allows us to make complex analyses, in many cases more nuanced than volitionism and attributionism (which solely look at the agent's conscience and motivation respectively). I consider many of Mason's analyses plausible, though we also saw one case where I considered the idea of proleptic praise

more plausible. The next case will be one of proleptic blame (as the case is important, I will describe it twice).

Case 7

Huck keeps a slave. To some extent he cares about the latter, but lives in a context where slavery is legal and normal, and is not aware, at some level, that slavery is wrong.

Alternatively, Huck eats meat. To some extent he cares about animal welfare, but has never heard anything about factory farms and does not know that meat consumption is wrong.

One may wonder whether such cases are really possible. If you care about animal welfare, then don't you know deep down that consuming animal products is problematic? This may be right in many cases, but (partial) moral concern might not always entail such knowledge. If you find yourself in a bad epistemic environment, where no-one considers meat consumption a moral issue, you may well be perceptive to animal welfare without being able to translate this into any suspicions about his food (or into a plant-based diet for that matter).⁹

In this case, Huck is conscience respectable as he acts rightly by his own lights. He is also motivation esteemworthy given that he has the right sort of concern. Even so, I do not think we should consider him praiseworthy, because objectively speaking Huck acts wrongly, and praising and drawing attention to his conduct will not constitute any reminder of our values. Assuming that Huck really does not know at some level that his conduct is problematic, he is not able to recognize his fault, and Mason would consider him detached blameworthy.

I would like to suggest a different analysis. I do not think that we should blame Huck in a merely detached way (i.e. send others in our community a reminder of the values we share, i.e. values according to which Huck's acts are wrong), but also blame him proleptically. As with proleptic praise, proleptic blame is communicative, though it does not communicate to Huck an expectation that he acknowledges his fault (as he may not understand what is going on), but again that his concerns are of the right kind, and that he is welcome to our moral community.

Yet there is more. We may also communicate to Huck the expectation *that he should have acted better*—not by his own lights, but objectively speaking. After all, Huck possessed the right kind of concern to do better, and was on the right track, so to speak, to act as he did in case 4 (where he does act rightly and lets the slave free).

But, why would blame involve an expectation that the wrongdoer should have acted better? What sort of function might this sort of blame have? It cannot be the function Mason identified: "In blaming her, I am acting

⁹ I have described such cases in my 'What's special about moral ignorance?', *Ratio* 30 (2017), at pp. 156-7.

as a proxy for her own conscience: I am simply reminding her of what she already knows to be the case, and making vivid that she has failed.” (p. 105) After all, blaming Huck in this case will not serve as a reminder of values *he already accepts* (at least, he does not reflectively endorse them).

Even so, blaming Huck might still “make vivid that he has failed”, that is, not subjectively but objectively, and this may serve as a learning moment for him. These functions differ, and I tend to think that both are variants of ordinary blame: one is about reminding the wrongdoer of her own values, while the other is about educating the wrongdoer about *new* values. If we are interested in the latter, I think we may well blame Huck in case 7 in the ordinary way.

What is so important about reminding or educating others about our values? This is a very fundamental issue that Mason does not address, but perhaps the importance of these things has to do with *maintaining the moral community*. We then maintain our moral world by keeping one another on track, but there are limits as to what we can do. We cannot keep and bring everyone in. We remind and educate wrongdoers *only to a certain extent*. If they have *very* different moral views, or *very* different concerns, we stop blaming them in the ordinary way.¹⁰

To be sure, often we will not be in the right position to blame meat eaters or slaveholders, and it might not always be the most effective strategy to improve their behavior. Yet, the idea here is that *if* we are in the right position to blame them, we say that we expected them to do better, and in response we expect them to apologize, and, I would add, to promise to do better in the future.

Case 8

Huck keeps a slave. He knows that this is wrong, though he does not really care about his slave.

In this case, Huck is not conscience respectworthy as he acts wrongly by his own lights. He is also not motivation esteemworthy as he acts from the wrong sort of concern. Given that Huck knows that his conduct is problematic, Mason might consider him ordinarily blameworthy. Namely, we may blame Huck in the sense that we expect him to recognize his fault.

However, following my analysis of the previous case, I do not think that in this case Huck is blameworthy in the ordinary way. Generally, I take it, knowledge of one’s mistakes is not sufficient for ordinary blameworthiness. We also need some concern for the features that make one’s conduct problematic—some such concern that one could have acted on to do better.

¹⁰ This may sound plausible, though there are some tricky issues. Strictly speaking, there is a difference between (i) we do not *actually* engage with others with very different concerns, (ii) we are not *able* to educate them, and (iii) we are not *supposed* to educate them. While (i) may be true, this seems insufficient for the argument to work, and (ii) and (iii) are up for discussion.

I think it would be pointless to blame Huck in the ordinary way, not because he will not acknowledge his fault (he might well acknowledge this), but because he does not possess the right concern to do better. Instead, I would blame Huck in a detached way. I do not expect him to have acted better, but send others in my community a reminder of our values.

There are different versions of the foregoing cases, i.e. various forms of inadequate concern. For example, Huck may act (keep slaves or eat meat) out of self-protection. In that case, he can see that others do not like it what he does, but he is not strong enough to admit—to others or even to himself—that his conduct is problematic. He is unable to handle the truth about his way of life. Deep down he may feel that something is not quite right, but he manages not to think about it (or he might even cook up elaborated stories on why he is acting rightly). Such a Huck is quite different from a Huck who acts from indifference, self-interest, or ill will. The first does not even notice that there is any issue about his conduct in the first place. The second could accept that others find his behaviour problematic, but has different concerns, namely doing what is best (cheapest, easiest, etc.) for himself. The third could accept that others do not like it what he does, but that is exactly what he is after: hurting others.

Moreover, there are numerous mixed cases, i.e. cases where Huck is partially concerned about self-interest and partially about his self-image, or partially concerned about his self-image and partially about the slave's welfare, and so on. My point, here, is that we should not blame Huck in the ordinary way—specifically, should not expect him to have acted better or to promise to do better in the future—so long as he does not possess at least some partial concern for the features that make his conduct problematic.¹¹

Taken together, in our discussion of the latter cases, two views on blameworthiness have emerged. The first view, suggested by Mason:¹²

S is ordinarily blameworthy for A iff A is subjectively wrong, i.e. S knows at some level that A is problematic; and
S is detached blameworthy for A iff A is objectively wrong, but S does not know at some level that A is problematic.

The alternative view:

S is ordinarily blameworthy for A iff S is partially, though less than fully adequately, concerned about what makes A problematic; and
S is detached blameworthy for A iff S is not even partially concerned about what makes A problematic.

¹¹ For ideas into this direction, cf. my 'Responsibility for strategic ignorance', *Synthese* 194 (2017), at pp. 4487-91.

¹² Ignoring any potential excuses and exemptions (chs. 6-7) that we did not address here.

Of course, these are not the only possible views. And, I agree with Mason that the first is attractive *so long as* the main function of blame is to remind each other of values we already endorse. But, for the reasons discussed, I consider the second a promising competitor.

That said, these views still agree about a crucial distinction between ordinary and detached blameworthiness, and, irrespective of how we draw the exact boundaries, Mason is to be credited for describing them in such a distinct and compelling way. Surely, the “old” views volitionism and attributionism can no longer hold across the board—at best, they talk about merely one aspect of our responsibility practices.¹³

¹³ For comments, I thank: Ellie Mason and Leo Menges.