

Blaming and Forgiving: The Work of Morality

Outline

There is more than one way to respond to somebody who wrongs you. Our central reactions—such as blaming or forgiving— may derive from deep impulses in human nature, but they are also culturally shaped. We are surely able, therefore, to take some responsibility for the specific forms of blaming and forgiving that we cultivate and encourage. This book takes a step back from these interpersonal practices to discern the various functions or roles played by blaming and forgiving in our shared moral life, and to evaluate them. I will endeavour to identify a plausible ‘paradigm case’ (in the sense of *explanatorily basic case*) of each. I will argue that the forms of blaming and forgiving that we should continue to cultivate are those that are conducive to wrongdoers coming to see clearly the moral significance of their actions, and blamers being enabled to harbour blame-feeling only insofar as it remains at least potentially morally transformative to do so. Moreover, I will try to show that both blaming and forgiving of these basic kinds work together in the service of a common ultimate goal: to encourage an increasing alignment of how wronged and wrongdoer understand what has gone on between them. In other words, the kinds of blaming and forgiving we should continue to cultivate are those that ultimately work together to encourage *shared moral understandings*. In this sense I hope to leave us with a picture according to which it is through our interpersonal negotiations of blaming and forgiving that we construct and discover our shared moral world. In another sense, however, the equal and opposite preoccupation of this book is to explore those dysfunctional forms to which our practices of blaming and forgiving are intrinsically prone. These dysfunctions arise from the attempts at moral influence—operations of moral power—that are built into blaming and forgiving, furnishing them with both their progressive moral energy and also their tendency for deterioration into moral manipulation. The hope is that articulating these intrinsic degenerative tendencies will enable us to better understand, resist and avoid them as hazards endemic in moral life.