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The Communication Argument and the Pluralist Challenge

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Abstract

Various theorists have endorsed the “communication argument”: communicative capacities are necessary for morally responsible agency because blame *aims at* a distinctive kind of moral communication. I contend that existing versions of the argument, including those defended by Gary Watson and Coleen Macnamara, face a pluralist challenge: they do not seem to sit well with the plausible view that blame has multiple aims. I then examine three possible rejoinders to the challenge, suggesting that a context-specific, function-based approach constitutes the most promising modification of the communication argument.

Keywords: Blame; moral responsibility; communicative theory of responsibility; function of blame

1. Introduction

In an influential remark, Watson writes that,

In a certain sense, blaming and praising those with diminished moral understanding loses its “point” ... The reactive attitudes are incipient forms of communication ... the most appropriate and direct expression of resentment is to address the other with a complaint and a demand. Being a child exempts, when it does, not because expressing resentment has no desirable effects; in fact, it often does. Rather, the reactive attitudes lose their point as forms of moral address. (2004, 230–31)

This passage has been frequently cited approvingly, and the argument in this passage—from how blame would lose its “point” to why we should exempt individuals—has received much discussion in the literature (e.g., Darwall 2006; Shoemaker 2007; Watson 2011; McKenna 2012; Talbert 2012; Smith 2013; Macnamara 2015a, 2015b; Beglin 2020). But what does it exactly mean to say that blaming attitudes or behaviors “lose their point as forms of moral address”? I take it that the most natural construal is a teleological one: blame loses its point just in case blame does not *fit its aim*. The argument, then, is that communicative capacities (e.g., the capacity of moral understanding) are necessary for morally responsible agency because blame *aims at* a distinctive kind of moral communication. Following Macnamara’s terminology (2015a, 212), I will refer to this line of reasoning as the “communication argument.”

Many have endorsed the communication argument. For example, McKenna states that communicative capacities are necessary for responsible agency because “blame only has a point if the one toward whom it is directed is able to understand it as an expression of our moral regard for, and expectations in response to, what the person has done” (2012, 109). As another example, Shoemaker puts it that psychopaths and moral fetishists are not morally responsible agents because they cannot care about the basic demand to be communicated, and thus blaming them would be “particularly

pointless” (2007, 85). In his later work, Watson himself draws the same conclusion about psychopaths by contending that the “*telos*” of blaming practices is “the prospect of codeliberation and reconciliation,” but when it comes to psychopaths “this hope is forlorn” (2011, 323). And Macnamara (2015a, 2015b) offers a functional account of the communication argument according to which reactive attitudes are “communicative entities” in the sense that they “have the etiological function of eliciting sincere acknowledgment of fault from the wrongdoer” (Macnamara 2015a, 222).

The goal of this paper is to present a novel challenge against the communication argument based on the plausible pluralist view that blame has more than one aim. Though various theorists have mentioned or briefly discussed the possibility that blame has multiple aims, its potential threat to the communication argument has not been sufficiently discussed. I will argue that there is a serious difficulty in configuring the communication argument under a pluralist picture about blame’s aims. I then discuss three possible strategies to respond to the difficulty: a conjunctive approach, a disjunctive approach, and a context-specific approach. I conclude by suggesting that the context-specific approach, when combined with a functional account of the communication argument, offers the most promising way out of the pluralist challenge.

Before I proceed, it is worth noting that the communication argument is not the *only* argument for the alleged centrality of communicative capacities to responsible agency. Communicative theories of responsible agency consist in a broad family of views (e.g., Watson 2004, 2011; Darwall 2006; Shoemaker 2007; McKenna 2012; Macnamara 2015a, 2015b; Fricker 2016, 2018). They all share the commitment that communication is the key to understanding what it is to be a morally responsible agent, but the specific contents of and motivations behind these views vary significantly. For example, Darwall’s version of the theory is part and parcel of a second-personally oriented metaethical framework that other communicative accounts are usually reluctant to rely on, while McKenna’s version of the theory is uniquely built upon an analogy between moral communication in blame and linguistic conversation. My interest in this paper is not to give an overall evaluation of all those different sorts of communicative theories and potential arguments supporting each. Instead, I will address the particular issue of whether the communication argument, or a close variant thereof, is well suited to back up the communicative theory of morally responsible agency.

Another important preliminary matter consists in the question of what blame is. My approach is to understand blame in terms of negative reactive attitudes. Specifically, on my view, blame is either (i) private blame in the form of a negative emotion such as resentment, indignation, and guilt, or (ii) public blame in the form of an outward behavior, like complaint and condemnation, that expresses a negative emotion such as resentment, indignation, and guilt. This is a fairly moderate stance on the nature of blame. For example, it is neutral on the question of whether private blame or public blame is more explanatorily basic,¹ and it is compatible with various accounts about what underlying factor unifies all instances of blame.²

2. The communication argument

I have described the communication argument as follows:

The Communication Argument. Communicative capacities are necessary for morally responsible agency because blame aims at a distinctive kind of moral communication.

In this section, I will more carefully unpack the communication argument by discussing (i) different views on the distinctive kind of moral communication; (ii) different views on the required communicative capacities; and (iii) what it means to say that one is a morally responsible agent.

¹McKenna (2012, 2016) argues that public blame is more explanatorily basic. By contrast, Driver (2016) and Menges (2017) have provided reasons for thinking private blame is more explanatorily basic.

²For different accounts see, e.g., Watson (2004), Sher (2005), and Scanlon (2008).

According to some theorists, blame is meant to communicate a *demand* or *expectation*. This is evident in Watson's remark: "the most appropriate and direct expression of resentment is to address the other with a complaint and a demand" (2004, 230). According to Watson, blame involves a concern for the *basic demand*, which is "a *moral demand*, a demand for reasonable regard" (2004, 229). Watson seems to imply that blame, or at least the most appropriate and direct form of blame, is both meant to convey a moral demand as its *content* (the blamer is meant to communicate that she demands a reasonable degree of good will), and is also meant to be in the *form* of a demand itself (her blaming attitude or behavior constitutes a demand itself, instead of other forms of communication like invitation and request).³ In a nutshell: blame aims at communicating a demand or expectation. This is the "telos of this practice" (Watson 2011, 322).

Darwall (2006) also endorses this demand claim. However, according to Darwall, the content of the moral demand involved in blame is more complicated. Importantly, blame demands not just good will but also that others recognize the "second-personal" nature of this demand, which further requires others to recognize our *authority* to make demands. The recognition of this authority is essential when it comes to respecting a morally responsible agent as a person. As Darwall puts it, "their [reactive attitudes'] aim is to demand respect" (2006, 86) and "the implicit aim of reactive attitudes is to make others feel our dignity" (85). Thus, according to Darwall, good will, recognition of authority, and respect are all interrelated elements involved in the content of the distinctive kind of moral demand that blame aims to communicate.

Shoemaker (2007) makes a similar point about the second-personal nature of blame's demand, but he parts ways with Darwall in taking the basic demand to involve an essentially affective dimension. Important for Shoemaker, blame is both an address of reasons and an "emotional address": it consists in "urging the wrongdoer to feel what I feel as a result of his wrongdoing and then subsequently to feel the guilt or remorse (at having caused that feeling) which I expect to motivate him to cease his wrongdoing" (91). Blame is meant to communicate a demand as "a form of emotional address"; it is analogous to asking, "can't you see how you've made me feel?" (Shoemaker 2007, 100).

Though widely accepted, the demand claim has received some criticisms (e.g., Macnamara 2013; Telech 2020). The details of this dispute need not bother us here. It is enough to note that it is an open theoretical possibility for a defender of the communication argument to rely on a notion of moral address broader than that of a moral demand. As Telech puts it, "it is not clear why Strawsonians should have identified moral address with one of its varieties—namely, moral demand. Apart from demand, moral address can take the form of invitation, urging, request, and so forth" (2020, 10). Though Telech's point here is meant to apply to praise, it can also be taken as a reasonable take on the scope of moral address involved in blame. One version of the communication argument that does not rely on the demand claim has been defended by Macnamara (2015a, 2015b). Her approach is to understand the distinctive kind of moral communication in blame in terms of the *uptake* that blame is meant to receive. Macnamara puts it that uptake of blame "is understood to involve sincere acknowledgment of one's fault—most paradigmatically, feeling guilt and expressing it via apology and amends" (2015a, 215). This provides one way of understanding the communication argument while setting aside disagreements on what moral address or moral demand exactly involves, by focusing on the "consensus that uptake requires the capacity to feel guilt" (216). Macnamara then suggests that eliciting this emotional uptake is the aim, or, more accurately, the *function*, of blame.

The above theorists' differing views on what blame communicates correspond to their disagreements about what the relevant "communicative capacities" necessary for morally responsible agency are. Watson (2004) takes it to consist in the cognitive capacity to understand the relevant moral demand. Blaming an individual who lacks this capacity is "pointless" and "unintelligible"

³See Macnamara (2013) and Telech (2020) for a similar distinction.

because it does not fit the aim of blame. Darwall concurs, but he adds that the blamer also needs to possess the capacity to “take moral demands as conclusive reasons for acting,” which further involves the capacity to “hold oneself responsible” and to “determine oneself by a second-personal reason” (2006, 78). The thought is something like the following: blaming an agent who lacks the capacity to engage in the exchange of second-personal reasons does not fit the aim of blame, which is to address a demand that involves the exchange of this distinctive kind of reasons. Shoemaker (2007) agrees that a morally responsible agent needs to have the capacity to recognize and apply second-personal reasons. However, because Shoemaker thinks blame is also meant to be an emotional address, he also requires that a responsible agent has an emotional capacity: the capacity to be “moved to identifying empathy with” (101) the person who is the source of the relevant second-personal reasons. Identifying empathy requires that one is able to “feel what they [the blamers] feel in the way that they feel it” (99). Lastly, Macnamara concludes that morally responsible agents need to possess the capacity to feel guilt because the function of blame involves evoking emotional uptakes.

Now we can see a similar pattern of reasoning in the above authors. They all start from a distinctive sort of moral communication that blame aims at—a reason-based demand, an emotion-based demand, or a broader form of moral address—and then infer from the premise that this sort of communication is the aim of blame to the conclusion that an individual who lacks the capacity to stand in the role of the addressee in the relevant communicative process is exempt from blame. After all, blaming her would not fit the aim of blame; it would be pointless. As Macnamara puts it, “it seems utterly intuitive that one is a felicitous candidate for a role only if she has the capacities necessary to perform the activities that are constitutive of the role” (2015a, 214). If we were to blame an individual who is unable to play the required role when it comes to the aim of blame, then our blame would fail to *fit this aim*. The communication argument relies on the intuitively plausible view that an instance of blame that does not fit the aim of the practice is misdirected; its target should, therefore, be exempted from our blaming practices.

Before I proceed to present my challenge against the communication argument, it is worth making a few remarks about what morally responsible agency entails. Defenders of the communication argument all agree that morally responsible agency is conceptually tied to the exemption condition of moral responsibility. An individual who lacks responsible agency is exempted from responsibility practices and exempted from blame. One contentious matter, however, is whether morally responsible agency is a context-general or context-specific concept. While the context-general view is often taken for granted by defenders of the communication argument, the context-specific view also has its proponents. For example, Vargas (2013) contends that both empirical evidence and armchair reflection support the claim that responsible agency is likely to be a “patchy concept” such that one may have or lack responsible agency depending on the context that one is in. As Vargas puts it, capacities relevant to responsible agency can include a variety of things: “susceptibility to a nagging, reacting to a dim hope, being able to imagine the situation of another, or attending to an inarticulate, largely inchoate suspicion about things” (2013, 208–9). Given that all these elements can vary significantly across contexts, it seems unlikely that responsible agency is an entirely context-general kind.⁴ Another potential complication concerns whether morally responsible agency is binary or scalar. Theorists often take for granted that responsible agency is a binary concept, but some have convincingly argued that morally responsible agency can come into degrees (e.g., McKenna 2012, 10; Shoemaker 2015; Nelkin 2016; Brink 2018, 2021). I will put aside these

⁴Other proponents of context-specific responsible agency include defenders of “responsibility variantism” (Doris, Knobe, and Woolfolk 2007; Knobe and Doris 2010; also see Nichols 2015). For example, Knobe and Doris (2010) cite intriguing empirical evidence in support of treating responsible agency differently depending on whether an individual is a stranger or one we stand in close relationship with.

controversies for now, but they will play important roles in an approach to be presented later in [section 4.c](#).

3. The pluralist challenge

In this section, I will raise what I refer to as a “pluralist challenge” against the communication argument. The central claim is that the communication argument, when combined with the plausible pluralist view that blame has more than one aim, seems to lead to some unwanted consequences. The challenge for friends of the communication argument, then, is to identify a strategy that can accommodate both theses:

The Communication Argument. Communicative capacities are necessary for morally responsible agency because blame aims at a distinctive kind of moral communication.

Aim Pluralism. Blame has more than one aim.

To demonstrate that this is a real challenge, I will argue that (i) we have good reasons to believe that aim pluralism is true, and (ii) there is a serious tension between the communication argument and aim pluralism. This is what I will attempt to accomplish in this section. To do so, I will identify two different but related theses underlying aim pluralism: *concept pluralism*, according to which there is more than one sense, or more than one *concept*, in which blame has an aim ([section 3.a](#)); and *content pluralism*, according to which blame has multiple aims even when we settle on a particular concept of aim ([section 3.b](#)).

3.a Concept pluralism

One way to establish aim pluralism is to argue that more than one *concept* can be involved in the use of aim-talk:

Concept Pluralism. There is more than one sense in which blame has an aim.

My proposal is to defend concept pluralism by distinguishing between three concepts of blame’s aims: its intentional aim, functional aim, and normative aim. This distinction draws on a close analogy from the literature about the aim of belief. It is widely agreed that beliefs aim at truth, but philosophers have carefully distinguished between different concepts of aim that can be involved in such a claim.⁵ I suggest that a similar taxonomy can be applied to the case of blame as well in a way that will turn out to illuminate our discussion of the communication argument.

Theorists have offered three competing kinds of interpretations of the platitude that belief aims at truth: the intentional interpretation, the functional interpretation, and the normative interpretation. The intentional interpretation understands the claim as stating that an agent only believes that *p* when she accepts *p* with the intention of obtaining truth. It follows that believers always have an intentional goal: to accept a proposition only when it is true. The functional interpretation understands the claim as stating that obtaining true beliefs is the function of the activity of regulating beliefs. This function may, but need not, rise to the level of the agent’s intention. Both the intentional and the functional interpretations are sometimes dubbed “teleological” interpretations.⁶ They are attempts to offer naturalistic, non-normative explications of the claim that belief aims at truth. By contrast, there is the normative interpretation that understands the claim as stating an epistemic norm that is “essential and constitutive for belief” (Fassio 2011, 471): a belief is correct or appropriate if and only if its content

⁵See, e.g., Velleman (2000), Wedgwood (2002), Owens (2003), Shah (2003), Shah and Velleman (2005), Steglich-Peterson (2006), Fassio (2011), and McHugh (2012).

⁶For teleological interpretations, see e.g., Velleman (2000), Steglich-Petersen (2006), and McHugh (2012). See Owens (2003), Shah (2003), and Shah and Velleman (2005) for important objections.

is true. According to this interpretation, the expression of “aiming at truth” is best “interpreted as a metaphor” (Wedgwood 2002, 267) meant to capture this epistemic norm.⁷ Disagreements between teleological and normative interpretations persist in the literature.

My proposal is that we can distinguish between different senses of “aim of blame” in a similar way, and they would provide different ways to explicate and reconstruct the communication argument. First, *X* is an *intentional aim* of blame if and only if an agent always, or at least typically, has an intention to *X* when she blames. The claim that blame aims at communicating a moral demand, then, implies that we blame with an intention to communicate such a demand to the wrongdoer. Second, *X* is a *functional aim* of blame if and only if a function of blame as a type of practice is to *X*. The function of blame may, but need not, rise to the level of intention of the blamer. Instead, the claim that blame aims at a distinctive kind of moral communication implies that it is a function of blame to facilitate this kind of communicative processes. Lastly, *X* is a *normative aim* of blame if and only if blame as a type of practice is governed by a norm like the following: blame is appropriate only if it is directed at agents who can *X*. This last interpretation takes the aim of blame as a metaphor. The claim that blame aims at communicating demands, then, implies that blame is appropriate only if it is directed at agents who can fulfill the required role in a distinctive kind of moral communication.

Given this taxonomy, we have good reasons to accept concept pluralism. More accurately, there can be an intentional version, a functional version, and a normative version of the claim that blame “aims” at a distinctive kind of moral communication. Concept pluralism does not directly pose any objection to the communication argument, but it does invite theorists to take special care to convey the meaning that they intend when contending that *X* is an aim of blame. Note that some instances of aim-talk by defenders of the communication argument—for instance, the claim that blame would be “pointless” (Shoemaker 2007, 85)—seem open to all three kinds of interpretations. One important exception is Macnamara (2015a, 2015b), who clearly identifies the functional aim of blame as the concept relevant to the communication argument; but the potential ambiguity remains an issue for at least some defenders of the argument. Take Darwall (2006) as an example. He frequently puts it that communicating the second-personal demand is what blame “seeks.” He writes, for example, that reactive attitudes “seek respect” and they “seek to engage the other second-personally, and they succeed when the other takes up the address, acknowledges its terms, and thereby respects the dignity of the addresser, both the demand she addresses and her standing to address it” (86). The most natural reading here seems to be intentional or functional. However, Darwall also frequently says that communication figures in the “normative felicity condition” of appropriate blame. As he puts it, a “normative felicity condition” of second-personal address is “a necessary condition of the second-personal reasons actually existing and being given through address” (56). This is more like saying that communicating the demand is the normative aim of blame. Note that the point here is not that Darwall’s account is inconsistent; I am inclined to think that his argument can be reconstructed in a way that avoids any potential linguistic ambiguity. Instead, the point here is that attending to concept pluralism can help clarify and reinterpret some existing theories and arguments that involve aim-talk—otherwise, we risk trading between claims about different concepts of blame’s aim.

One reason why we should be especially cautious of this risk, I think, is the following: the normative aim of blame should *not* be the relevant concept that figures in the communicative argument, so defenders of the argument should pay special care to dispel this interpretation. Otherwise, the argument will be the following:

The Communication Argument (normative). Communicative capacities are necessary for morally responsible agency because a normative aim of blame consists in a distinctive kind of moral communication.

⁷For the normative interpretation, see e.g., Wedgwood (2002), Shah (2003), and Shah and Velleman (2005).

There are a couple of reasons why this should not be how communicative theorists reconstruct their argument. The obvious problem is that the argument is not very informative and lacks dialectical value. Its crucial premise is that communication is a normative aim of blame, but that just means that there is such a norm that blame is only appropriate if it targets individuals who possess communicative capacities. Those who do not yet find the conclusion of the communication argument convincing are unlikely to simply accept this premise; the explanatory circle between the premise and the conclusion is too small to make the argument very informative.

In addition, the normative version of the communication argument would potentially undermine a, broadly speaking, Strawson-style naturalist project. This project is at least important for Watson (2004), who attempts to find a justification for the exemption condition of moral responsibility that is *internal* to our blaming practices involving reactive attitudes. Watson's goal there is to develop and critically evaluate the best possible version of what he calls Strawson's "expressive theory of responsibility" (226). The basic tenet of the expressive theory is that "it is not that we hold people responsible because they *are* responsible; rather, the idea (*our* idea) that we are responsible is to be understood by the practice ... of expressing our concerns and demands about our treatment of another" (222). But if the starting point of the communication argument is a normative claim about when blame is appropriate, then we may worry that the account does not really offer an *internal* justification—the normative claim requires further justification, which may well turn out to be external to our practices of holding people responsible.⁸

Again, concept pluralism does not directly pose any objection to the communication argument, but it invites conceptual clarity. More specifically, the upshot is that theorists defending the communication argument should (i) adopt the intentional version of the argument, (ii) adopt the functional version of the argument, or (iii) appeal to a sense of aim other than that of the intentional, functional, or normative aim. Option (iii) is a possibility worth more investigation in the future. For now, I will focus on the intentional and the functional versions of the argument. I will argue that even if we settle on which concept of aim is involved in the communication argument, there is still a further difficulty: blame plausibly has more than one intentional aim and more than one functional aim, which comes into tension with the communication argument.

3.b Content pluralism

Start from the intentional version of the argument:

The Communication Argument (intentional). Communicative capacities are necessary for morally responsible agency because agents who blame always, or at least typically, have an intention to engage in a distinctive kind of moral communication.

This intentional formulation, I think, remains a reasonable reinterpretation of the communication argument to the extent that defenders of the argument take the communicative aim of blame as stemming from the nature of blame as a *demand*. After all, a literal demand qua speech act typically accompanies an intention to achieve some goal. More generally, participants of speech act activities typically intend to participate in such activities. To the extent that blame is thought of as a demand analogous to a form of speech act, it is reasonable to think that the aim of this activity is determined by the intention of the blamer. So one interpretation for the communication argument as defended by Watson, Darwall, and Shoemaker can be as follows: blamers intend to communicate a moral demand, and, therefore, only those who possess the (cognitive, behavioral, and/or affective) capacity to engage in this communicative process are morally responsible agents.

⁸One way to offer a set of criteria internal to our blaming practices about whether blame is "appropriate" is to adopt some response-dependence or fitting attitude account (e.g., Shoemaker 2017), but to appeal to an account of this sort is to locate the source of support for communicative theories elsewhere instead of in the communication argument itself.

One difficulty with the intentional version of the argument concerns cases of private blame. It seems that many of those who have hidden resentment or indignation do not intend to communicate their demand; their intention is typically to not communicate it.⁹ But there may be available moves to deal with this difficulty. One possible move can be found again in the literature about the aim of belief. In his defense of the intentional interpretation, Steglich-Petersen (2006) suggests that there can be “subintentional surrogates” (510) of the intention to obtain truth, if a mental state shares certain characteristics such that it can be conducive to the “hypothetical aim” (515) of someone intending to obtain truth. Similarly, a defender of the communication argument may turn to rely on the weaker assumption that blamers either (i) have an actual intention to communicate demands or (ii) have an attitude or behavior that shares certain characteristics conducive to the hypothetical aim of someone intending to communicate demands.

No matter whether such a move is ultimately defensible, my contention is that the intentional version of the argument faces another serious difficulty: the intention to communicate a moral demand does not appear to be the *only* intentional goal that would count as the intentional aim of the practice. That is, the argument is in tension with the following claim:

Content Pluralism (intentional). Blame has more than one intentional aim.

Remember that *X* is an intentional aim of blame if and only if an agent always, or at least typically, has an intention to *X* when she blames. Let’s assume that blamers do typically have an intention to communicate demands. Still, we blame with other kinds of intentions as well, sometimes having little to do with addressing a moral demand of reasonable regard. Depending on the context, some might blame with an intention to stand up for themselves and to promote one’s self-respect; some might blame with an intention to signal that they share some values widely accepted in their social community, and to maintain social cohesion; some might blame with an intention to vent their negative feelings.¹⁰ At least some of these intentions seem to appear in a wide enough range of contexts such that we can say that blamers *typically* possess these intentions, and, therefore, they should count as blame’s intentional aims. Accepting content pluralism does not lead to any logical contradiction with the communication argument, but it does lead to a serious tension. This is because defenders of the communication argument tend to *privilege* the communicative aim over the other aims, but it is unclear how they justify doing so if communication is just one of the many intentional aims of blame.¹¹ The challenge for defenders of the communication argument, then, is to show why the intention to engage in a distinctive sort of moral communication is special in a way that it leads to a constraint about morally responsible agency.

One may reply on the grounds that the communicative intention has a special conceptual connection to blame. It is conceptually contingent that blamers have intentions to promote their self-respect. However, to the extent that they engage in the practice of blame, there is a conceptual requirement that they also have a communicative intention. Here one may also invoke the distinction between distal and proximal intentions (e.g., Mele 1992, 2009; Pacherie 2008). Roughly speaking, distal intentions are about what to do *in the future*, while proximal intentions are about what to do *now* (Mele 2009, 10). It might be suggested that even when blamers have the distal intention of promoting their self-respect, their proximal intention in blame must be to engage in a distinctive kind of moral communication, such as communicating moral demands.

In reply, consider a case that I will call *Idiosyncratic Intention*: Matt was told by his therapist that practicing anger could relieve stress and be good for his mental health. The day after, Matt blames his friend for failing to fulfill a promise, with the intention to act on the therapist’s suggestion. Let’s

⁹For a similar argument, see Macnamara (2015a, 2015b) and Driver (2016).

¹⁰See, for example, Reis-Dennis on the kind of blame that involves an intention and a desire to “rectify, perceived slights and disruptions to the moral order” (2019, 452).

¹¹Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this characterization of the tension.

grant, for the sake of argument, that Matt also has a proximal intention to communicate a moral demand to his friend. But let's also suppose that the former intention, rather than the latter, is Matt's primary intention: he renders it much more significant in his practical reasoning, and he cares about his mental health much more than whether he successfully conveys a moral demand to his friend. My intuition is that to the extent that blamers' intentions provide a constraint for who counts as the proper targets to blame, what matters in *Idiosyncratic Intention* is Matt's primary, not secondary, intention. However, the intentional version of the communication argument suggests that Matt's secondary intention, rather than his primary intention, determines the standard for whether his friend is a morally responsible agent. But what explains this? The fact that Matt's secondary intention happens to be one that has some conceptual connection to blame does not seem enough. Generally speaking, even if we take for granted that there is such a conceptual connection and it explains why the communicative intention is a special intentional aim, we still lack an adequate explanation for why it is *special in terms of its normative implications about morally responsible agency*. In any event, it seems to me that we can imagine that Matt does not even have the proximal intention to communicate; instead, it is possible that Matt's intention about what he does at the moment of blaming is precisely to improve his own mental health, instead of communicating a demand. If so, then the distal/proximal distinction does not help defenders of the intentional version of the argument. There does not seem to be a strong conceptual connection between blame and a communicative intention after all.

Now turn to the functional version of the argument:

The Communication Argument (functional). Communicative capacities are necessary for morally responsible agency because blame has a function of facilitating a distinctive kind of moral communication.

Macnamara (2015a, 2015b) has defended an argument like this by focusing on blame's function of "eliciting sincere acknowledgment of fault from the wrongdoer," typically in the form of eliciting guilt (2015a, 222). I will focus on Macnamara in the remainder of this section. However, note that this functional formulation is another reasonable interpretation of the communication argument for theorists like Watson, Darwall, and Shoemaker as well. Given the problems with understanding blame as always involving a literal demand qua speech act, it is reasonable to reinterpret their demand-talk as the claim that blame has the function of communicating demands. I expect that my arguments below would also apply to this reinterpretation.

Macnamara explicitly endorses an etiology theory of function. According to the etiology account (e.g., Wright 1973, 1976), a function of *M* is *F* just in case that (i) *F* is a consequence of *M*'s being there, and (ii) *M* is there in part because it does *F*. As an example, the function of the heart is to pump since, first, pumping is a consequence of the heart's being there, and, second, current tokens of the heart are there in part because past tokens of the heart did the work of pumping. Applying the etiology theory to blame, Macnamara suggests that (a) past tokens of blame did evoke uptake of their representational content in recipients, and (b) this partly explains why we have current tokens of blame now. To defend (a), Macnamara appeals to empirical evidence about the facial signatures of reactive emotions (2015b, 557–60); to defend (b), she contends that reactive attitudes and their emotional uptake have made a significant contribution to the "building and healing of the moral community" (2015b, 560–2).

But there is a complication. We need to distinguish between the claim that evoking emotional uptake is *the only function* of blame, and the claim that it is only *one of the many functions* of blame. Macnamara means the latter. As she puts it,

To be clear, the question here is not, "Is this the reactive attitudes' only function?" ... I take it as a given that reactive emotions, like emotions more generally, have any number of intrapersonal functions—informing the emotion-bearer about, and preparing her to respond

to, her environment, to name a few. Our question, then, is whether the reactive attitudes also have the interpersonal function of evoking uptake of their representational content in a recipient. (2015a, 219)

And Macnamara is right to focus on the weaker claim, because it is better supported by the evidence she cites. The fact that reactive attitudes have, through evoking emotional uptake, played a significant part in the building and healing of moral community is good evidence that evoking emotional uptake is one important function of blame, but it is fairly weak evidence for its being the only function. Macnamara herself mentions various intrapersonal functions like “informing the emotion-bearer about, and preparing her to respond to, her environment” (2015a, 219). We thus have good reasons to accept content pluralism about blame’s functions:

Content Pluralism (functional). Blame has more than one functional aim.

Again, there is no logical contradiction between accepting content pluralism about blame’s functions and the communication argument. But there is a serious tension here given that defenders of the argument tend to privilege the communicative aim of blame. The challenge is for defenders of the communication argument to explain what is special about the communicative function that it leads to a constraint about morally responsible agency, but other functions do not.¹² Is it special in that the communicative function is the only *interpersonal* function of blame, whereas other functions are *intrapersonal*? I do not think this is tenable. Blame has interpersonal functions in addition to evoking emotional uptakes as well. For example, various theorists (McGeer 2013; Kogelmann and Wallace 2018; Shoemaker and Vargas 2021) have argued that blame has an important *signaling* function. Shoemaker and Vargas defend an account according to which the definitive feature of blame consists in its “hard-to-fake costly signaling function” (591). A crucial feature of their account is that they take blame to signal “many types of information” and to “multiple targets” (590). For example, they argue convincingly that blame functions to signal, first, one’s commitment to a relevant norm, and, second, one’s own competence in detecting norms in a relevant domain. Along a similar vein, McGeer suggests that blaming emotions are “expensive signals” that are “hard to generate under conditions that do not naturally prime a person to experience them” (2013, 182).

Importantly, blame as a signal can be properly addressed to a recipient even if its recipient lacks the capacity to feel guilt. One can signal that one is *committed* to a norm by issuing blame, and a recipient can properly receive this signal as long as she is sensitive to the relevant contextual cues. The recipient does not need to be able to understand that the content of the relevant norm is *correct* in order to be able to get the signal that one is *committed* to that norm. Feeling guilt, by contrast, requires understanding the force of the content of the relevant norm. If we run an argument structurally parallel to the communication argument, it will go as follows: the capacity of receiving signals is necessary for morally responsible agency because blame has the signaling function. It seems that defenders of the communication argument would also need to accept this signaling argument. However, this then seems to undermine the alleged centrality of communicative capacities to morally responsible agency.

At this point, some may want to deny that blame has a distinctive signaling function. But the more general point stands anyway: blame plausibly has other interpersonal functions in addition to its communicative function,¹³ and defenders of the communication argument need to either (i) explain what is special about the communicative function, or (ii) expand the scope of their

¹²One may reply by allowing additional constraints about morally responsible agency. I will discuss this kind of reply, as well as its potential difficulties, in section 4.a.

¹³Apart from the signaling function, blame’s functions may also include a function of directing attention and epistemic efforts, a function of developing and expanding agents’ rational capacities, a function of properly modifying personal

argument by adding other constraints about responsible agency. Either way, it is not that easy to retain the force of the functional version of the communication argument while at the same time accepting content pluralism about blame's functions.

Another potential response is that signaling is just a form of moral communication or a part of what moral communication consists of. It might be suggested that signaling one's moral status is communicating one's moral status in some sense, and the point of issuing such signals is for the sake of engaging in moral communication. Thus, it might be suggested that what I've characterized as a pluralist functionalist picture is, in fact, just a redescription of the communicative view when different forms and elements of the communicative process are spelled out. However, I do not think that signaling can be categorized as a communicative function. The point of communication, at least according to Watson and Macnamara, is to make the blamee *understand* that she has done something morally bad or morally wrong—for Watson, for the blamee to understand the moral demand; and for Macnamara, for the blamee to understand that she ought not to perform the relevant conduct and thereby feel guilt. Thus, the blamee needs to have the cognitive capacity to understand the relevant norms. But, again, signaling does not presume this cognitive capacity. There is no denying that the signaling function often works together with blame's communicative function. However, they can also come apart, and my contention is that it is a non-trivial task to reformulate the communication argument to accommodate this possibility.

Maybe there is a way to appeal to a broad definition of "communication" such that all interpersonal functions of blame fall into that category. But I doubt this will be a useful definition. Its content would be too thin to have much explanatory value. Further, defenders of the communicative view (e.g., Watson 2004, 2011; Shoemaker 2007) usually want to exempt psychopaths from blame, but even psychopaths would count as possessing communicative capacities under this broad sense of communication. This would at least be a striking result for anyone sympathetic to the communicative theory of responsible agency. The takeaway from the pluralist challenge is not that the communication argument is definitely refuted, but that a careful reconstruction of the argument is needed, which may require significant modifications to the communicative view of morally responsible agency as standardly conceived.

4. Possible replies to the pluralist challenge

In this section, I will discuss three possible replies to the pluralist challenge. I will focus exclusively on the functional version of the argument, which I take to be the most promising variant, and explore how it can potentially accommodate the pluralist claim that blame has multiple functions.

4.b *The conjunctive strategy*

One natural response to the pluralist challenge is simply to accept the implication that the communication argument needs to be expanded in a way that requires us to add further constraints on morally responsible agency:

The Conjunctive Strategy. *S* is a morally responsible agent only if blaming *S* would fit all functions of blame.

I have said that this threatens to undermine the alleged centrality of communicative capacities to morally responsible agency, but one may not regard this as a huge problem. After all, the communication argument, even as originally presented, is supposed to offer only a necessary

relationships, etc. The pluralist challenge is a real challenge as long as (i) blame has at least one of these functions, and (ii) this function is distinctive from blame's communicative function.

condition for moral responsibility. What's the problem, one may ask, if we just allow more necessary conditions?

One worry is that the resulting requirement about responsible agency would seem ill motivated. The conjunctive view requires a responsible agent to be a fitting target when it comes to all functions of blame. However, if blaming an individual already fits one function of blame, why isn't this enough for that individual to be eligible for the role of blamee? Why should it matter whether it fits *another function* of blame? As an analogy, a ring has both a function of indicating marital status and a decorative function. Imagine a context, like a fashion show, where wearing a ring is only fitting for the decorative function but not for the function of indicating marital status. It still seems appropriate for the model to wear a ring; the complaint that "but this does not fit the other function of rings!" is ill grounded. There are similar cases when it comes to blame. Imagine an employee, Erin, in a non-ideal workplace, where she is routinely asked to take on extra tasks, doing more work than she is paid for. Also imagine that she has an uncommunicative boss, Pam, who is too ingrained in her motto of "there is no such a thing as too much work" to be able to acknowledge that she has done anything wrong to Erin. Given this setting, it seems possible that Pam fails to be a fitting target when it comes to blame's communicative function, but she remains a fitting target for blame's signaling function. Even if communication is futile, Erin can still signal to Pam that she is committed to the relevant norms by blaming Pam. Erin's blame would not fit all functions of the practice. However, her blame still seems appropriate in contrast to what the conjunctive strategy entails. After all, Erin's blame fits the signaling function, so the complaint that "but blaming Pam does not fit that *other* function of blame!" seems beside the point. Note that this is all consistent with thinking that we may have other, non-function-related grounds to think Pam ought not to be blamed, for example, by arguing that she is non-culpable, does not deserve blame, etc. But to the extent that we rely on the communication argument, or a variant thereof, to draw conclusions about responsible agency, the conjunctive strategy seems to lead to an overly strong and ill-motivated requirement.

4.b The disjunctive strategy

If the conjunctive strategy seems too strong, then how about a disjunctive approach? The idea will be as follows:

The Disjunctive Strategy. S is a morally responsible agent only if blaming S would fit any one of the many functions of blame.

The natural worry here is that the criterion is too weak. In the absence of other constraints for responsible agency, it implies that one is eligible for the role of blamee as long as one has the capacity to, for example, receive signals about norm commitments. But this is a really low bar. Again, even psychopaths—who many communicative theorists (Watson 2004, 2011; Shoemaker 2007) tend to exempt—would count as morally responsible agents. We would also include young children who are developmentally mature enough to receive moral signals, but not yet mature enough to engage in the communication of moral demands or have the capacity to feel guilt. Further, the disjunctive strategy seems to render communication—either in the sense of communicating demands or evoking guilt—only one of the many elements that we need to attend to in deciding who is eligible for the role of blamee. There would seem nothing special at all about communication in this process; but the uniqueness of the communicative function of blame is an important part of why the argument becomes appealing in the first place.

4.c The context-specific strategy

Both the conjunctive strategy and the disjunctive strategy lead to some unwanted consequences. There is more to be said about these two strategies, and perhaps they can be

developed in more careful ways to avoid the potential problems. But I think there is another strategy available:

The Context-Specific Strategy. *S* is a morally responsible agent in a distinctive kind of context *C* only if blaming *S* would fit the contextually significant function in this kind of context (when there is only one contextually significant function in *C*).

The general idea is this. When a type of practice has more than one function, and to the extent that its functions constitute restrictions of the propriety of the practice, these restrictions ought to be *context specific*. Consider the ring-wearing example again. It is intuitive that whether ring wearing is appropriate in a fashion show has little to do with whether it would fit the function of signaling marital status. The natural explanation is that the latter function is not significant in this context. Instead, the contextually significant function is the decorative function. Thus, the fittingness of ring wearing depends only on this contextually significant function; whether it fits some other function of the practice is simply beside the point.

The context-specific strategy is based on a similar thought. The communicative function is only one of the many functions of blame, but there is a distinctive kind of context—let’s call this the *communicative context*—where this function is contextually significant. We then may be able to explain why the communicative function is special by explaining the uniqueness of this kind of context.

But there is a further problem. What if there are two or more equally or similarly significant functions in *C*? I am inclined to think that the formulation of the strategy then needs to take into account degrees of responsible agency. If blaming *S* would fit all contextually significant functions, *S* is a *fully* morally responsible agent in *C*; but if blaming *S* would fit some but not all contextually significant functions, then *S* has diminished morally responsible agency in *C*. The account then needs to be modified as follows:

The Context-Specific Strategy (scalar). *S* is a morally responsible agent in a distinctive kind of context *C* only to the extent that blaming *S* would fit the contextually significant function(s) in *C*.¹⁴

I find the context-specific strategy promising. But what exactly decides the contextually significant function(s) in *C*?¹⁵ One way to do so is to examine the function(s) that we, either based on some convention or based on some other shared understanding of an expectation, associate with *C*.¹⁶ For example, the decorative function of wearing a ring is conventionally associated with the context of a fashion show. On this approach, the communicative function is a contextually significant function of blame in *C* when there is a convention or a shared understanding of an expectation that communication is an important goal in *C*.

Another way to decide the contextually significant function(s) is to examine the function(s) that should matter in *C* given the morally salient features of this context. The thought is that different kinds of contexts can highlight and make salient different elements of one’s situation that require our moral attention, which can then make a difference about the contextually significant

¹⁴Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising the question about equally significant functions and suggesting this modification of the view; One might wonder why we need to appeal to context-specific agency at all, if we already treat responsible agency as coming into degrees. Why not just modify the conjunctive strategy such that *S* is a morally responsible agent only to the extent that blaming *S* would fit blame’s functions? I think that this modified conjunctive strategy still faces a serious problem, because there are cases where, as I mentioned in section 4.a, a function is not contextually significant and, intuitively, should not affect even one’s degrees of responsible agency.

¹⁵Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this question.

¹⁶For related discussion, see Walker on different senses of a “context,” including the sense that “invokes a shared understanding of the expectations that are in play in common social encounters” (2002, xi).

function(s).¹⁷ I think we should combine those two approaches to understanding contextual significance. Sometimes the communicative function becomes contextually significant due to our associating the function with *C* on the basis of convention or shared understanding of an expectation. At other times it becomes contextually significant because communication is an important goal given the morally salient elements of *C* that require our attention. Both kinds of circumstances constitute the “communicative context”—those circumstances where the communicative function of blame is contextually significant.

We can then have a version of the communication argument according to which the communicative function affects, to a significant degree, the extent to which one is a morally responsible agent in the communicative context. We may also preserve the uniqueness of the communicative function by defending the uniqueness of the communicative context. More specifically, the communicative context seems to be fairly *pervasive*: in many, if not most, blaming contexts, communication is at least one of the contextually significant functions. On one hand, we often associate the communicative function with blaming contexts, especially when we blame people whom we love or care about; we typically expect blame to serve a communicative goal and to initiate a conversation between us. On the other hand, there are also many situations that make salient the *need* for moral communication, for example, when blame targets a norm violation that occurs because of miscommunication or lack of shared moral understandings between the blamer and the blamee. In these circumstances, communication should be an important functional goal given the features of the situation that deserve our moral attention. The pervasiveness of the communicative context, I think, can potentially justify why one can privilege the communicative aim of blame over the other aims.

However, the context-specific strategy also allows contexts where the communicative function is not significant, or significant only to a fairly small degree. This can be what happens between Erin and Pam. I take it that the morally salient features of the context are the non-ideal features of the workplace. The need for communication is much less salient, especially given the radical asymmetry between the communicative power of the potential interlocutors. This can explain why Erin’s blame still seems appropriate: blame is fitting for its most contextually significant functions, including the function of signaling Erin’s commitment to norms. The context-specific strategy thus allows the possibility that one lacks the communicative capacity but is still a partially or even fully morally responsible agent.

The conclusion of the context-specific strategy relies on the assumption that morally responsible agency is context-specific. As I have mentioned in [section 2](#), there are good reasons to accept a context-specific or “patchy” picture of responsible agency (see e.g., Vargas 2013), but this remains a controversial matter. My formulation of the strategy also assumes that responsible agency comes into degrees. More work needs to be done to defend these assumptions, but the context-specific strategy seems a more promising way out of the pluralist challenge compared to its alternatives. Despite its relatively moderate stance on the centrality of communication to responsible agency, it may provide the best reconstruction of the communication argument in a way that preserves much of its theoretical insight.

5. Conclusion

I have proposed the pluralist challenge: despite the appeal of the communication argument, it is in tension with the plausible pluralist claim that blame has more than one aim. I have discussed some

¹⁷This is related to Herman’s (1993) discussion about “rules of moral salience” in moral knowledge. According to Herman, rules of moral salience are what enable a person to “pick out those elements of his circumstances or of his proposed actions that require moral attention” (77). I am agnostic about whether such rules exist or how they figure in moral epistemology. But I agree with Herman that the morally salient features of a situation should play a crucial role in our moral theory.

possible strategies that one may adopt to respond to the challenge and the difficulties facing each, and I have suggested that the context-specific function-based approach seems most promising. The upshot is that accommodating the communication argument in a pluralist picture about blame's aims is no easy task, and to do so may require its proponents to abandon or at least modify the initial stance about how central communicative capacities are to morally responsible agency.

Another issue worth further investigation is how to understand the aims of those practices related to or resembling blame. For example, praise and blame are often treated symmetrically in the literature, but do they have the same aims or not? How to think about the relations between the aims of blame and the aims of forgiveness? How much analogy or disanalogy there is to make between the aims of blame and the aims of criminal punishment? These are all interesting issues, and I expect that a pluralist view about aims similar to the one proposed in the current paper can help shed light on them.

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