

Blaming and Knowing

The speech-act of blaming is infelicitous when uttered by a guilty-blamer (GB) - such as a liar who blames someone else for lying. The GB is not the only infelicitous blamer. At least in some cases, the speech-act of an ignorant-blamer (IB), such as someone who never had to contend with the kind of pressure or circumstances the blamee is facing and “does not know what it’s like”, is infelicitous as well. Whereas existing literature focuses on moral contexts, the phenomenon is broader, and extends throughout the practical realm. Thus, it is infelicitous for a player renowned for fumbling the ball to blame a team-mate for fumbling the ball, or infelicitous for someone who never played a championship match to criticize the players for being nervous.

When a speech-act fails or is infelicitous, the force of the act is lost¹. For example, valid instructions normally oblige the instructee to act as instructed (or at least provide a reason to do so). In many cases, one might act as an imposter demands simply because one is fooled by the imposter. Even if one is not fooled, one might still act as required for various reasons: one might wish to humor the imposter or because one intends to perform the designated action anyway, or one might comply out of fear from the imposter. But the instruction of an imposter is not an instruction – it lacks the illocutionary force of a real instruction.

What the GB and IB show is that knowledge of the blameworthiness of the blamee is insufficient for felicitous blaming. A speech-act – call it “shlaming” – uttered by a GB or an IB who *knows* that the shlamee is blameworthy, fails to have the illocutionary force an act of blaming does? This is manifested by the aptness and effectiveness ad-hominem arguments sometimes have. Both the “tu quoque” response

¹ The general framework is from Austin, John Langshaw. (1962) *How to do Things with Words*, Oxford: Clarendon. For the idea of a rule of a speech-act as well as the introduction of the knowledge condition see Williamson, Timothy (1996) ‘Knowing and Asserting,’ *Philosophical Review*, 105 (4):489-523.

to a GB and the “you don’t know what it’s like” response to an IB are sometimes effective and apt responses to blaming that successfully disarm the blamer. This highlights the fact that guilty and ignorant blaming “misfire” – the speech-act lacks the force it normally has.

So the question is ‘What renders some personal facts about the blamer relevant to the felicitousness of blaming?’ Note that the puzzle survives quick attempts to pass the buck. Thus, suppose we accept the view that blaming is felicitous only if certain reactive attitudes such as resentment are appropriate. Still, we must explicate why the appropriateness of reactive attitudes is sensitive to facts about the blamer (e.g. “why is it inappropriate for an IB to resent the blamee?”), and why if these attitudes are inappropriate the speech-act has no force.

The thesis of this paper is that contrary to appearances, knowledge actually is sufficient for felicitous blaming. What the GB and IB teach us is not that knowledge is insufficient. Instead they expose the conception of knowledge that underlies our practice of blaming: it is internalistic (knowledge entails motivation), and involves simulation.

First, I briefly discuss the relation between blaming and related speech-acts such as condemning. It is claimed that all the speech-acts that entail moral disapproval display a similar sensitivity, and therefore should be accounted for together. One consequence of this claim is that Scanlon’s account of blaming cannot resolve the puzzle at hand because it is blaming specific. Second, the knowledge condition is introduced. It is shown that this condition is necessary for felicitous blaming, and that it does account for some infelicitous blamers such as hypocrites (who do not really believe the action is wrong, and thus violate the knowledge condition).

Third, it is shown that the knowledge seems insufficient for felicitous blaming for the reasons mentioned above- namely the need to account for the infelicity of the GB and IB. Fourth, I criticize attempts to add a condition to the knowledge condition that exclude the GB or IB in order to achieve sufficiency. These attempts are rejected as arbitrary and as failing to account for the lack of force of blaming.

Fifth, the idea that the knowledge condition is in fact sufficient is introduced. The first attempt is to adopt the Socratic view and equate “knowledge” with motivation. This entails that anyone who is guilty does not really know that the action is wrong. So the GB violates the knowledge condition thus construed. However, this attempt is criticized as being too strong – it is shown that the Socratic conception of knowledge does not underline our practice of blaming that recognizes the possibility of *akrasia*.

Consequently, the proposed view is amended in two ways. First, instead of equating knowledge with motivation a moderate internalist view according to which knowledge entails a disposition to act is adopted. Second, it is claimed that the conception of knowledge underlying our practice of blaming involves a simulation view understanding, rather than a theory view. It is shown that the resultant conception of knowledge accounts for the infelicity of the GB. Finally, it is shown how this view accounts for the IB as well. Thus, it transpires that the knowledge condition suffices for felicitous blaming. The infelicity of the GN and IB results from the fact that one cannot ascribe knowledge in the full sense to neither.