

Commentary on Antti Kauppinen's "Character and Blame in Hume and Beyond"

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Introduction

The Character Thesis (CT) Blame targets a person's character, as manifested by bad thoughts, words, and actions.

This thesis contradicts an important assumption in moral theory – that blame targets actions in virtue of their consequences (consequentialism) or act types in virtue to their conformity to principles of duty and obligation (deontology). It is important to virtue theory, which aims to shift the focus of moral evaluations from acts to character traits.

Antti Kauppinen examines this thesis – particularly as it appears in the writings of 18th century Scottish philosopher David Hume in “Character and Blame in Hume and Beyond.”¹ Kauppinen expresses some skepticism about the thesis. However, he argues, if we look at the way that Hume handled the thesis, we get an option that has some merit. In his presentation, Kauppinen provides some arguments from Hume in defense of the thesis, then examines the ways Hume would respond to three possible problems with the thesis.

CT is presented in such a way that it appears that what we are really interested in is the value of the character itself. It says nothing about what determines the value of a person's character – whether that value is intrinsic or depends on its consequences or some combination of the two. We look at an action, infer something about the person's character from that action, make an evaluation of the character, and assign blame accordingly.

In his discussion, Kauppinen raises several points to a thesis similar to the character thesis that I am interested in. This can be expressed as “the Desire thesis”:

The Desire Thesis (DT) Praise and blame – as well as other types of moral reward and punishment – target a person's malleable desires, as manifested by bad thoughts, words, and actions, with the aim of promoting desires generally that have produce benefits and reduce harms.

DT is significantly different from CT in a number of ways. It applies the analysis to both praise and blame – and to moral rewards and punishments more generally. It shifts the target from character traits to malleable desires – though I do not think there is much of a difference between the two at least insofar as relevance to morality is concerned. And it presupposes a goal – that of promoting desires generally that produce benefits and reduce harms.

However, there is enough in common between the two that Kauppinen's comments on CT will be applicable to DT, and we will get to see how DT handles problems that the CT has difficulties with. With

¹ Kauppinen, Antti (2017). Character and Blame in Hume and Beyond. In Iskra Fileva (ed.), *Questions of Character*. Oxford University Press.

DT we look at a person's actions. We make inferences as to some key desires and aversions. We inquire about the effects of a person's desires and aversions. We draw further inferences about what the effect on society would be if those desires and aversions became universal – and apply praise or condemnation with an aim of adjusting the desires in a better direction.

Relating Blame and Character

Kauppinen begins by outlining Hume's theory of blame.

Briefly, Hume believes that blame consists in what he calls indirect passions of hate, contempt, and withdrawal of goodwill. A person becomes the object of such passions when she performs an action that causes or is apt to cause someone to suffer, and the action is associated with her as a result of issuing from an enduring quality of hers. The blame-constituting passions motivate action to change the agent's character, for instance, by means of punishment. (p. 47).

This passage identifies two reasons for relating blame to character traits.

The first is that, even though actions can be good or bad, a moral evaluation requires that we link the action to the person who performed it. We praise or blame people. We praise or blame them in virtue of the actions that they perform, but it is still the person that we evaluate morally (as somebody who performed an action of that type), not the action.

The relevant connection from action to person is that the action comes from the person's character. For it to be the case that you are responsible for an action – for it to be your action – it has to come from your character and reflect the type of person you are.

The second reason to connect action to character is that that praise and blame ultimately aim to change character – to make it better than it was.

There are two primary ways in which praise and blame, and reward and punishment, can have an influence on further actions. One way is directly through the incentive power of praise and other rewards and the deterrence power of condemnation and punishment. If you want the \$1000 reward, bring in the prisoner (dead or alive). If you want to avoid fines and imprisonment, then do not perform the action that will result in fines and imprisonment. If you want others to speak well of you then you should act in ways that tend to evoke respect and admiration. If you want to avoid their anger and wrath, then do not do those things that inspire anger and wrath.

The incentive and deterrence value of rewards and punishments have no necessary link to character. Incentive and deterrence take a person's character as-is, and uses that fact to manipulate behavior. An agent needs money as a means to the fulfillment of some of his ends. A cash reward will make it easier for her to realize reward, while a fine would make it harder. This gives the agent reason to do that which will be rewarded or refrain from that which is punished. These facts obtain for people of poor character and of good character alike. In some cases, incentives and deterrence are only relevant to people with poor (or less good) moral character. A good character would have performed such actions for their own sake - without these inducements.

The main lesson to be drawn from this part of the discussion is that we should not look at CT or DT in overly simplistic terms – as providing the one correct and true answer to all questions involving praise and blame. However, their importance is far greater than many people are aware of.

The other way reward and punishment can influence action is by actually changing an individual's character. Praise and condemnation, reward and punishment, may, "perhaps even change their dispositions so that they are less likely to do so in the absence of external control" (p. 50). We can create or strengthen a desire to help those in desperate need that motivates the agent to help others for its own sake. We can create or strengthen an aversion to lying, for destroying the property of others or taking their property without consent, for assault, for enslavement, and for murder. The deterrence effect of punishment only influences the behavior of those who fear they may be caught (and roughly in proportion to the chance of being caught). The person whose character comes to be molded has no reason to consider rewards or punishments – that person is going to do the right thing for its own sake.

When we give or strengthen a person's aversion to taking the property of others without their consent, we can make them into somebody who will not take another person's money – such as if they should find a wallet on the street or have access to another person's purse when others are not around. We can trust them just as we can trust somebody not to take and eat some food she hates – so long as she is not too hungry to care.

If we can change a person's character then we can potentially make an improvement that will pay dividends in many future actions that the modified trait can influence. Being the beneficiary of those future actions, or having one's friends and family be the beneficiary of those future actions, gives one reason to bring about the change. Where praise and condemnation are the tools of change, one has reason to praise and condemn.

These points provide a reason for associating praise and blame with character traits even if we were not already in the practice of doing so. There are potential benefits waiting for us to harvest them.

However, it seems more likely that our distant ancestors recognized – intuitively if not consciously – that by influencing the character of a person they can regulate future behavior even when those others are not being watched, and they had reason to do so. In fact, these may be habits that developed in our pre-history evolutionary past as ancestors, even further back on the evolutionary chain, recognized that acts of reward (grooming or a gift of food) and condemnation (a snarl or a swipe of a paw) would alter the behavior of others by promoting a desire to do that which was rewarded, or an aversion to doing that which was condemned.

There is more to be said on this subject of conditioning behavior. However, before I get to it, I wish to address a third reason that Kauppinen finds in Hume for relating blame to character – found in the existing practice of recognizing certain excuses.

Consider the excuse of "accident". A car speeds through an intersection and crashes into some pedestrians crossing the road. People generally certainly have reasons to mold the character of others to prevent these types of things from happening. They condemn the driver. However, an investigation discovers that the brakes on the car failed. Even a driver with good desires – that set of aversions that would motivate her to avoid crashing into a group of pedestrians – would not have been able to prevent

the accident from happening. There is no justification for trying to prevent future accidents by reforming the driver's character – so the driver is excused.

However, even if the brakes failed, we may still find somebody to blame, and the thesis of linking blame to character tells us where to look. We may still blame the driver if we discover that she did not have regular maintenance done on her vehicle. We may blame the manufacturer who ignored evidence that the brakes were prone to fail. In pursuing both of these options, we are looking for an example where the tragedy could have been avoided if only people had better motives for acting, and praise and condemnation are tools to be used in creating those better motives.

All of the various types of excuses – the "consent" excuse (the stuntman agreed to perform the dangerous stunt, so I am not responsible for the fact he was harmed), the "greater good" excuse (I had to break my promise to meet you for lunch because I needed to help this kid who was hit by a car), and the "ignorance of fact" excuse (he pointed a gun at me that I had every reason to fear was a real gun), all serve to show that a person of good character would have still performed the action under those circumstances.

Note that our judgment would change if we can trace the accident back to the driver's negligence in keeping the car maintained – having the brakes checked at reasonable intervals and having them replaced or repaired when necessary. We might also be able to trace the accident back to a character flaw on the part of the manufacturer, who ignored evidence that the brakes were prone to fail. Where we find a character flaw that, if reformed, could have prevented the accident, we see reason to apply the tool of condemnation to bring about that type of reform.

In short, these practices all indicate that we take blame to be a statement about a person's character, and the person being blamed can shield himself by pointing to some fact whereby a person of good character would have performed the same action.

Kauppinen mentioned finding these three reasons for relating blame to character in Hume.

He did not mention a fourth and – at least for consequentialists, far more important – reason to associate blame with character. He did not mention the effects of praise and condemnation on reforming (or forming) the character of people other than the person praised or blamed, particularly children.

Consider the case of "accident" discussed above, where a vehicle hit a group of pedestrians. Even if the brakes failed and the driver could not have stopped, we may blame the owner if she failed to have routine maintenance performed on the vehicle, or we may blame the manufacturer if they did not perform or ignored the results of tests performed on the braking system. Whether we end up blaming the driver, owner, or manufacturer we are aiming not only to change the behavior of the person blamed. We are looking to change the behavior of others.

This is particularly obvious in the case of capital punishment. Certainly, capital punishment "reforms" the character of the person blamed, in a sense. However, the aim of capital punishment is to reform the character of others who will hopefully see the act for which the accused was executed as a great wrong and acquire an aversion to performing it.

Kauppinen seemed to think that the utilitarian understanding of blame ended with its effects on the character of the person blamed.

The insufficiency of the utilitarian interpretation can also be observed in Hume's belief that it can be appropriate to blame people even when doing so will effect no change in their character, for example, when they are already dead (T 584). (p. 50; referencing Hume's Theory of Human Nature, p. 584)

However, this does not call into question of the utilitarian interpretation of praise and condemnation if we include in that utilitarian account the effects of others. If, in condemning the dead, we can promote an aversion to that which we are condemning among the living, we can harvest the benefits of people having that more widespread aversion. If, by praising the dead in eulogy, we can inspire others to be like the deceased, we can obtain the benefits of their improved character.²

We get the same utilitarian benefits when we praise or condemn the characters of fiction. Certainly, we cannot expect that our praise or condemnation can have any influence on a person who is a character in a novel, play, or movie. Nor are those characters capable of doing us harm or providing us with a benefit. Yet, we make moral evaluations of fictional characters, and we share our moral evaluations with others.

In fact, much of our praise and condemnation even of others in the community can have no effect on the character of the person being praised or condemned. We do not praise or condemn them to others, but praise or condemn them when we talk about them to our neighbors, friends, and family members. In another chapter in the same anthology, Hayes, Hogan, and Elmer assert that, "The most important means by which people learn character is through gossip."³ Gossip, in turn, is third-person praise and condemnation.

When we tell our children to "Be like this person" and "Do not be like that person." When the villain in a movie "gets what he deserved." When we idolize or vilify a historic figure. When we gossip about neighbors, family members, or "the rude waiter we had when we visited Paris." In all of these cases we encourage the people around us to adopt certain traits and discourage them from adopting others. More needs to be said about the effectiveness of these techniques, but we clearly do use them.

A general change in the dispositions of many people through third-party praise and blame is potentially far more significant in a utilitarian sense than the effect on the person being praised or condemned. There are more of them, and they have the capacity to perform a great many more actions that fall under the influence of those particular traits. Some of them – particularly the children – may be more susceptible to its influences than the person praised or condemned.

Is third-party praise and condemnation actually an effective way of altering character traits (desires)? People seem to widely assume that it is. If this assumption is correct, then utilitarian considerations

² It would be interesting to review Hume's writings to discover what he thought about the utility of third-person praise and condemnation. However, that project is outside of the scope of this work. Regardless of Hume's position on the matter, if third-person praise and condemnation molds character traits, then we have a reason to use them for that purpose.

³ Hayes, T. L., Hogan, R., & Emler, N. (2016). The Psychology of Character, Reputation, and Gossip. *Questions of Character*, 268-282.

provide an even stronger reason for believing that, even if we were not already in the practice of associating praise and condemnation with character, we would be well advised to take up the practice.

Furthermore, I would like to remind the reader that I am not limiting myself to speaking about praise and condemnation as incentives and deterrence – acting to obtain praise and avoid condemnation. I am writing about changing character itself – creating within people an aversion to taking the property of others without consent that motivates people to avoid performing such an act the way an agent might avoid an annoying sound or an awful smell. I am writing about creating agents who do not perform actions that tend to produce harm for others even when they could get away with it, and would otherwise benefit, because they don't like to do those kinds of things.

I have now presented four reasons for holding that praise and condemnation focus – or should focus – on the character of the person praised or condemned. Doing so is consistent with the agent's responsibility for the action – with the idea that the action belonged to the agent. Also, it is consistent with our practice of recognizing an excuse. We also have utilitarian reasons for adopting the practice even if we were not already using it. This includes harvesting the benefits of reforming the character of the person praised or condemned. Far more important, from a utilitarian perspective, are the benefits of reforming the character of other people – those who experience the praise or condemnation directly, and through the use of third-party praise or condemnation.

The practice of “excuse” can still be understood in utilitarian terms, since an “excuse” is mostly a claim that, “your moral praise or condemnation will have no utility – at least in the form of providing future benefits and reducing future harms through altered character traits.” The issue of relating the act to the person by saying that it springs from “his character,” and then relating “his character” to “malleable desires that can be shaped by praise and condemnation” raises questions about how “the person” can be related to “malleable desires that can be shaped by praise and condemnation”.

After presenting a defense that included at least three of these four considerations, Kauppinen then went on to consider three challenges to the view.

Three Challenges

After presenting reasons to associate blame with character traits, Kauppinen looks at three reasons for thinking that we either do not or should not engage in this practice.

First, we should only blame people for those things over which they have voluntary control. People do not have voluntary control over their character traits (or, at least, not enough voluntary control to warrant blame), so character traits are an inappropriate object of blame.

Second, there are important cases where people with identical character traits are still given different levels of blame. We see this in the distinction between murder and attempted murder, where the person who successfully kills is blamed more than the person who tries just as hard but fails. This shows that blame looks at more than character traits.

Third, there are cases where a person acts out-of-character because they are tired, distracted, grief-stricken, or otherwise knocked off balance. We sometimes blame people for actions that are out-of-character. When this happens, blame is not targeting the person's character.

Kauppinen looks at whether these are actual problems for the Character Thesis. I would like to look at these objections as well to determine if they are actual problems for Desire Thesis.

Voluntary Control

The first of the three challenges that Kauppinen raises against the accounts given above is the fact that praise and condemnation are only legitimate for things that are under an agent's control. An agent's character traits are, in many circumstances, not under his control. He expresses the objection as follows:

(P1) What we are to blame for must be something that is under our voluntary control.

(P2) Our character traits are not under our voluntary control.

(C) Therefore, we are not to blame for our character traits.

(pp. 52-53).

Earlier in the article, Kauppinen expressed the position more simply.

The first is that responsibility requires voluntary control, which we have over actions but not over character traits (p. 47).

Kauppinen reports that Hume responded to this objection, not by coming up with some way of suggesting that our character traits are under our control, but by rejecting the idea that we can only be praised or blamed for that which is under our voluntary control. In our actual practice, we do not hold people responsible for actions that emerge from nowhere. We hold people responsible for actions that come from the person – from their “motives, tempers, and circumstances.”

If there is any sense to be made of the idea that the action is voluntary, it can be said that this consists in having nothing between the action and the character of the person. If the agent is under some sort of compulsion, whether it is an external threat or damage to the brain, then the act does not come from the character – from the person herself. Consequently, the person herself is not to be blamed.

Actually, to say that an action is under our control is to say that it springs from us – with nothing between the character and the person to interfere. The relevant sense of “not under our voluntary control” means “not under the influence of forces other than mine. The act is mine. It comes from me.”

This evidence counts as observations that this is what we actually do. We look at the character traits that motivated the action, and do not look at what caused the individual to have that trait.

Desire theory adds to this a strong reason to be concerned with character as a cause of action. The character trait that caused this action will likely be the character trait that motivates the individual in other characters like this one. To the degree that there are reasons to prevent the person (or others in a similar situation) from performing this type of action, and to the degree that condemnation can prevent this, to that degree there is reason to condemn the agent. We focus on character traits because we have reason to focus on something that will likely influence the behavior of the agent and others in future circumstances.

The fact that people cannot easily explain that this is what they are doing is not an argument against the thesis that they are doing it. Many people who can ride a bike cannot tell you how they keep their balance on two thin tires. The most likely response to the question is that they do so by shifting their weight – the same way they would keep their balance if they were standing still on one foot. However,

this is not true. They keep their balance by turning the front wheel slightly left and right, and then using their inertia to carry their weight back and forth across the center of gravity.

The fact that people often cannot correctly answer the question of how they ride a bike does not prevent them from riding a bike. Similarly, the fact that people cannot explain how they are using praise and condemnation to mold malleable desires is no argument against the fact that this is what they are doing – or the fact that this is what it makes sense for them to be doing.

Before moving on to the next objection, I want to be against a potential misinterpretation of what I have claimed. I am not claiming that praise and blame are based entirely on an agent's utilitarian calculation of the effects of a specific instance of praise or blame on future behavior. The disposition to praise or condemn is also under the influence of character traits. Some people are quick to anger, and some are forgiving. Some are disposed to blame anybody but themselves, and some assign responsibility to themselves far too easily. We can evaluate these traits, as we evaluate others, on their utility. We can judge harshly the person who is too judgmental or too demanding, and praise the person who is just and "objective".

This does not defeat the thesis that praise and condemnation target sentiments. When answering the question of whether a malleable disposition to praise or condemn is such a good idea, it makes sense to consider the effects of praise and condemnation on molding the sentiments of others. At the same time, those others will be using praise and condemnation to mold one's own disposition to praise or condemn.

The rationality of praise and condemnation depend on something quite different from voluntary control. It depends on the ability of praise and condemnation to influence those traits they target.

Moral Luck

As a matter of empirical fact, we praise or condemn people, in part, according to the degree of actual benefit or harm they bring about. For example, using a case that Kauppinen discusses that comes from Adam Smith, two people each throw a heavy rock over a wall. One person's rock lands harmlessly on the other side. The other person's rock strikes and kills a person. We may assume that the two people have an identical moral character (one that would cause them to throw a rock blindly over a wall). However, we blame the one who causes a death more than we blame the one who merely created a risk. We are likely to charge the killer with a crime involving a severe punishment, while the lucky one would suffer a lesser penalty, and likely merely a reprimand.

The conclusion that we can draw from cases like this is that the differences in levels of blame are not grounded on differences in character. Clearly, something other than character must be relevant in blame.

One thing to note about the problem of moral luck is that a person cannot consistently say that a theory has a problem with blaming people for things outside of their control and, at the same time, has a problem with moral luck. Moral luck, by definition, blames a person for the consequences of their action that are outside of their control. To defend moral luck as a "problem" for CT is to defend blaming people for that which is outside of their control. If we are blaming people for that which is outside of their control, then we can blame them for their character traits. If we are not, then our practice of accepting moral luck is a mistake.

Yet, it would be a very strong and popular mistake.

According to Kauppinen, Hume has no answer to moral luck. To preserve CT, we must deny the relevance of moral luck.

However, moral luck is not a problem for DT, as expressed above. DT would make room for moral luck – for practical reasons.

For years, my own answer to this question has been to argue for condemning each person according to the risk of harm and not according to actual harm. I imagined taking the various results of an action and calculating some sort of “average consequence”. People would then be condemned or punished according to this “average consequence”.

However, DT has a different answer.

DT says that we praise and blame to shape malleable desires – to promote desires and aversions that tend to fill other desires. We have more and stronger reasons to change certain desires depending on the ease of changing those desires and the degree of benefit or harm-avoidance that the change will bring about. If a certain act-type tends to bring about a great deal of harm (e.g., rape) then we have more and stronger reasons to promote aversions against performing this type of action. The trick is to discover the amount of harm a type of action can bring about.

We could invent a moral system where people need to compute the average harms and benefits that a type of act will tend to bring about. However, that would require that people do a great deal of calculating – far more than most people have the time or the skill to do properly. time for. overall harms and benefits of a desire or aversion held universally across a population. However, we would be calling for a system that requires a great deal of effort and mental acuity.

Or we could allow the system to play out by allowing people to take actual consequences into consideration and let the overall social praise and condemnation play out over the many and various instances of praising and blaming.

The problem with a system that averages out the harm and benefits and then praises or blames people according to that average harm or benefit is that it is not going to happen. We will not be able to establish such a system among normal human beings. Given that morality is a practical institution invented to help people realize their ends, anything that makes it impractical provides the grounds for a serious objection.

Besides, life is filled with luck of this type.

Two soldiers jump out of the trenches to charge an enemy machine-gun position. One gets killed after taking only a few steps, while the other succeeds in destroying the position. One because just another casualty of war, the other gets a Congressional Medal of Honor.

Two sets of parents are equally diligent in caring for their children. One of the children gets in an accident and dies, and the other grows to become a prominent and well-respected member of the community.

Two people are equally diligent in planning for their retirement. By chance, one of them puts her money in investments that earn 1% more per year than the other, on average. At the end of 40 years, one of them has \$500,000 more than the other.

Two people adopt identical exercise and diet regimes to care for their health. Yet, one of them gets cancer and dies, while the other lives a long and healthy life.

Two people buy a lottery ticket each. One wins a hundred million dollars, while the other is \$1 poorer.

In each of these cases, the agents' actions influence the chances of a favorable outcome, but they do not guarantee that outcome. The outcome is, to some degree, a matter of luck.

There is another reason to allow people to consider the actual consequences when determining levels of praise and blame. We cannot fully determine the mental states that brought about the harms in question. Philosophers are great at coming up with examples where they can stipulate that the cases of the two individuals are identical. However, are there any cases where those who are actually doing the praising and blaming can know this?

Two people each throws a heavy rock over a wall. One of them recklessly kills somebody on the other side, the other one does not. The philosopher stipulates that this was entirely due to luck. Yet, in any real-world case, we have no reason to accept this assumption. The difference between the two might be due to the fact that one was more careful in some way than the other. We want to reward the greater care and punish the greater carelessness. Taking the harm done as our only evidence of the fact, we can make the assumption in the real-life case that the person who did not kill anybody was more careful than the one who did not. We would need actual evidence of the contrary – not the philosopher's assumption.

It is still the case that praise and blame target a person's character. It does so for the purpose of changing a person's character. It does so not only to change the character of the person being praised or condemned, but to improve the character of others who may be influenced indirectly by that praise or condemnation. To do this efficiently – to allow the vast majority of people to participate in this project of molding the character of others – it allows people to consider the consequences of the specific action brought about by a given motive. It is just easier that way.

Acting Out of Character

Another threat to the idea that moral blame is focused on the character of the accused is that we still blame people for bad actions that are out-of-character for an agent. We may temper our judgment, but we still judge them nonetheless.

For example, an individual has a reputation for patience. She can handle the most problematic customers at work, maintains calm when driving home regardless of the traffic, and has never raised her voice with her children. Nonetheless, on a day when the customers at work were unusually bothersome, the traffic was a burden and somebody in an SUV nearly forced her off the road, and she learned that her best friend has cancer, her child comes up to ask a question. At the end of her rope, she snaps, "I'm busy! I don't have time for this. Go to your room!"

This act is out-of-character for her. It has never happened before and will possibly never happen again. In fact, she may resolve there and then, never to do such a thing again and be capable of keeping that resolution.

Still, her action was wrong. We would expect her to realize that her action was wrong and to go to the child and apologize. We see her act, and we expect her to see her own act, as something she ought not to have done. In this case, it is something that she is characteristically disposed not to do.

This creates a problem for CT in that we are not, in this case, targeting her character. We are targeting an action that is, by definition, uncharacteristic.

One of the problems with this analysis is that it is only applicable if we know a person's character. Many of the interactions we have with other people that involve blame (or praise) do not come with an opportunity to perform a complete character analysis of the agent. In the case of the shoplifter, the person who tailgates on the highway, the person who cuts in line, are people we will likely meet only once. The act may be out of character, but we have no reason to know that. Given that in-character actions are common and out-of-character actions are rare, if we had to choose, we are more likely right in thinking that a given action is in-character rather than out-of-character.

When we do know a person well enough to think that we have a firm understanding of their character, we tend to take this into account in making our judgments. A sudden and uncharacteristic outburst does not prompt condemnation. Instead, it invites us to ask, "What's wrong? What's going on in your life?" A person with a long history of honorable behavior is let off the hook while a repeat offender is instantly blamed for the same action.

However, these observations do not defeat the original objection. The observation that we sometimes praise or condemn people for actions that are out of character is inconsistent with the thesis that praise and condemnation target character.

A person who assaults (hits, or perhaps stabs or shoots another) or who takes another person's property will still be accused of assault (or murder) or theft, even if the act is out-of-character.

Kauppinen claims that Hume can defend CT from this objection by claiming that these "uncharacteristic" actions are not uncharacteristic after all. Our agent, in this case, is the type of person - has a character of someone - who will snap at a child under these circumstances. We can compare this to a person who, even faced with these stresses, would not snap at a child. Indeed, we have reason to want this person to be that type of person. Consequently, when we condemn this person and say she ought not to have snapped at the child, we are still targeting her character.

Where do we draw the line between what is in-character and what is out-of-character in the relevant sense?

If we accept the idea that praise and condemnation are meant to do work - to alter character traits - this question is answered by determining the character traits that praise and condemnation can influence. To say that blame in this case targets her character is to say that this disposition to blow up at a child in these circumstances is not necessary. The mother can and should acquire a disposition to refrain from taking out her frustrations on her child in this way, and the condemnation of her actions reflects that fact. "It's not his fault that you had a bad day. Now, go upstairs and tell him you are sorry."

The case becomes stringer when we add the fact that the utility of praise and condemnation extend to influencing the character of others as well. In condemning the mother, we teach others – including (and especially) the child and any of her other children – not to adopt those attitudes. Refraining from condemnation, on the other hand, tells the children and others that snapping at children in this way is permissible. That is not a lesson that people generally have much reason to want others to learn.

For an act to be “out of character” in a way that would put it beyond the scope of praise and condemnation, it would have to be motivated by some trait that is beyond the reach of praise and condemnation. We cannot expect a person to treat the physical pain of all people equally, so it makes no sense for us to condemn people for treating their own pain as more important than another person’s. Somewhere in the world there is somebody suffering from a pain where, if it were you or I, we would be doing whatever we could to end that pain. We do not condemn him for giving his pain a priority over other concerns, because his aversion to pain is beyond the reach of praise and condemnation.

Types of Blame

Kauppinen goes on to discuss “two kinds of blame”; what he calls “reactive blame” and “relational blame”. His thesis is that a combination of these two types of blame, existing together in the same moral system, might be able to handle the idea that blame targets character.

Both types of blame have significant problems.

Under the term “reactive blame”, Kauppinen appears to understand “blameworthy” in terms of “that which causes us to have a particular emotional reaction such as “resentment, indignation, and guilt”. This is the type of blameworthiness into which Kauppinen writes at least a small amount of utilitarian measure – the reaction is meant, in part, to reform the character of the person being blamed even (as in the case of guilt) the blamer and the blamed are the same individual.

The primary problem that I have with “reactionary blame” is that it seems to ignore the question of when blame is appropriate or inappropriate. In fact, this account seems to render inappropriate blaming to be an impossibility. If a black person moving into the neighborhood makes a person angry, then it is a fact of the matter about the black person moving into the neighborhood that it is such as to make the white residents angry. The character of the black person – that he would dare to move into a white neighborhood – gets targeted with blame.

However, the black person is not blameworthy. We need some way to determine when blame is legitimate. Merely assuming that the reactions are legitimate is problematic at best.

The instrumental approach has two advantages over the reactive approach.

The first is that it provides a way to evaluate reactions. People generally have no reason to condone a disposition to getting angry because a black person moves into the neighborhood, and many and strong reasons to condemn it. Imagine a world in which nobody cared whether a black person moved into the neighborhood. Who would be worse off? Not the black person who moved into the neighborhood, and not anybody in the neighborhood that the person moved into that did not care about such things.

The second benefit of considering the use of praise and condemnation to mold character is that it provides a way to alter our reactions. To the degree that they are learned, we can use the tools of social

approval and disapproval – including praise and condemnation, and even extending into the realm of reward and punishment – to promote sentiments people have reasons to promote. By condemning those who lie or commit fraud, we may be able to promote an aversion to performing these types of actions, and less lying and fraud as a result. This gives people the benefit of living in a community with less fraud.

The other type of blame that Kauppinen discusses is relational blame. Relational blame effects the relationships between individuals. The spouse who cheats, the “friend” with whom the spouse cheats, the co-worker who speaks ill of a person in front of her boss and takes credit for one’s work, the boss who sets up an employee to fail. These are examples of cases where blame is attached to a character trait that gives a person reason to alter a relationship.

My objection to this type of blame is that it does not seem to be distinctly moral. While it is true that, in the examples given, the behavior is immoral and it gives an agent reason to alter a relationship with a person. It is also the case that a person can have reason to alter a relationship with another on grounds that are not immoral.

In the cases where characters What makes these actions immoral is not the fact that others have reason to alter the relationship with them.

Assume that the spouse, instead of cheating, gets involved in a career that, it turns out, she is very good at and finds extremely rewarding. As a result, she loses her interest in having children. This may give a person reason to alter his relationship with her. However, it is not the case that the woman’s change in interests is blameworthy. The same can be said of the friend who starts dating and does not want to hang out any more, or the changes in the relationship between parent and child as the child grows up and becomes an adult, while the parent ages and becomes frail.

Here, the instrumentality of blame allows us the difference between these types of cases. People generally have reason to condemn the cheater, the underhanded co-worker, and the malevolent boss. People do not have reason to condemn the career-minded woman, the friend who falls in love, or the child who grows up. The reasons for condemnation have to do with the reasons for creating aversions to cheat on a spouse, lie about a co-worker, or set up an employee or teammate to fail.

For these reasons, we should give up the idea of blame as reactive or relational. Blame is instrumental. It targets character – or, more precisely, malleable character traits (those that can be altered through the application of rewards and punishments delivered to the agent or to others) – because it is a tool for altering those character traits. There may be a reactive component, but one’s reactions can be molded – ironically, as it turns out, by using the tools of praise and condemnation themselves.

The reason that blame targets character traits is precisely because it has this power to operate to alter those character traits and, thereby, to improve them.

Conclusion

CT, the character thesis, claims that blame targets a person’s character. However, it does not answer the question, “Why?” What is it about character that makes it a legitimate target for blame?

Kauppinen mentions three primary reasons why we may consider targeting a person’s character. The first is that we think that blame should attach itself to the person – it should be something that the

person has done that provides the warrant for blame. The doctrine of excuse seems to follow this model, since a person can use as an excuse from blame any fact that shows that the act did not come from his character – that he was not the cause of the action. Kauppinen also mentions the utility of blame in providing a deterrence, and potentially molding the character of the person blamed so as to improve his or her behavior in the future.

Kauppinen does not seem to consider what is the most important benefit of blame, which is to alter the behavior of people other than the person blamed. This effect, applied to a lot more people, has the potential to produce a lot more benefit. If he were to do so, he would see that it makes more sense to attach blame to character than he allows.

One of the listed problems with targeting character with blame is that character is not under a person's control. Yet, if the purpose of blame is to produce an effect on character, then we would not want character to be entirely under a person's control. It needs to be the kind of thing that blame itself can influence.

Another problem is accounting for moral luck. All moral theories have a problem of accounting for that portion of blame that comes about in virtue of consequences. In the case of CT, it seems to defeat the claim that blame targets character when blame is determined by consequences that are independent of character. However, if we see blame as targeting character for the purpose of producing certain effects, we can ask the further question of whether "moral luck" will improve the ability to produce those effects. We cannot expect people to do the calculations to determine the average effect of actions produced by a poor character trait. However, we can expect the combined instances of condemnation that consider actual harms to average out over time to give us something approximating the appropriate level of concern.

A third problem – that we sometimes blame people for actions that are "out of character" - appears to be a philosopher's problem with a particular conception of the way blame is associated to character traits. In effect, no action motivated by a sentiment that can potentially be influenced by the effects of praise and condemnation on character traits. Again, our interest is not just in modifying the traits of the agent, but in modifying the traits of people generally.

An examination of these problems highlights the importance of the utility of praise and condemnation in molding the sentiments of people other than the person praised or condemned. Morality, as a practice, needs to be something that nearly everybody can participate in – regardless of individual talents or level of education. It is not merely a practice for the moral philosopher.

We can expect people to see the value of molding the desires of others – causing them to promote traits that tend to fulfill other desires or, at least, that prevent the thwarting of other desires. As with riding a bike, the fact that people do not have a clear understanding of how they do morality does not prevent them from successfully doing morality.

We can expect people to give additional weight to the harms caused by a given action motivated by a character trait they have reason to condemn, even though the specific harms are somewhat a matter of luck. It is something that a person on the street – without a degree in moral philosophy or psychology – can adopt as a successful rule-of-thumb.

We can expect people to apply these tools to all traits that praise and condemnation (reward and punishment) can influence. After all, in many cases we cannot know the overall character of the person we praise or condemn – our interactions with that person is limited. We cannot wait to complete a whole personality profile before assigning praise and condemnation. However, we can know if the action was motivated by traits that praise and condemnation can influence, and generally know if we have reason to promote or interfere with those traits.

Blame targets character traits because blame has the power to change character traits. It targets character traits as a way of bringing about some practical change.