

Consequentialism and the Ethics of Blame

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Abstract: Consequentialists are often associated with a rather simplistic theory of blame, the Influence Theory: blaming people is a way to influence their behaviour for the better. Most philosophers think the Influence Theory is hopeless. Among other things, it fails to account for our beliefs about responsibility and blameworthiness, focuses on the wrong kinds of reasons, and ignores the more complex role played by reactive attitudes in human relationships. In this article, I develop a new consequentialist ethics of blame that avoids the Influence Theory's problems. First, I argue for a sophisticated consequentialist framework that focuses on the whole practice of blame rather than individual acts. To this end, I suggest a multi-level dispositional account of blame to reconstruct Parfit's notion of blameless wrongdoing. Second, I connect consequentialism with recent relational theories of blame. The practice of blame plays an important constitutive, motivational and communicative role in valuable social relationships. Tying these moves together, I show that this new consequentialist theory avoids the Influence Theory's shortcomings and makes for a plausible new compatibilist approach to the ethics of blame. Accordingly, consequentialism deserves to play a more central role in philosophical discussions of blame where it is often dismissed too quickly.

Key words: consequentialism; blame; moral responsibility; utilitarianism; reactive attitudes