LETTING GO OF BLAME

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Abstract. Most philosophers acknowledge ways of overcoming blame, even blame directed at a culpable offender, that are not forgiving. Sometimes continuing to blame a friend for their offensive comment just isn't worth it, so we let go instead. However, despite being a common and widely recognised experience, no one has offered a positive account of letting go. Instead, it tends to be characterised negatively and superficially, usually in order to delineate the boundaries of forgiveness. This paper gives a more complete and systematic account of this important practice. We argue that the basic distinction between forgiving and letting go of blame follows from distinctions that many philosophers already accept. We then develop a positive account in terms of the reasons one has to let go rather than forgive and show that letting go is as valuable a part of our shared moral lives as forgiveness.

1. Introduction

Suppose Salman overhears his friend Emily tell what sounds like a racist joke about immigrants and is offended and angry with her. There are various ways that Emily might respond to his blame and various ways in which Salman might then cease to blame her. She might be surprised and explain that the joke was actually mocking those who unjustifiably fear immigrants. She might be embarrassed and explain that she didn't realise the joke was

offensive—perhaps she was unaware that the joke is a modern riff on one historically made at the expense of another despised minority. Or she might be ashamed and apologise to him for telling the hurtful joke. Each of these responses gives Salman reason to stop blaming Emily and each prompts a recognizable and distinct way of ceasing to blame: justification, excuse, and forgiveness, respectively. But there is another way that is just as common, if not more so. Salman might just *let it go*.

Forgiveness theorists rightly distinguish forgiveness from other ways of ceasing to blame. If you come to believe that a person was not responsible for their action, then you excuse them. If you come to believe that their behaviour was permissible, then you take them to be justified. While there are disagreements about the nature and ethics of forgiveness, most theorists agree that forgiving requires a change in attitude towards the offender and that this change is compatible with—indeed requires—continuing to view oneself as having been culpably mistreated (cf. Boleyn-Fitzgerald, 2002).

Attitudes change in many ways, though, and most philosophical accounts of forgiveness acknowledge that a victim can cease to blame a culpable wrongdoer in ways that do not qualify as forgiveness. One may forget about the wrongdoing (Murphy, 1982) or view the wrongdoer or the offense as beneath one's notice (Griswold, 2007a). Even so, this other phenomenon—what we'll call 'letting go'—has remained relatively unexplored. Such distinctions have served mainly to delineate the conceptual boundaries of forgiveness. The aim of this paper is to give a more complete account of letting go. We distinguish it from other phenomena, develop a positive account of the practice, and correct some misconceptions that have arisen. And we argue that letting go of blame is as rich, subtle, and normatively interesting as other ceasing-to-blame practices.

In section 2, we try to illuminate the phenomenon of letting go of blame in two ways: we briefly explain what it means to blame and we describe other familiar forms of letting go

unrelated to blame. In section 3, we show that letting go is distinct from other ways of ceasing to blame, is recognised as such, and is more common than its neglect by philosophers might lead one might think. In section 4, we briefly distinguish letting go, as we understand it, from three similar but distinct phenomena: losing hold of blame, hiding blame, and rejecting blame. In section 5, we present our positive account of letting go. Like forgiveness, letting go is best understood in terms of the reasons underpinning the practice. With this in mind, we explain some of the distinctive reasons one might have to let go, rather than forgive. We also describe the psychological underpinnings of the phenomenon. Finally, in sections 6 and 7, we argue that letting go is a valuable practice while acknowledging its risks and limitations. We then argue that, as a practice, it is a valuable part of our repertoire of responses to moral conflict and, as a concept, sheds light on some perennial problems raised by forgiveness theorists.

2. Blame

We will argue that there is a practice, distinct from forgiving, whereby one lets go of blame toward a culpable wrongdoer. In order to understand this practice, we must have a sense of what blame is. While we are all familiar with it, there is significant disagreement about what blame actually consists in and what unifies the diverse but recognisable instances as a coherent phenomenon.

At the most general level to blame is to hold some misconduct against the perceived offender (Nelkin, 2017: 605). Theories of blame attempt to identify what it is, over and above appraising a person as blameworthy, that explains its force and function.[1] For some, blame consists in the judgment that the offender manifested a bad quality of will (Hieronymi, 2004)

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[1] For overviews, see Coates and Tognazzini (2012), Nelkin (2017), and Brink and Nelkin (2022).

or deserves to feel guilty (Carlsson, 2017), while for others it requires a disposition to react to an offender's wrongdoing (Sher, 2006), a separate affective attitude like anger (Wallace, 1996; Wolf, 2011), recognition of a change in the relationship between the blamer and the blamed (Scanlon, 2008), or protest against mistreatment and a demand for due regard (Smith, 2013).[2]

Still other accounts understand blame in terms of what it does, its role or function (McKenna, 2012; McGeer, 2013; Shoemaker and Vargas, 2021). Blame is described variously as an appraisal (Watson, 1996), demand (Shoemaker, 2015), protest (Smith, 2013), punishment (Smart, 1961), down-ranking (Nussbaum, 2016), prolepsis (Williams, 1995), encouraging or prompting remorse (Fricker, 2016), affirmation of the worth of the victim (Tierney, 2019), and signal of the blamer's commitment to the violated norm (Shoemaker and Vargas, 2021).[3] We think that blame does all of these things. However, all of these functions seem to have the same overarching aim, namely, to encourage or push the offender to (re)commit to the norm they violated through their misconduct.[4]

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[2] It may also be that no single account can adequately capture what we commonly understand as blame (Nussbaum, 2016: 256-61) and that we should be pluralists of some sort.

[3] Shoemaker and Vargas may object to being lumped in with these other positions. On their view, the function of blame (i.e., signaling commitment to a norm) *determines* which attitudes and activities count as blame (2021: 7). They would say that, e.g., down-ranking and encouraging remorse are not *functions* of blame but are rather distinctive activities that, according to their respective theorists, *constitute* blame.

[4] If one thinks of blame as a form of punishment, one might object that it has a function not captured by our overarching aim. While punishment is often communicative, it may sometimes seem to function as retribution. In particular, blame sometimes seems to be a way of giving the offender what they deserve, whether in the form of a cold shoulder or withheld good will. This might be the blamer's conscious aim, or it might be unconscious. However, while we recognize that this is a reality, we also agree with most blame theorists that such overt sanctions are better characterized as accompanying blame rather than being blame or being its function (Coates and Tognazzini, 2012; Nelkin, 2017). After all, one may blame without intending any harm and without actually sanctioning one's target.

Each of these theories attempts to capture the relevant change undergone by a victim in response to an offense. And this is precisely the change that is reversed (or mitigated) when one lets go. (We will have more to say about the psychology of letting go in §5.) For example, on an affective account of blame, what it means to let go is to overcome hard feelings, like moral anger or contempt, that one has toward the offender about the offense. We do not advocate a particular view of the nature of blame and our account of letting go is meant to be compatible with many of the plausible contenders.[5] However, we follow others in noting that affective blame, directly or indirectly expressed, plays an especially prominent role in our shared moral lives. It is the reason we hope for and try to earn forgiveness as offenders and what weighs on us as blamers. (We focus primarily on public blame, but will discuss letting go of private blame in §5.5.)

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[5] It may not be compatible with all accounts of blame. Scanlon claims that to blame a person for an action is to "take that action to indicate something about the person that impairs one's relationship with him or her, and to understand that relationship in a way that reflects that impairment" (2008: 122-123). Thus, on his view, letting go of blame must be either a) no longer taking the action to indicate something about the person that impairs the relationship, or b) no longer understanding the relationship in a way that reflects that impairment. We agree with Scanlon that (a) is a description of forgiving. For example, Salman might no longer take Emily's offense to be an impediment to their friendship because she has apologized and repudiated the offensive joke. But (b) is something we would recognize as letting go. One might recognize that the offense has impaired the relationship, but carry on with it anyway. This is certainly one way that Salman could respond to Emily's offensive joke. To this extent, our account is compatible with Scanlon's. However, we also want to recognize forms of letting go other than (b) and that requires acknowledging ways of ceasing to blame that Scanlon does not. Suppose that Salman continues to view Emily's offensive joke as indicative of her character, but ceases to hold it against her. If Scanlon's account of blame is correct, then this phenomenon cannot be a form of letting go. It is instead a case of perpetual blame. But that just doesn't seem right. Thus, to the extent that we acknowledge forms of letting go that Scanlon must count as continued blaming, we must reject his account. A similar point applies to Hieronymi's (2001 and 2004) account of blame, except that she would also deny that (b) is letting go of blame. On her view, the only basis for revising the set of judgements that constitutes blame is a reason to forgive—i.e., a reason to believe that the threat posed by the offense no longer exists. We think this is too high a price to pay. The phenomenon we call letting go is—we think always, but at least *sometimes*—the overcoming of fitting blame.

3. Letting Go of Blame

In this section, we show that there is a phenomenon that can be usefully understood by the term 'letting go,' that it is widely if imprecisely alluded to in the literature, and that it is, in fact, a common and familiar experience. We have already encountered the phenomenon: the example of Salman and Emily illustrates the basic idea and our descriptions of other forms of letting go add to that picture. The aim of this section is to further explicate letting go of blame by examining how philosophers have characterized it. We will see that they do so by describing phenomena that are *not* forgiveness. As a result, existing discussions provide only a sketch of the practice, and that primarily in negative terms. We fill this gap later in the paper by providing a positive account of the reasons for and mechanism of letting go, but the sketch provided here is a useful starting point.

However, in order to understand letting go of blame, it might first be useful to consider forms of letting go that have nothing to do with blame.[6] For example, in *Frozen*, Elsa sings about letting go of the shame she feels about her difference—her power to control ice and snow. (She might also be letting go of fear, both of her power and of its being discovered.) By letting go, Elsa is not necessarily denying the grounds for her shame. She is refusing to let her shame constrain and control her: "I don't care what they're going to say" … "no right, no wrong, no rules for me / I'm free."[7]

Or consider grief. We grieve in response to a loss, but eventually we cease grieving. This can happen in different ways: grief may fade as we process and accept the loss, remembering the person and reflecting on our relationship and their importance to us; grief

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[6] Thanks to Avram Hiller for this suggestion.

[7] This might not seem like a different form of letting go since shame is arguably a type of self-blame. However, Elsa's shame appears to be directed at who she is, a person with this abnormal and (seemingly) dangerous difference, and to result from an internalization of others' (apparent) disappointment at her inability to conform to their ideal.

may also fade with time, even if we cling to it as our last connection to our loved one; and sometimes we let go of grief and try to move on. In the last kind of case, we do not (or at least need not) believe that grief is unfitting or wholly bad. We simply don't want to grieve anymore. And in such cases, it can be reasonable to take steps to overcome our grief: we may distract ourselves with work or exercise, avoid activities or people that remind us of the person, or tell ourselves that they would want us to move on and enjoy our lives; we may even speak with a grief counsellor or group to help us manage and move on from our grief. Again, we do these things not because we no longer care about our lost loved ones or want to forget them, but because grief has outstayed its welcome for us or can no longer play its usual valuable role.[8]

We can now turn to letting go of blame. The example of Salman and Emily helps to distinguish different ways of ceasing to blame and to pick out the phenomenon of letting go. Forgiving requires that one view an offender as a culpable wrongdoer. It is therefore incompatible with excuse and justification, whereby one denies responsibility or wrongdoing, respectively. Letting go is similar, but one who lets go ceases to blame for different reasons than one who forgives. Consider a paradigmatic reason to forgive. A victim who ceases to blame an offender because they express remorse and apologise for their behaviour has forgiven. By contrast, a victim who ceases to blame solely because he views the offender as a lost cause and no longer worth his time has not forgiven; he has let go. His reason for ceasing to blame is not a reason to forgive. We will argue that letting go can be distinguished from

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[8] We probably let go of other attitudes or emotions, too. We try to overcome fear, either because it's irrational (like a phobia) or because it's counterproductive (as when our courage would inspire others to resist hostile opposition and accomplish some great good). We try to overcome envy, not only when it seems unwarranted, but also when it seems counterproductive, useless, or demeaning (whether to oneself or its target).

forgiving and understood in terms of a mutually exclusive set of reasons for ceasing to blame a responsible wrongdoer.[9]

In doing so, we take for granted that one forgives for reasons and that, in order to forgive, one must cease to blame for the right kind of reason. At the very least, in order to count as forgiving, the victim must be responding to an apparent fact about the offender or the offence since this is what prompted blame in the first place. This view is widely accepted by forgiveness theorists (Murphy, 1982; Griswold, 2007a; Milam, 2019a; Schönherr, 2019), though not by all (Calhoun, 1992; Nelkin, 2013).[10] A pluralist about forgiveness might argue that different kinds of forgiveness are done for different kinds of reasons (Adams, 1991; Bennett, 2003; Fricker, 2019).[11] However, even pluralists acknowledge that some reasons to overcome blame are not reasons to forgive in any sense (Bennett 2003: 140). But if we accept that some reasons for ceasing to blame culpable wrongdoers are not reasons to forgive, then what are they? We think that these reasons form a coherent and unified set and describe the practice that we call letting go.

Another way to see the outlines of letting go is by examining the various phenomena that philosophers contrast with forgiveness. A consistent but incomplete picture of the phenomenon appears in the negative space of forgiveness theories. Forgiveness is held to be

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[9] Different accounts of forgiveness identify different reasons to forgive and a complete account of the two phenomena would adjudicate the disagreements between them. However, for our purposes, it is sufficient to show that there are two ways of ceasing to blame a culpable wrongdoer and that they are best distinguished by their reasons for doing so.

[10] Even staunch defenders of unconditional forgiveness seem to accept that when one forgives unconditionally, one does so for reasons (Garrard and McNaughton, 2010: 114-116).

[11] A pluralist could argue that all reasons to cease blaming a culpable wrongdoer are reasons to forgive and that what we call letting go is actually one or more types of forgiving. We acknowledge this possibility, but contend that the two practices differ in psychologically and morally significant ways—and that this is true regardless of which forms of forgiveness a pluralist view recognizes. For example, few pluralists would describe Salman as having forgiven when he decides that Emily is not worth his blame.

distinct from "forgetting" (Murphy, 1982: 508), "mental hygiene" (Richards, 1988: 79), "taking a specially designed pill" (Hieronymi, 2001: 530), "merely prudential…self-interest" (Bennett, 2003: 140), "amnesia" (Griswold, 2007b: 40), "closure" or "putting it [the issue] away" (Griswold, 2007b: 70), "therapeutic anger reduction" (Pettigrove, 2012: 4), "merely getting over" blame (Pettigrove, 2012: 97), "moving on" (Nelkin, 2013: 166), and "mere 'letting go'" (Wonderly, 2021: 3). Other than forgetting and amnesia, which are involuntary, these phenomena are best distinguished from forgiveness in virtue of the reasons one has for overcoming blame.

Lucy Allais and Jay Wallace provide the most substantive descriptions of the practice we're trying to bring into focus. Allais clearly distinguishes forgiveness, her focus, from the "therapeutic dispelling of the [retributive] emotions" (2008: 43-44). She says:

> [M]y aim is to exclude therapeutic dispelling of retributive emotions where this is understood as processes that the victim undergoes to get rid of negative emotions for her own sake, and that do not involve a changed view of the wrongdoer. For example, she may want to learn to not dwell on the wrongdoing, and to put him out of her thoughts, for the sake of her own peace of mind, although her view of the wrongdoer and his action remains unchanged. She may learn to cease feeling resentment by focusing on thinking of him as beneath contempt, or not worthy of her response (2008: 43-44 fn. 26).

Wallace comes closest to describing what we have in mind in his discussion of phenomena adjacent to forgiveness, though his account echoes others (e.g., McGary, 1989):

> In a still different kind of case, the reasons that speak in favor of forswearing warranted reactive attitudes are prudential rather than moral in nature. There are circumstances in which continued fruitless protest can be debilitating for the protesters, interfering with their ability to maintain emotional equilibrium and get on

with their own lives. Under these conditions, the aggrieved party might be well advised to overcome such resentment as they continue to feel, regardless of whether the person at whom it is targeted has apologized, in order to move forward with their own projects (2019: 247).

These descriptions capture a recognizable experience—it's clearly something we do—and a few features stand out from this composite sketch: to let go is to overcome negative emotions; it is at least partly voluntary; it is a way of disengaging; it has a therapeutic aim; one who lets go does not change their view of the offender; and, while responsive to the offender and context, it is unilateral, in that letting go does not require consideration or the participation of the wrongdoer.

Having recognised this distinct phenomenon, we can see that it's actually quite common. Forgiving can be burdensome (Hieronymi, 2001: 551; Walker, 2006: 79-80) and we often let go instead. For example, a victim of hateful verbal abuse might be unwilling (or unable) to forgive an unapologetically bigoted offender, but nonetheless come to believe that continuing to blame would be pointless or counterproductive. More prosaically, one might have a friend whose unrepentantly rude behaviour consistently warrants blame, but whom one simply cannot be bothered to keep blaming after every offence. In such cases, letting go is a valuable alternative.

Despite being both common and widely recognised, there is not a well-developed account of letting go. While dozens of articles about forgiveness are published each year, none have explored the practice of letting go. Many philosophers gesture at the concept, but almost always in passing. As above, cases are contrasted with forgiveness, usually with the aim of delineating the boundaries of forgiveness and explaining why it is normatively significant (McGary, 1989), so it is unsurprising that letting go is often characterised negatively and superficially. Even those who discuss the difference between forgiving and

condoning (Downie, 1965; Kolnai, 1973; Hughes, 1995), which can be a form of letting go, fail to consider whether some cases of condoning are species of a broader genus.[12]

4. Three Distinctions

The phenomenon sketched above should be familiar. However, before offering a positive account of the reasons to let go, it is worth briefly distinguishing it from three other phenomena: losing hold of blame, hiding blame, and rejecting blame.

First, the metaphor of letting go suggests both *losing* our hold on blame and *releasing* our hold on blame. The relevant difference here is between active responses to reasons and passive responses to events. One can lose hold of blame as a result of a merely causal process. Fatigue, distraction, cognitive impairment, or mood disorder can cause someone to forget, or cease to care about, some offence or mistreatment, particularly as time passes. On our view, this is neither letting go nor forgiving. Our claim is not that letting go requires conscious reflection on one's reasons. We can let go intentionally, but by exploiting causal mechanisms that can help to overcome blame. We might have a glass of wine, meditate, go for a run, or spend time in the company of entertaining friends in order to avoid thinking about an offense. This may enable us to overcome blame.[13] We might employ these strategies

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[12] We gave a brief description of letting go as distinct from other ways of ceasing to blame in an earlier paper (Brunning & Milam, 2018: §1.2). Here we develop the account we suggested there. In particular, we offer a systematic account of the reasons to let go (rather than forgive) that we think ground our earlier distinction, and we show that most philosophers recognize what we're calling letting go as distinct from forgiveness, even when they don't recognize letting go as significant in its own right.

[13] The poet Claudia Rankine captures this phenomenon in her description of the depleting effect of everyday racism: "You lean against the sink, a glass of red wine in your hand and then another, thinking in the morning you will go to the gym having slept and slept beyond the residuals of all yesterdays. Yes, and you do go to the gym and run in place, an entire hour running, just you and your body running off each undesired desired encounter" (Rankine, 2014: 79). Such cases remind us that, as Hieronymi says, blame is rarely simply "washed away" so much as it's "digested or absorbed" (2001: 551 fn. 39).

reflectively, but reflection isn't needed. After an upsetting encounter at work, we might push a little harder at the gym or switch on the TV without consciously trying to help ourselves let go. Such behaviours, while unreflective, are done for reasons and are examples of letting go.

Second, letting go of blame is different from hiding blame from victims and third parties. Letting go implies an internal change, while hiding blame implies the opposite. One may choose to hide their blame and have good reasons for doing so, but this is consistent with recognizing letting go as something else and significant in its own right. Geoffrey may hide his blame to avoid embarrassing his brother, who has himself hurt Geoffrey by telling a humiliating story about him.[14] Letting go plays a role that hiding blame does not. In the same scenario, Geoffrey might try to actually overcome his blame because he decides that blaming his brother isn't worth it because he'll just dismiss Geoffrey as being uptight.

Sustained blame may preclude continuing a friendship or other close relationship. It is arguably constitutive of some relationships that one cease to blame the offender for some kinds of offenses even if they have not repudiated them. Even in friendships that leave more conceptual leeway for extended blame, it may be difficult to say that one is really still a friend if one continues to hold a grudge against them even as circumstances change and one acquires reasons to let go. Moreover, empirical evidence suggests that hiding blame may be costly, both to oneself and others, compared with letting go. Studies appear to show that attempts to *suppress* emotions—as one might when trying to hide them—decreases positive emotional experience without affecting negative emotions, that this method impairs memory function by consuming cognitive resources, and that suppression can be perceived by others, thereby raising their blood pressure. However, *reappraising* an emotion—as one might when

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[14] Another related phenomenon is continuing to feel blame, not hiding it, but nonetheless failing to express it. Perhaps expressing it is too awkward, and one has been socialized not to do so, even though one wants the blamee to be aware of it. This may be difficult for an observer to distinguish from letting go. Thanks to Matt Matravers for this example.

trying to let go—decreases the extent to which it is experienced negatively, is not cognitively costly, and does not negatively affect one's interlocutors (Gross, 2002: 289). If this is true, and the analogy is apt, it might be better to let go of blame even if one could effectively hide it.

Third, to let go of blame is not to reject it as unfitting. Blame is fitting so long as its target is blameworthy.[15] One might think that blame is never fitting because determinism or some other thesis entails responsibility skepticism and no one is blameworthy (Pereboom, 2001; Nelkin, 2005; Levy, 2011). Or one might believe that blame rarely fitting because it is rarely proportional, perhaps due to our all too human susceptibility to epistemic and moral mistakes. Alternatively, one might think that blame can be fitting, but never appropriate all things considered because it is always problematic in some other way, whether arbitrary, unfair, or standingless (Todd 2019; Telech and Tierney, 2019).

These are reasons to avoid, resist, and overcome blame, but they are grounded in doubts about its fittingness or its all things considered appropriateness, whether as a practice or a particular instance. We are interested in a different phenomenon. On our view, letting go, like forgiveness, can be uncompromising (Hieronymi, 2001: 530-531). The domain of letting go is circumstances and cases in which a person is generally sensitive to wrongdoing, considers blame to often be a fitting and nuanced way of seeking moral repair, but has specific reasons, unrelated to fittingness, to let go in their particular context.

5. Reasons to Let Go

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[15] We follow standard practice in understanding blameworthiness as "a *normative* concept in which a person is an appropriate or fitting object of blame on account of facts about her and her actions or attitudes" (Brink, 2021: 118). This is consistent with D'Arms and Jacobson's (2000) suggestion that an emotion, like amusement or fear, can be fitting but morally or prudentially inappropriate. If blame is an emotion, or has an emotional component, it too can be fitting (in size and shape) but inappropriate (morally or prudentially).

Our positive account of letting go centers on an account of the reasons to let go. However, in order to facilitate the comparison with forgiving, it is useful to have a clear statement of each. As you might expect, an account of letting go will look similar to an account of forgiving. A common account of forgiveness says that to forgive is to overcome blame toward the offender for their offense, while still viewing them as having been blameworthy for it. However, we showed in §3 that such an account cannot pick out forgiveness because some reasons for overcoming blame toward a culpable wrongdoer are not reasons to forgive. It therefore needs to be modified:

F: For X to forgive Y for A is for X to overcome their blame toward Y for A *for the right kinds of reasons* (R1, R2, R3, etc.), while still viewing Y as having been blameworthy for A.

We can then give a parallel account of letting go:

LG: For X to let go is for X to overcome their blame toward Y for A *for the right kinds of reasons* (R4, R5, R6, etc.), while still viewing Y as having been blameworthy for A.

The substance of these accounts comes in spelling out which reasons are reasons to forgive and which are reasons to let go—just as one might determine whether a gesture was romantic or an act one of penance based on the reason for doing it. Nonetheless, as this account makes clear, letting go is not *just* about one's reasons for overcoming blame. Letting go, like forgiving, differs from, say, taking the objective stance insofar as the latter requires denying that the offender was blameworthy at the time of their offense.[16]

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[16] One might insist that wanting to avoid "the strains of involvement"—e.g., the burden of blaming—is a reason to take the objective stance even when one takes the agent to be a proper target of reactive attitudes. However, while possible, Strawson makes clear that we can't do this for long. If we really want to avoid the strains of involvement, we must do something else than deploy the objective stance as a "resource" (1962: 156), whether that is severing the relationship (his suggestion) or letting go (our suggestion).

In previous sections, we drew the outlines of letting go by describing various ways in which ceasing to blame a culpable wrongdoer could fail to be forgiveness. In this section, we fill in that outline with a positive account of the practice of letting go. Because the distinction between forgiving and letting go is explained in terms of the different kinds of reasons for which one might cease to blame, our account of the nature of letting go is an account of the reasons one might have to let go, rather than forgive. In particular, we will show that there are more reasons to let go than came out in the above sketch.

There will be a range of such reasons. Some are prudential and others moral; some are narrowly focused on the responsibility practice of which blame is a part, while others are about other features of the situation. These reasons reflect the fact that much of blame's force depends on its communicative role. The effects of blame ripple outward from its immediate target, the wrongdoer, and influence others.[17] Similarly, the effects of any episode of blame may depend on features of the communicative context which, in turn, are often outside the blamer's control. We will show how sensitivity to these contextual features may supply blamers with reasons to let go.

At the simplest level, the reason to let go of blame is because it isn't worth it. We divide reasons to let go into three categories: overriding reasons, resignation reasons, and alignment reasons. One might let go of blame for one's own or another's sake, because blame is unlikely to work, or because blame is unnecessary. These categories are neither exclusive (one may let go for multiple reasons) nor exhaustive (there may be other kinds of reasons to let go); nor do they capture all the relevant features of letting go. However, they clarify and illuminate the most familiar aspects of the practice, so, in the remainder of this section, we flesh out this taxonomy of reasons to let go.

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[17] Here we refer to the way that others may be influenced by a single attribution of blame, not the distinct phenomenon of "blame contagion" (Fast & Tiedens, 2010).

5.1. Overriding Reasons

Sometimes continuing to blame is not worth it because it is *too costly*. A person might let go of fitting blame for the sake of their own well-being, either because their ability to keep blaming is psychologically expensive or because it impedes some aim that they judge to be more important. In either case, the cost or conflict is evaluated in a specific context.

Philosophers, psychologists, and self-help writers have noted the 'therapeutic' value of letting go of blame, but not all self-interested reasons are best understood as therapeutic. One might withdraw from debates about sensitive moral and political issues on social media because communicating and defending one's blame online is exhausting, painful, traumatic, or otherwise burdensome. However, sometimes one lets go in order to more effectively pursue other aims, even when continuing to blame would not be painful or difficult. One might be concerned that blame will ruin one's mood at a party or distract one from more pressing matters, like revising a paper for a deadline or enjoying a weekend with one's kids. These concerns might also bear on how one presents oneself in public (Goffman, 1959). For example, blaming emotions could undermine one's ability to perform kinds of work that require an unusual level of composure, like acting, sport, diplomacy, or counselling.

Insofar as therapeutic letting go implies doing so intentionally, it also excludes cases in which one would endorse some reason for letting go, but is not actively pursuing one's own well-being for that reason. For example, one might let go of blame towards a callous colleague because grief about a recent loss has left one emotionally and socially drained. Such a person lets go in the way that one might succumb to fatigue or attend entirely to an immediate threat while ignoring other problems.

What unites these reasons is that they focus on oneself and how blame relates to one's well-being and other interests. People can let go of blame because their circumstances make

it reasonable to do so. Indeed, if we accept the possibility of self-directed duties (Schofield, 2021), in cases where the costs of blaming are too high—perhaps because one is especially vulnerable—one might have strong (or even decisive) *moral* reasons to let go of blame.

Sometimes the costs of blame are borne by others. One can let go of blame out of concern for the well-being of others, including the wrongdoer. Doing so may yield no personal benefits—it may even make life harder—but some blamers choose to bear these burdens. Blame has an emotional impact, which can exacerbate the distress of those already dealing with other burdens—e.g., a person dealing with a mental health crisis or severe grief at the loss of a loved one. Sensitivity to the felt experience of blame can motivate one to let go, not as an excuse or justification, but as a compassionate response to a wrongdoer seen in the light of their wider life circumstances. Indeed, commitment to an ideal of charity or magnanimity, coupled with the recognition that much wrongdoing occurs in complex and difficult circumstances—e.g., consumption within a globalized economy—might dispose one to let go more frequently.[18]

Alternatively, since the effects of blame are not easily contained, one might let go of blame directed at one person, for reasons having to do with others. For example, a child might stop blaming a parent because that blame is harming her relationship with a sibling who views the parent differently. Or a diplomat might let go of blame at their erratic boss in order to serve the interests of their colleagues, their fellow citizens, or the nation itself. In both cases, one lets go in order to avoid particular undesirable consequences of blame.

5.2. Resignation Reasons

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[18] This attitude might also be coupled with an undemanding conception of moral vigilance such that one may be prone to let go, not because blame is inappropriate, but because one denies the importance of always tracking what is appropriate (Smilansky, 1996).

Sometimes continuing to blame is not worth it because it is *ineffective*. In overriding cases, people let go of blame precisely because it is functioning as intended, because one must experience the feelings associated with blame, and because others are receptive and responsive to its message and its sting. But one can also let go for the opposite reason, namely, that blame is (or is likely to be) ineffective because the normative context within which the moral conflict is playing out is somehow fragile. In these cases, blame is fitting, but other facts about the situation prevent it from performing its usual function—i.e., encouraging or pushing the offender to recommit to the norm they violated through their misconduct. Resigned to its impotence, one might relinquish blame.

A context can be fragile in three main ways. First, the wrongdoer may be insensitive to the significance of their actions—unaware of, or indifferent to, their impact. Obliviousness is sometimes an excuse, but one can also be negligent in failing to recognize how one's behavior negatively affects others. Indifference is more straightforwardly wrong, whether it results from simple negligence or is the result of sustained contempt for others. Negligence and reckless indifference can create a fragile context to the degree that they make rationalization, defensiveness, and denial more likely. For example, a reckless offender may double down on their misconduct as an exercise of freedom, or a negligent offender may become defensive and insist on their good intentions.

Second, a context might be unclear or normatively contested. The blamer's standing to blame may be (or appear) compromised because the offender or a third party views the blamer as a hypocrite or the offense as none of their business (Todd, 2019). Or perhaps one finds oneself in a situation where people adhere to different cultural norms or moral schemes, where notions of politeness, ownership, or authority are themselves contested. A visitor from a highly egalitarian society may find the norms of authority in a very hierarchical society deeply troubling. However, despite her egalitarian commitments, she might nonetheless

refrain from blame because she fears it will be unhelpful. She might reasonably think that effective blame requires that she be integrated into the life of her new society or that she at least earn sufficient trust from her new compatriots before she can express her reservations about their norms in a way that is productive. Until that happens, she may worry that they do not share enough moral background, and therefore resign herself to the fact that blame cannot secure moral alignment and let go accordingly.

Finally, a context can be fragile because the dynamics of power systematically undermine the ability of some individuals to receive uptake of their blame. When wrongdoers and victims are not social equals, the latter can be compromised in their ability to blame and to let go. Oppressed persons are often subject to stereotyping, microaggressions, and overt hostility resulting from implicit or explicit bias. Privileged wrongdoers may hold harmful stereotypes about the moral competence or standing of their victims, perhaps dismissing them as 'bossy', 'bitchy', 'bitter', or 'uppity,' or viewing them as morally compromised in ways that makes their blame illegitimate. Vanessa Carbonell (2019) calls this phenomenon, wherein marginalized victims are undermined in their capacity to engage in felicitous moral address, 'claimant injustice'.[19] This can happen when the wrongdoer simply does not recognize that they have harmed the victim and therefore fails to find the latter's blame fitting. Even when the wrongdoer is aware of their misconduct, the force of victim's blame may be diminished if it fails to receive uptake in the community. In such cases, letting go of blame may accompany 'testimonial smothering,' wherein a marginalized victim limits their testimony about their mistreatment based on the perceived testimonial (in)competence of their audience (Dotson, 2011: 244).

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[19] See also Sue Campbell's (1994) discussion of having one's anger or other emotional responses dismissed.

While circumstances of oppression most clearly produce and illustrate this kind of fragility, oppression is not necessary. It can occur wherever blame is likely to be dismissed or disregarded and that can happen wherever there are ingroups and outgroups. For example, a group of religious believers may dismiss blame directed at them by apostate group members, whether because they discount their moral authority or because they take apostates to have lower moral status. The same can happen when a community is dominated by members of one political party, especially when the political issues the community cares most about are strongly polarized.

5.3. Alignment Reasons

Sometimes continuing to blame is not worth it because it is *unnecessary*. More specifically, it is not needed in order to bring the offender back into alignment with respect to the values that they contravened. In fragile contexts, people may let go of fitting blame because it is likely to be ineffective in securing moral alignment. In other contexts, though, blame may not be needed. It is not always necessary to blame those with whom one already has a significant relationship, like friends, romantic partners, or family members. Suppose a friend misses an important meeting without a good excuse and without making much effort to apologize. One might reasonably blame them for their culpable tardiness, but decide to let go of that blame. Friends and romantic partners wrong each other against a background of shared history and mutual understanding where trust in, or the reliability of, others is stable. These facts can make blame seem not worth it, not because the friend is unimportant or the context is fragile, but precisely because they are important and the context is robust. Because they are friends, understanding is likely to be forthcoming. Close relationships are not guarantors of alignment, but one can often maintain a harmony of moral understanding and motivation without the sting of blame.

Similarly, one can let go of blame not because one can rely on the wrongdoer to realize on their own that their behaviour was wrong, but because one can rely on third parties to intervene. For example, Salman might be the subject of racist 'banter' by his boss David. It would be fitting for Salman to blame David, but Salman knows David is fragile and gets defensive when called out. However, Salman also knows that his white friend, Sarah, is a reliable ally in these situations and will confront David. Salman's relationship with Sarah, and his ability to rely on her, means he can let go because moral alignment (between David and himself) will be forthcoming, even if he is not the person whose blame brings it about. (Notice that in this scenario the context is fragile, but alignment is secure.)

One might object that letting go for these alignment reasons is better understood as a kind of forgiveness. Anticipated alignment seems more like a reason to forgive than like other reasons to let go.

However, two points are worth noting here. First, we should expect similarities between different ways of overcoming fitting blame and we should expect some forms of letting go to be more similar to forgiveness than others. But these similarities do not undermine the distinctiveness of letting go as a practice. Second, the worry cuts both ways. Based on their similarity, one might equally well argue that some purported forms of forgiveness are better understood as examples of letting go for alignment reasons. At a taxonomy's blurred edges, it is better to focus on concrete differences.

Nonetheless, we can still ask whether alignment reasons to let go of blame are better understood as reasons to forgive. A case might be made for this view. Consider the phenomenon that Miranda Fricker (2019) calls 'proleptic gifted forgiveness.' A victim offers proleptic gifted forgiveness when they think blame is 'redundant' because forgiving would be as, or more, effective at bringing the wrongdoer back into moral alignment. One might think

that what we have described as letting go of blame for alignment reasons is better understood as a version of this form of forgiveness.[20]

However, despite their similarities, there are important differences between gifted forgiveness and letting go. Gifted forgiveness aims to *bring about* moral realignment, is bi/multilateral, and is typically communicated to the wrongdoer. Letting go for alignment reasons, in contrast, merely *anticipates* moral alignment, can be unilateral, and need not be communicated to the wrongdoer.

The causal role of one's orientation to blame lies at the heart of the matter. The person who 'gifts' forgiveness wants alignment to happen *because* of their gifted forgiveness. They would be frustrated if alignment was secured on the basis of another reason. For example, Hal might mistakenly think that because Bernice no longer blames him, she does not grasp the significance of his wrongdoing. Hal feels guilty due to his perceived luck in avoiding her wrath, and recommits to upholding the norms he violated because of that guilt. In such a case Bernice might feel frustrated by Hal's misunderstanding insofar as she intended her forgiveness to bring him back into the moral community.

Letting go is not directed in this way. If Bernice lets go, she does so because she thinks that other factors will ensure realignment in the absence of her blame. Perhaps she is close with Hal and knows he is prone to recognize and reflect on his moral failures and to

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[20] Fricker describes a second form of gifted forgiveness, which she calls 'distributed gifted forgiveness' (2019: 256). The idea is that Laurencia is able to forgive Pilar on the basis of the wider moral alignment between Laurencia and her community, rather than the alignment between Laurencia and Pilar. The community supplies 'the moral affirmation of shared understanding' to the victim even in cases where the offender is unable or unwilling to do so (2019: 256). The phenomenon we have described is different in that the reason for letting go is the anticipated (re)alignment of victim and wrongdoer. We would actually question whether distributed gifted forgiveness is a form of forgiveness at all. The fact that Laurencia and her community are morally aligned does not seem to give Laurencia any reason to change her view of Pilar. If anything, Pilar's persisting misalignment is a reason to continue blaming or a resignation reason to let go. There is much more we could say about both types of gifted forgiveness, but that discussion deserves more attention than we can give it here.

feel remorse long after the event. Bernice would not worry if Hal's realignment resulted from her letting go; indeed, she does not even need Hal to know that she's let go of blame. This unilateral, and potentially private, dimension of letting go has its advantages. In such cases, Bernice's 'gift' of forgiveness may appear to Hal as pitying or sanctimonious, while her implicit (and silent) trust might allow him the space to reflect and reform on his own.

Fricker's account of gifted forgiveness, or something like it, may seem to challenge our account, but closer inspection shows both that letting go for alignment reasons and gifted forgiveness are different, and that letting go may have distinct advantages. [21]

5.4. The Mechanism of Letting Go

Thus far our positive account of letting go has been an account of the reasons one might have to let go of fitting blame rather than forgive. However, one might want more from a positive account of a practice. The aim of this section is to give an account of the *mechanism* of letting go—as one might expect from an account of forgiveness.

What is going on mentally when a person lets go of blame? There are two ways of understanding the mechanism. Both start with the claim that, when a person lets go, they are responding to reasons to let go, they are motivated by those reasons, and their responsiveness results in sufficiently overcoming their blame.

The first way of elaborating this basic description is to say that a person who lets go of blame is no longer (or is much less) disposed to blame the offender for that offense. (This need not affect their disposition to blame *other* individuals and or the same individuals about

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[21] We have discussed Fricker's view as one version of a more general worry, but there are independent reasons to resist her conception of forgiveness (Milam, 2019b).

other offenses.) Probably we cannot say *how much* one's disposition to blame must diminish, but that shouldn't speak against the view.

The second way of describing letting go is to say that a person remains just as disposed to blame the offender for their offense, but that this disposition is masked rather than eliminated or diminished—in the same way that a sugar crystal coated in plastic remains disposed to dissolve in water, but is not actually likely to dissolve. One reason to favor this second view is that it allows us to distinguish the mechanisms of forgiving and letting go. When a person forgives, their reasons respond to blame's success in realigning the parties and resolving the conflict, and the disposition to blame disappears or substantially weakens as a result. When a person lets go, their reasons respond to blame's failure to resolve the conflict, but, while the disposition to blame remains, it is blocked by these other factors— perhaps in the way that blame can be blocked by being perpetually distracted. In short, reasons to let go function like the plastic coating on a sugar crystal (blocking dissolution to diminish the likelihood of dissolving), while reasons to forgive function like water on a sugar crystal (dissolving it so that it is no longer disposed to dissolve). This description also seems to fit our experience of forgiving versus letting go. When an offender gives one a reason to forgive—e.g., when they appear remorseful, apologize, and demonstrate their care and regard—one's blame begins to dissolve. When an offender or situation gives one reason to let go—e.g., when one realizes that it is too much of a burden or resigns oneself to being dismissed—one's blame does not dissolve; instead, one must actively put it away, move on, or get over it. All of these descriptions suggest a process of blocking blame from playing its usual psychological role given its inability to play its usual normative role.[22] We favor this second description.

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[22] Thanks to Jay Odenbaugh for suggesting we explain the mechanism of letting go and to John Eriksson for suggesting this account.

5.5. Letting Go of Private Blame

In this paper we focus mostly on public blame, but one might wonder how our account of letting go applies to private blame. Generally, one might ask what other-directed reasons one could have to let go of fitting private blame. Specifically, it seems that private blame is less likely to be problematic either in terms of its consequences or how it is received. Our account has two things to say about private blame, both of which allow that one may have less or weaker reason to let go of private blame than to avoid expressing it publicly.

First, private blame can affect others indirectly. For example, one who blames privately may nonetheless experience a change in how they are disposed to treat the offender or other objects of their blame. We should not underestimate these indirect effects, whether on others or the blamer herself. While private blame may galvanize a victim's spirit of resistance, it can just as easily fester and rankle. Second, many of the reasons to let go that we describe also apply to private blame. Private blame can be burdensome and painful, even if one is not also struggling with others' reactions to it. Likewise, the fact that others dismiss one's blame is not just a reason to refrain from expressing it; it is—or can be—a reason to let it go entirely because how one experiences blaming depends not just on how others *are* responding to it, but on how one believes they *would* respond.

6. The Value of Letting Go

Letting go is a recognizable part of life. It is clearly something we do. We let go for particular reasons, in response to particular situations of moral conflict, and often with particular aims. And these are often good reasons to do so. When it accomplishes these aims, letting go can be good in the ways we have described: therapeutic, liberating, beneficent, and

even virtuous. While it has typically been portrayed as something one does for self-interested, therapeutic reasons (Allais, 2008; Pettigrove, 2012; Wallace, 2019), we have shown that letting go of blame is more complex than this, and that people can do it for reasons that are sensitive to the wrongdoer, third parties, groups, or features of the social context.

Given this complexity, we should not expect letting go to be morally straightforward. Like any moral practice, including blame and forgiveness, it has risks and limitations: we can let go mistakenly, lazily, carelessly, harmfully, wrongfully, out of contempt, and in ways that condone misconduct. It is important to let go in the right ways, so we need an ethics of letting go, and developing such an ethics, requires that we be able to identify it, distinguish it from other phenomena, and understand it well enough to do it thoughtfully and purposefully.

There is clear prudential value in letting go of blame in contexts where it is emotionally demanding and there can be moral value in doing so to avoid harming an earnest and morally fragile wrongdoer (overriding reasons), avoid misunderstandings or cycles of blame (resignation reasons), or to nurture mutual trust in a group of erstwhile strangers (alignment reasons).[23] Nonetheless, we must consider the risks and limitations of letting go.

6.1. Wrongful Letting Go

Humans are morally fallible and our moral failures take various forms and can implicate our attitudes, intentions, character, and values.

Malicious letting go. Sometimes one lets go of blame in order to harm or manipulate another—e.g., out of spite or to hurt someone. Letting go can express attitudes of disrespect or indifference, discount or deny the offender's agency, or serve as a kind of moral 'silent

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[23] This is not to deny that anger remains fitting (or 'apt') even when one has other reasons to let go (Srinivasan, 2018) or to claim that any particular reason to let go is decisive.

treatment' in an attempt to derail other moral interactions and obstruct pathways to moral repair.

Condoning letting go. Sometimes a person lets go of fitting blame out of a desire to avoid social awkwardness or in order to intentionally curry favor with the wrongdoer, or a relevant third party (Hughes, 1995). Condoning letting go can be cowardly or obsequious, as one is disengaging from or failing to stand up for morality out of weakness or selfishness. Nor is it objectionable solely in virtue theoretic terms. Condoning fails to meet the legitimate demand that the offender be made to account for their offense and repudiate it.

Contemptuous letting go. Sometimes one lets go because of a belief that one is superior to others in some way and that it is therefore beneath one to blame them for their wrongdoing. Macalester Bell describes Aristotle's *megalopsychos* and Nietzsche's noble man as holding beliefs about their status that lead them to passively contemn others (2013: 139, c.f. Griswold, 2007a: 15). Similar ideas can be found in the Stoics (Griswold, 2007a: 12-13) and the early Church Fathers (Konstan, 2010: 139). These figures may be disposed to let go of fitting blame because they view others' misdeeds as trivial or unworthy of their notice. Arguably, this attitude manifests the vice of arrogance or the cluster of vices which Bell labels 'superbia' (2013: 96-110). Nor must one read Aristotle or Nietzsche to witness contemptuous people shrugging off blame toward those they contemn.

Negligent letting go. Sometimes one appreciates that one has been wronged, blames the wrongdoer, but is unwilling to sustain blame through an extended process of moral engagement. In such cases, if one lacks a good reason to let go—e.g., if it would be effective and not excessively burdensome—then one may wrongfully let go out of laziness.

Mistaken letting go. Sometimes one misunderstands the reasons one has to let go. One might overestimate the emotional effort or psychological difficulty of blaming someone and let go when blame would have been relatively effortless. One might underestimate an

offender's ability to understand the significance of their actions and mistakenly think that blame would be ineffective. Or one might mistakenly assess a context as fragile, perhaps believing there to be a substantive difference in worldview when actually there is significant overlap of moral and cultural norms. Such mistakes are not necessarily blameworthy, but they can be, just as a policy maker (or ethicist) can culpably overestimate the utility of implementing a policy that requires infringing the rights of some for the benefit of others.

In each of these cases, one lets go because one judges that continuing to blame isn't worth it—whether because one is mistaken, lazy, contemptuous, obsequious, or hostile to the offender. One recognizes that blame is fitting and efficacious, but is unwilling to sustain it. These are reasons to let go, but they are not good (enough) reasons to let go in the circumstances. Whether they reflect malice, lack of care or regard, or a culpable assessment of the risk, they demonstrate the pitfalls both of blaming and letting go of blame.

Such risks may tempt one to think that letting go of blame should be avoided. However, as we have argued, one can have good reasons to let go and failure to do so can also be inappropriate. Nor is letting go unique in posing a moral hazard; blame and forgiveness are also risky, but we recognize that they are sometimes worth it. We must approach both blaming and letting go of blame mindful of the risks of each. It is vital that we attend to other agents, to circumstances, and to how letting go may shape our characters.

6.2. Oppression and Letting Go

In the previous section, we considered the kinds of reasons one might have for letting go. In this section, we have considered how a person might let go wrongfully. But these are not the only factors that bear on the value of letting go. Social position can influence both the reasons one has to let go of blame and the significance of letting go in one's life.

One is more likely to be in a position to let go for overriding or resignation reasons if one is more likely to be burdened by the emotional effects of blaming.[24] Members of oppressed groups are likely to bear such burdens for two reasons. First, they are more likely to be wronged in virtue of their perceived group membership, whether via stereotyping, microaggressions, discrimination, or overt hostility. Second, they are less likely to secure uptake for their fitting blame, making it less likely to be effective. For example, many people downplay or deny the prevalence and significance of microaggressions. Likewise, stereotypes—that members of some group are angry, bossy, bitchy, or bitter (Campbell, 1994)—can leave oppressed people struggling to secure uptake because their blame is taken to be somehow illegitimate.

More privileged people, by contrast, are less likely to be victims of systemic wrongdoing.[25] As a result, they are less likely to (need to) blame others, and so less likely to be burdened enough by blame to (need to) let go of blame for overriding reasons—in response to persistent wrongdoing—or resignation reasons—in response to its perceived futility. Moreover, it is a likely benefit of privilege that third parties and the moral community generally are more likely to take one's blame seriously and believe it to be justified. For example, privileged people who report supposedly suspicious behavior by people of color are believed by other privileged people and experience relatively easy uptake of their moral concern (Eberhardt, 2019).

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[24] One might choose to relinquish fitting blame in contexts of sustained oppression due to the harmful impact of what is, for them, a 'burdened virtue' (Tessman, 2005).

[25] Privilege and oppression is not a simple binary. Oppression comes in degrees and the fact of intersectional identities means that most people will be members of at least one oppressed group. Nonetheless, while it is therefore more accurate to speak of *more* and *less privileged* people, there are significant differences in the degree of privilege between groups and it is not misleading to describe some people as more (even much more) likely to experience many forms of mistreatment.

Attention to these dynamics reveals a double bind. On the one hand, oppressed people have more and stronger reasons to blame and continue blaming those who mistreat them. At the same time, though, they encounter proportionally more reasons to let go of blame, as a result of their personal experience of blaming and finding themselves in fragile contexts where they lack uptake—though, they may also face obstacles to uptake when they let go. Thus, those for whom letting go of blame might be most personally useful—e.g., as a refuge from some of the burden of everyday racism or sexism—are also those who may have the strongest moral reasons to continue blaming.[26]

Finally, grappling with this double bind is itself a burden that contributes to the oppression that some people face; and it is a conflict that more privileged people are less likely to encounter. Privileged people are privileged, in part, because they are fortunate that their ability to let go of blame has proleptic force in bringing about moral alignment. This is a small, but not trivial, luxury to which some have less access.

These are tentative claims and open to empirical disconfirmation. However, we are confident that the ability and opportunity to let go of fitting blame without reservations, the significance of this move in the broader scheme of our responsibility practice, and the power of letting go to effectively bring about moral alignment between victims and offenders, is not distributed evenly within society. As Sandra Bartky said about the ability of oppressed people to respond to shame: When thinking about letting go of blame we must be careful not to "[posit] as universal an agent who is specific and quite privileged, an agent whose social location is such that he has the capacity not only to be judged but to judge, not only to be

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[26] This is the familiar point that the burden of opposing oppression often falls mostly on the oppressed and fits a plausible description of what a double bind is (Hirji, 2021). The worry is also similar to Regina Rini's concern about the usefulness of proleptic blame towards microaggressors, namely, that the "most effective uses of proleptic blame will probably be directed at people who are already relatively decent" (2021: 198-99).

defined by others but to define them as well" (Bartky, 1990: 97). Oppressed people are simultaneously hamstrung by their mistreatment, and by their more limited repertoire of socially-recognized responses to their mistreatment.

7. The Significance of Letting Go

Letting go is a response to moral conflict that has been neglected in philosophical discussions of blame and forgiveness. We have attempted to provide a positive account of letting go, a practice that we believe is as subtle and nuanced as forgiveness or excuse. Our overarching aim has been to distinguish letting go from other ways of ceasing to blame, to develop a more complete positive account of the practice, and to correct some of the misconceptions about it found in the literature. We've argued that, while we often let go of blame for self-interested reasons, many of which are therapeutic, this does not exhaust the purview of the practice. People let go for their own sakes, for the sake of others, and out of a sense that blame won't work or is unnecessary.

That letting go can be a useful response to moral conflict should not be surprising given the complexity of our moral lives and the different challenges and opportunities we encounter.[27] Indeed, reflection on our conflicts suggests that often we cease to blame through a combination of responses. We may realize that an offence was not as bad as we thought (justification), that the person was not entirely responsible for what happened (excuse), but that there is nonetheless something that warrants blame and calls for forgiveness or letting go.

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[27] Indeed, while we cannot discuss this further in the present paper, another upshot of our account is that it provides an alternative to accounts of forgiveness that strain to capture the variety of ways in which we respond to moral conflict and cease to blame. For example, it allows us to acknowledge the reality and importance of the kind of change of heart Cheshire Calhoun (1992) identifies, but without diminishing the significance of the form of forgiveness she finds lacking.

However, having a positive account—one that helps to recognise, understand, and practice letting go in a reflective way—is significant in other ways, too. It puts a label on a recognisable but nebulous concept. In doing so, the concept becomes available for both reflective inquiry and application, in the same way that, by distinguishing the "problem that has no name" (i.e., the recognisable dissatisfaction of middle-class women) from unhappiness generally, Betty Friedan facilitated theorising and activism about it (Friedan, 2001: 62-64). This is not to suggest that understanding letting go and understanding Friedan's unnamed problem are comparably significant. Our point is rather to illustrate how identifying and describing a previously hidden or nebulous phenomenon can help us to understand the world better and act in light of that understanding.

Finally, a positive account of letting go supports a plausible view of the value of forgiveness. Accounts of the nature of forgiveness are susceptible to two kinds of mistake. First, by failing to distinguish between forgiving and letting go, they render themselves unable to explain the value of forgiveness. Western societies valorise forgiveness, but its moral significance and the admiration we have for those who forgive are in tension with the view that we forgive whenever we intentionally cease to blame a culpable wrongdoer. Recall the example at the beginning of this paper. While Salman's decision to let go may be prudent or kind, it is not (or not necessarily) especially impressive or admirable. Second, many accounts seem to assume that forgiveness is admirable and that other responses to conflict are not. We hope to have shown that this is also a mistake. Both forgiving and letting go can be admirable or not, depending on the circumstances. Sometimes an offender apologizes, repents, and makes amends so willingly and sincerely that it would be difficult, even callous, not to forgive. Likewise, managing to let go can be a significant accomplishment, both personally and morally. Letting go is not always a suboptimal response to moral conflict; it may even be required in some circumstances. Forgiving feels significant because it often

requires working through the implications of one's mistreatment with a remorseful and repentant offender. But it can still be banal. Letting go is more likely to be unilateral, but it is no less responsive to the attitudes and actions of the offender. It may lead to a different resolution to the conflict, but it can still be personally significant and morally valuable.[28]

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