



Fitting Blame and the Partiality Problem

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Received: 13 February 2025 / Accepted: 22 June 2026
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Abstract

Blameworthiness is commonly understood in terms of fittingness of blame: An agent X is blameworthy to degree n for an action A if and only if it is fitting for all agents to blame X to degree n for A. The problem with this biconditional is that it conflicts with the intuition that whether and what kind of blame is fitting depends on the personal relationship between the blamer and the wrongdoer or the blamer and the victim. Sometimes it is, *prima facie*, fitting for certain agents to have different blaming responses toward the same wrongdoer due to personal relationships. This is the partiality problem for blame. I argue that we should not try to solve the problem by appealing to wrong kind of reasons, i.e. non-fittingness reasons. Instead, we should accept that different blaming responses toward the same wrongdoer may in fact be fitting. To solve the partiality problem, I propose distinguishing between agent-relative and agent-neutral blameworthiness and show how the distinction can be understood in a Strawsonian framework.

Keywords Blame · Fittingness of reactive attitudes · Partiality problem · Wrong kind of reason · Agent-relative/-neutral · P.F. Strawson

1 Introduction

It's common to understand blameworthiness in terms of fittingness of blaming responses:

(BB) An agent X is blameworthy to degree n for an action A if and only if it is fitting (for all agents)¹ to blame X to degree n for A.

¹ I use parentheses since in the literature the agential component is seldom made explicit. I show in the next section that (BB) in fact has this agential component and how this generates the partiality problem.

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Versions of this blameworthiness-biconditional (BB) are widely endorsed by authors in the fittingness debate (Howard 2018: 1; Howard and Rowland 2022: 1) as well as authors in the blame debate, especially Strawsonians who understand blame in terms of reactive attitudes (McKenna 2022; Shoemaker 2017; 2022; Wallace 1996: 91; Menges 2017; Todd 2016; Wang 2022).² However, (BB) has the following problem, which I will call the *partiality problem for blame*: Understanding blameworthiness in terms of fittingness of blame conflicts with the intuition that it is sometimes fitting for certain agents to blame the same wrongdoer differently due to partial relationships (i.e. close personal relationships, paradigmatically friendship or romantic relationships) between the blamer and the wrongdoer or the blamer and the victim. (BB) implies that there cannot be a change in fittingness of blame without there being a change in blameworthiness. However, it is—at least, without further specification—problematic to claim that the blameworthiness of the wrongdoer is affected by who the blamer is, since blame can be harmful and so one could think that, analogously to punishment, fitting blame shouldn't depend on the blamer but be impartial.³ Abandoning (BB), however, comes with the cost of losing the, initially plausible seeming, possibility of analyzing blameworthiness—like other evaluative properties such as the admirable, the amusing, the contemptible, or, generally, the valuable—in terms of fitting responses and of having to rethink popular Strawsonian approaches, which understand responsibility in terms of blameworthiness and blameworthiness in terms of fittingness of reactive attitudes.

So, wouldn't it be neat if we could show that, contrary to appearance, different blaming responses are not actually fitting? One way to do this is to argue that reasons provided by relationships only bear on whether the blaming attitude would be beneficial or morally right to have, and not on blame's fittingness—relationships would give us only non-fittingness-related reasons, i.e. *wrong kind of reasons* (WKR's). After stating the partiality problem in Sect. 2, I present this solution in Sect. 3 and argue in Sect. 4 that the WKR solution should be rejected in the case of blame, and that we have reason to think that different blaming attitudes are indeed fitting depending on partial relationships. In Sect. 5, I propose solving the problem by introducing the distinction between agent-relative and agent-neutral blameworthiness and show in Sect. 6 how the distinction can be understood in a Strawsonian framework. As a result, Strawsonians must modify (BB), but they have the resources to deal with the partiality problem.

²Strawsonian accounts are inspired by P.F. Strawson's "Freedom and Resentment" and take certain emotions as central to blame, especially resentment, indignation, and guilt. Some Strawsonians merely endorse the biconditional without claiming that one side is more fundamental (Menges 2017: 15; 2020). Others take a "response-dependent" view and see the right-hand side of the biconditional as metaphysically fundamental (Shoemaker 2017; 2022; cf. Todd 2016; Wang 2022). Note that Wallace is often ascribed a response-dependent view, but as Todd (2016) observes, Wallace does not articulate a clear "reversal" (i.e. response-dependence) thesis, and Menges (2017: 17) considers that some passages of Wallace could also be read as suggesting that being responsible and being appropriately held responsible are identical. I mostly focus on response-dependent views like Shoemaker's, but the partiality problem arises already if one merely endorses the biconditional.

³I propose such a specification in Sects. 5 and 6.

2 The Partiality Problem

Before stating the partiality problem, let me briefly clarify (BB). Fitting-attitude-biconditionals like (BB) consist of a normative and an attitudinal component. The *attitudinal component* of (BB) refers to the attitude of blame. Since especially Strawsonians endorse (BB), I understand blame, for the sake of argument, in terms of reactive attitudes (paradigmatically resentment, indignation, and guilt), i.e. angry emotional responses to the (perceived) ill will that people manifest toward each other.

Fittingness is the *normative component* of (BB). This needs some explanation. Authors in the blame debate often use different terminology and spell out the respective terms slightly differently. For instance, Wallace's "normative interpretation (N)" states that "S is morally responsible (for an action x) if and only if it would be appropriate to hold s morally responsible (for action x)" (Wallace 1996: 91), where he then spells out appropriateness in terms of fairness. Others unpack Wallace's principle (N) in terms of desert (Carlsson 2017; Pereboom 2014; cf. McKenna 2022). McKenna (2022) argues that desert is a species of fittingness. And Shoemaker uses "fittingness" and "merit" and defends a "normative response-dependence" view according to which "X is blameworthy for some action or attitude A if and only if, and in virtue of the fact that, X merits blaming anger for A" (Shoemaker 2022: 318; cf. 2017: 508). The different usages can easily become confusing. What I believe to be informative is to see how fittingness is understood in the literature on fitting attitudes and take the commonalities between the two debates as a starting point. It is widely accepted to gloss fittingness as the *distinct normative relation in which a response stands to an object when the object merits, or is worthy of, that response* (Howard 2018; 2023)—it is thus the relation in which "fear stands in when its object is fearful, that love stands in when its object is lovable, and that blame stands in when its object is blameworthy" (Howard and Rowland 2022: 1). The relevant notion is *normative*, not merely descriptive. Being lovable or blameworthy is not merely a matter of being someone whom one *does* or *could* love or blame. This is in line with the blame debate. Shoemaker and Wallace explicitly reject a descriptive reading of the biconditional according to which someone is blameworthy for A if and only if people are disposed to respond to them with blame for A in standard conditions (Shoemaker 2017: 496; Wallace 1996: 89–90). Instead, the blameworthy is what merits, positively calls for, blame.⁴ Which facts pertain to the fittingness of an attitude is deter-

⁴One common view is to analyze fittingness in terms of reasons (Scanlon 1998; Rønnow-Rasmussen 2011; 2022), while others treat fittingness as normatively basic (McHugh and Way 2016). I am sympathetic to the former view, but nothing much of the following arguments hinges on it.

mined by the nature of the attitude.⁵ So, if one holds that blaming attitudes are, for instance, essentially about a moral agent having violated a moral requirement without an excuse, then these facts give us reasons of fit for blaming attitudes (cf. McKenna 2022: 340; Shoemaker 2022: 307–8).

And, it's also uncontroversial that evaluative properties come in degrees and that responses can be overreactions or underreactions (D'Arms and Jacobson 2000, 74; Howard and Rowland 2022, 3). Blame is not simply merited but merited to *some* degree. One can be blameworthy to a higher or lesser degree (depending on factors like the severity of the wrongdoing and the degree of control the agent had over the action) and accordingly more or less intense blame is fitting (Clarke and Rawling 2023; Johansson Werkmäster and Werkmäster 2025a: 240; Shoemaker 2017: 510; Wang 2022); thus, we should include “to degree n” on both sides of the biconditional.

Lastly, (BB) has an *agential component*. When explaining evaluative properties such as blameworthiness in terms of fitting responses, one can ask for whom these responses are fitting. This is seldom made explicit, and, generally, undertheorized (Howard 2023). When talking about value simpliciter, authors (when making the agential component explicit) hold that the relevant pro-attitude is fitting “for just anyone” (Howard 2023; cf. Rabinowicz 2013), “for all agents” (McHugh and Way 2022: 250), or “for any actual or possible agent who is able to favour x with the relevant attitude” (Rønnow-Rasmussen 2022: 118). But, as Howard notes, in the case of thick evaluative properties, the agential component can vary depending on the nature of the property in question. Evaluative properties are either agent-neutral, in which case it is fitting for just anyone to have the relevant response—for example, the awesome calls for just anyone to be in awe of it; or they are agent-relative, in which case the attitude is fitting only for certain agents—for example, a shameful act calls for shame only on part of the agent (and maybe those closely related to her) who performed the act (Howard 2023). The reason for this is that shame seems to be about something reflecting badly *on me* (D'Arms 2022: 116). What about blameworthiness? As we'll see, this depends on one's view of the nature of blame and the reactive attitudes. But

⁵ One way to think about this is that attitudes come with internal standards of correctness, and these standards specify the features that an object must have in order for it to have the relevant evaluative property (D'Arms 2022; McHugh and Way 2016; cf. Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen 2021). But this is not to commit one to viewing fittingness as a matter of representational accuracy (D'Arms 2022: 108). I set aside views that understand fittingness essentially as a matter of accurate representation, according to which someone is blameworthy if and only if the thought implicit in the blaming attitude is true (cf. Graham 2014; Rosen 2015). There are several problems with representational views (D'Arms 2022; Pál-Wallin 2025). Understanding fittingness as representational accuracy implies that there is an independent blameworthiness property which makes blame fitting and thus, as Shoemaker (2017: 494) notes, blameworthiness would be response-independent from the start. Why is this problematic? On a representational view, attitudes (blame) are fitting in virtue of representing correctly that the object has certain evaluative properties (blameworthiness)—the value is what makes the attitude fitting, values are explanatorily prior. This conflicts with the popular Fitting-Attitude (FA) analysis of value which analyses values/evaluative properties in terms of fitting attitudes, so fitting attitudes are seen as explanatorily prior to values. Since it is *prima-facie* undesirable to exclude an FA-analysis of blameworthiness, and since Strawsonians often either endorse, or are at least sympathetic to, grounding blameworthiness in fitting/appropriate/deserved blame, I rather set aside views that understand fittingness as a matter of representational accuracy. For the argument that representational views of responsibility are in conflict with the FA analysis, see Pál-Wallin (2025). For the position that fittingness of emotions is a normative relation over and above representation, see Naar (2021).

blameworthiness seems to be usually understood as agent-neutral since a common view is that blame is about a moral agent having violated a moral requirement without an excuse (and not about the agent who has the blaming attitude, in contrast to shame). Accordingly, if someone is blameworthy, it is fitting for all agents (who are part of the moral community) to blame them. So, we should include “for all agents” or “for just anyone” on the right-hand side of (BB).⁶ This, however, gives rise to the *partiality problem*.

The partiality problem for blame can be seen as an instance of the more general problem that relationships seem to influence the fittingness of attitudes. The general partiality problem was first raised against the Fitting-Attitude (FA) analysis of value, and the FA literature is also where the problem is predominantly (if not exclusively) discussed.⁷ It has not been discussed in the context of blame even though (BB) is widely endorsed and the partiality problem is especially pressing for blameworthiness since, on the one hand, responding with different blaming reactions toward the same wrongdoer seems morally problematic due to blame’s potentially harmful effects, but, on the other hand, our blaming practices usually take the relationship between the parties into account and, accordingly, our blaming responses toward the same wrongdoer can vary widely. I first state how the partiality problem for the FA analysis is commonly understood and then apply it to blameworthiness.

According to the FA analysis of value,

(FA) X is valuable if and only if it is fitting to value it. (cf. Rabinowicz 2013)

The partiality problem for (FA) is usually formulated like this:

Partiality problem (general): (1) two items (objects, state of affairs) can be of equal value, (2) two items are of equal value if and only if it is fitting (for all agents) to value them to an equal degree, and (3) it is sometimes fitting (for certain agents) to value items of equal value to an unequal degree due to personal relationships. (cf. Lemos 2011; McHugh and Way 2022)

(1) is, I take it, trivial. (2) follows from (FA). And (3) is based on our practices and intuitions. Applied to blame, the problem can be stated as follows:

Partiality problem (blame): (1) two persons can be of equal blameworthiness, (2) two persons are of equal blameworthiness if and only if it is fitting

⁶To be clear, authors in the blame debate usually omit the agential component. But what also speaks for blameworthiness being implicitly understood as agent-neutral is that in the debate on standing to blame, it is commonly held that the blame of a hypocritical agent is fitting, however, morally objectionable (cf. Wallace 2010). This gives some support for there being the implicit supposition that if someone is blameworthy, it is fitting for all members of the moral community to blame—but for some members it would be all-things-considered inappropriate.

⁷The partiality problem was first pressed by Blanshard as a challenge for Ewing’s account of intrinsic value in terms of fittingness of favorable attitudes (Blanshard 1961: 287–288). For discussion of the partiality problem for the FA analysis, see Bykvist (2009), Lemos (2011), McHugh and Way (2022), Olson (2009), Zimmerman (2011).

(for all agents) to blame them equally, (3) it is sometimes fitting (for certain agents) to blame persons of equal blameworthiness differently due to personal relationships.

(1) is again trivial. (2) is implied by (BB). (3) is based on our practices and intuitions. However, (1), (2), and (3) are inconsistent since (3) can be reformulated as: it is sometimes not fitting for all agents to blame persons of equal blameworthiness equally. We can illustrate the phenomenon with the following example:

Wronged Partner: Anne's husband Bert is wronged by a third party, the stranger Steve. (Let's say, Steve disrespected Bert by making discriminatory remarks about him.) She also hears a story about a stranger who was wronged by a third party in the same way as Bert. Anne reacts with strong indignation to the first case and mild indignation to the second.

Note that the phenomenon cannot be debunked by appealing to different judgments of blameworthiness or to the distinction between private and expressed blame. It's plausible that Anne can judge the wrongdoer in the story to be equally blameworthy as Steve, who harmed her husband, but still, fittingly it seems, react with stronger indignation toward the latter.⁸ Also, it's plausible that she actually feels stronger indignation toward Steve and not merely that she is overtly expressing her indignation in the one case but not in the other. The next section discusses a more plausible solution.

3 The WKR Solution

Fittingness is often distinguished from the all-things-considered appropriateness of an attitude. Facts that pertain to the fittingness of blame surely can provide reasons for blame, but there can be other reasons that can bear on blame's all-things-considered appropriateness which are not fittingness reasons (e.g. Coates 2020; D'Arms and Jacobson 2000; Howard 2018). So, one possible explanation for the different blaming responses in partiality cases is that, contrary to appearance, relationships do not bear on the fittingness of blame, but they provide non-fittingness reasons which only bear on blame's appropriateness, so-called "wrong kind of reasons". This solves the partiality problem by rejecting (3): it is *not fitting* to blame persons of equal blameworthiness differently due to personal relationships, and thus (BB) remains intact.

The WKR solution goes like this:

⁸That the judgments don't differ is also commonly assumed when the general partiality problem is discussed. Blanshard argues that by feeling greater aversion toward your child's suffering, you usually do not mean that the stranger's suffering is less bad: "[T]he judged badness may be the same while the fitting attitudes differ" (Blanshard 1961: 287–288).

- (i) There is a distinction between reasons of the right kind (RKR) and reasons of the wrong kind (WKR): RKRs bear on the fittingness of an attitude while WKRs do not.
- (ii) Partial relationships give us only WKRs for blaming attitudes.
- (iii) Thus: Partial relationships give us only reasons that do not bear on the fittingness of blaming attitudes.

Premise (i): RKRs bear on the fittingness of an attitude while WKRs only bear on its all-things-considered appropriateness. The distinction is usually motivated by examples like the following: The fact that the bear is dangerous gives you a fittingness reason, a RKR, to fear the bear. The fact that your fear may lead to you making sudden movements and attracting the bear is a WKR not to fear the bear. The fact that it would be morally wrong to be amused by a joke (e.g. because it is offensive) is a WKR not to be amused by it but it has nothing to do with whether the joke is funny (D'Arms and Jacobson 2000). And the fact that an evil demon demands that you admire him or else kills your family is a WKR to admire the demon (Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen 2004).⁹

Even if we can intuitively grasp it, it is notoriously controversial how to precisely draw the distinction between RKRs and WKRs. I accept premise (i) that the distinction between RKRs and WKRs exists even though it might be difficult to give a precise account of it. For the purpose of the paper, only a sketch of the distinction is needed. There are the following two criteria for distinguishing RKRs and WKRs:

Essence: Which facts provide RKRs for an attitude depends on the nature of the attitude. RKRs for an attitude are considerations that pertain to what the attitude is constitutively, or essentially, concerned with (D'Arms and Jacobson 2000; D'Arms 2022; Hieronymi 2005). For example, fear is essentially concerned with the question of whether an object is dangerous and so a reason for fear is of the right kind if it pertains to this question. In contrast, WKRs are reasons to have an attitude that are not concerned with the attitude's essence but rather with considerations external to it, like the question of whether it is beneficial or morally appropriate to have that attitude.

Impact: RKRs and WKRs for an attitude differ in how they impact the forming of the attitude. We usually form attitudes *directly* in response to RKRs. Simply coming to believe that the bear is dangerous and thus settling fear's "constitutive question" (Hieronymi 2005) can cause you to be afraid of the bear. On the other hand, we seem to be able to respond to WKRs only *indirectly*, by trying to bring it about that we have the attitude (Gertken and Kiesewetter 2017; Schroeder 2012: 459). Believing that the demon will kill your family unless you admire him doesn't directly lead to you admiring him, but you have to do something to bring it about that you admire him (focusing on certain features of the demon, taking mind-altering drugs, etc.) (Nye 2017: 349).

Premise (ii): This is the premise that must be rejected if one wants to resist the conclusion that partial relationships don't influence the fittingness of blame. How should we understand the claim that partial relationships give us only WKRs for

⁹As these cases illustrate, WKRs can be very good reasons and reasons that we should follow all things considered.

blaming attitudes? Considering the examples of WKR in the literature, WKRs are usually either prudential reasons (e.g. it has good consequences or is beneficial not to fear the bear) or moral reasons (e.g. it is morally wrong to laugh at the offensive joke) or both (e.g. it has good consequences and is morally the right thing to do to admire the demon) (D'Arms and Jacobson 2000). We can then understand premise (ii) as saying that partial relationships give us only prudential and/or moral reasons for blaming attitudes.¹⁰

This way of understanding premise (ii) also corresponds to how the WKR solution to the partiality problem is sometimes presented in the FA literature. For example, Olson proposes that “[t]he partiality challenge ... is just a special case of the WKR problem” (i.e. the problem that sometimes what is valuable is not coextensive with what there are reasons to value (Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen 2004)) and that partiality gives us merely moral reasons to have an attitude: “As I see it the partiality challenge is a *moral* challenge. The intuition is that from a moral point of view one ought to give greater weight to the plight of those to whom one stands in personal relations than to the plight of strangers” (Olson 2009: 373–74). We morally ought to have different attitudes towards our loved ones than towards strangers, but this is not to say, as Olson states, that these different attitudes are fitting (Olson 2009: 374).¹¹ Applied to blame, Olson would say that it is not fitting to blame persons of equal blameworthiness differently, but sometimes we morally ought to do so due to partial relationships. Similarly, proponents of (BB) in the blame literature could appeal to *standing to blame* to explain the phenomenon. It is commonly held that standing bears not on the fittingness but on the all-things-considered appropriateness of blame, and that a lack of standing can make fitting blame morally objectionable and all-things-considered inappropriate. So, one could argue that it is not fitting to blame

¹⁰Note that moral or prudential reasons don't generally have to be WKRs. As D'Arms and Jacobson remark, if the emotion is moral or prudential “in shape” (i.e. is concerned with moral or prudential considerations), moral or prudential facts concerning the emotion's object are relevant to its fittingness. For instance, the fact that the mouse cannot hurt you is a prudential consideration that is relevant for whether fear toward it is fitting (since fear is, at least partly, concerned with one's interests). But one cannot infer from the fact that having an attitude would be morally or prudentially wrong, that it is not fitting (D'Arms and Jacobson 2000: 87–88).

¹¹Olson's solution is more complex than I suggest here. He holds that, since the partiality problem is a special kind of WKR problem, solving the WKR problem also solves the partiality problem. To do so, Olson proposes to understand fittingness as not analyzable in terms of reasons but as normatively basic. Accordingly, he aims to solve the WKR problem by “distinguishing between the moral ought and the ought of fittingness” (Olson 2009: 377) or “between an attitude being correct [i.e. fitting] and being such that we ought to have it” (373). So far so good. However, Olson seems to not only see fittingness as basic but also as *fundamental*, i.e. all other normative notions, including the *moral ought*, are analyzable in terms of fittingness. “[O]ne ought morally to have some attitude or perform some action ... if and only if one would be a fitting object of moral disapproval on account of failure to have that attitude or perform that action” (374). But if the moral ought is to be analyzed in terms of fitting responses, then it's not clear how this proposal is supposed to solve the partiality problem since we then end up again with conflicting statements: at the same time, it is fitting and not fitting to have differing attitudes toward friends and strangers. (Olson would have to tell a story of how there is no real conflict—for example, by distinguishing different kinds of fittingness or by distinguishing pro-tanto and all-things-considered fittingness. These distinctions would, however, also be possible without assuming that fittingness is fundamental.) It is hard to see how viewing fittingness as fundamental should help with solving the partiality problem.

persons of equal blameworthiness differently, but sometimes personal relationships affect standing to blame.

In the following, I show why premise (ii), at least in the case of blaming attitudes, is problematic and should be rejected.

4 Rejecting the WKR Solution

I first show why the claim that partial relationships only give us WKRs for blame is doubtful, then I argue that it's plausible that they give us RKR for blame. The following arguments are not meant to be decisive against the WKR solution, but they cast considerable doubt on it, thus we should look for a solution that accepts the claim that different blaming responses may be fitting due to partial relationships and still achieves to solve the partiality problem.

4.1 Why Partial Relationships don't Give us WKRs for Blame

Premise (ii) of the WKR solution can be understood as saying that partial relationships give us only prudential and/or moral reasons for blame. However, both options are implausible.¹² It is implausible that partial relationships give us prudential reasons (understood as reasons that pertain to consequences) for blame. Thinking something like "I should blame the wrongdoer who harmed my friend because this is beneficial for my friendship with her" would be quite odd and doesn't correspond to what it's like to be friends. I should immediately feel indignation when I learn that my friend was wronged. If I consider whether blaming will be beneficial for me or the friendship, we don't really seem to be friends at all.¹³ And it is generally doubtful whether there can even be good prudential reasons for blame. There is something deeply troubling about blaming someone because of potential beneficial effects, such as deterring the agent (and bystanders) from future wrongdoing.¹⁴ We might, however, refrain from blaming if it would have bad consequences. For example, if it would have bad effects on the blamer's mental health (because blaming is often exhausting), then this is a good (wrong kind of) reason to refrain from blaming. However, prudential considerations are no good reasons to *take up* a blaming attitude.

Thus, it's implausible that relationships give us prudential reasons for blame. Rather, the proponent of the WKR solution should hold that premise (ii) says that partial relationships give us moral reasons for blame. However, understanding premise (ii) like this is also problematic.

¹² I argue that it's implausible that partial relationships give us moral or prudential WKRs *for blame*. This leaves open that they can give us moral or prudential WKRs for other attitudes or actions.

¹³ This is not to say that there couldn't be any friendship-based reasons to blame, but that it is implausible considering the nature of friendship that there are *prudential* reasons to blame.

¹⁴ Simple consequentialist accounts of blame, according to which blame aims at shaping the agent's future behavior (Schlick 1939; Smart 1961), are now widely rejected. The "new-instrumentalism" put forth prominently by Vargas (2013) complicates this point. However, even Vargas agrees that our proximate reasons to blame are backward-looking.

First, since blame has a special gravity and can have detrimental effects, we think it's important to "get blame right". Just like punishment should fit the crime, one could argue, blame should only track objective features like the seriousness of the wrongdoing and the degree of responsibility of the agent. Blaming a person differently than a stranger, who committed the same wrongdoing, because one stands in a relationship with the victim, seems *prima facie* *morally* problematic. So, at least initially, it doesn't seem plausible to say that from the moral point of view we should have different blaming responses due to relationships. Quite the opposite, it seems morally dubious to do so. One could, of course, object that this potential conflict between moral and partiality reasons doesn't have to mean that partiality reasons are not moral reasons since the conflict could be *intra-moral*. But initial skepticism seems justified.¹⁵

Second, there is the issue that sometimes moral reasons are actually RKR for attitudes, namely when the attitude is moral in nature. Blaming emotions like resentment are *moral* emotions in the sense that they are connected to moral concepts; they are usually seen as being about a moral agent having violated a moral obligation (e.g. Wallace 1996). Thus, moral reasons are RKR for blaming emotions if they refer to the moral concepts that these emotions are essentially concerned with (such as responsibility, obligation, wrongness). Of course, there can be moral reasons for and against blaming attitudes that are WKR. The harm that blame may cause the blamee is a moral WKR to refrain from blaming, even though blame would be fitting. As D'Arms and Jacobson (2000) convincingly argue, it would, in general, be a fallacy to infer from the moral wrongness of an attitude that the attitude is unfitting. However, D'Arms and Jacobson admit that sometimes moral considerations are in fact fittingness reasons for emotions, namely when the emotion has a "moral shape", i.e. is connected to moral concepts, as is the case with blaming emotions.¹⁶

Lastly, the WKR proponent could say that we should interpret premise (ii) as saying that partial relationships influence *standing to blame*. If someone lacks standing, their blame is commonly seen as *morally* objectionable, despite maybe being fitting (e.g. Seim 2019). The thought is that considerations that concern standing are not related to fittingness but to moral appropriateness, and if partial relationships merely influence standing, partial relationships would thus merely give us WKRs for blame. How could partial relationships influence standing? One factor that is often thought to undermine standing is if blame would be *meddlesome*. Sometimes it is "none of our business" to blame a wrongdoer even though she is blameworthy. Third-party

¹⁵ I am not taking a position here on the question of whether it is morally appropriate to react with different blaming responses, but I am merely noting against the WKR proponent that it is, without further argument, problematic to claim that partial relationships give us moral reasons to blame persons differently. I come back to this point at the end of Sect. 6.

¹⁶ Furthermore, in the debate on moral encroachment on beliefs, moral reasons are sometimes seen as RKR for adopting higher epistemic standards or for withholding belief. As Fritz argues, they are RKR because the epistemic standards that must be fulfilled for belief to be justified are fixed by practical and *moral* considerations and because moral reasons seem to *directly* facilitate withheld belief which speaks for them being fittingness reasons (contrary to, for example, bribes to have certain beliefs which only *indirectly* influence beliefs) (Fritz 2020: 3056–59). If we accept that moral reasons are sometimes RKR for (withholding) belief, then this supports that moral reasons can also be RKR for other attitudes like blaming emotions.

blame can be meddlesome if the wrong is “committed within special relationships, such as romantic partnerships, familial bonds, and friendship” (Radzik 2011: 593). Meddlesome blame is often seen as morally problematic because it violates norms of privacy, intimacy, or agency (e.g. Radzik 2011; Seim 2019; Smith 2007; Snedegar 2025). So, accordingly, the WKR proponent could say that personal relationships merely influence whether someone has standing to blame but not blame’s fittingness.

I think this is the most promising version of the WKR response. However, I doubt that appeals to standing can do all the work needed to explain the phenomenon at hand. There are the following three problems with this solution: (i) There are cases where the wrong does not happen *within* a special relationship but where different blaming responses still seem fitting (like in *Wronged Partner*). So, we cannot appeal to a relationship-specific norm being violated (which, in cases where the wrong happens within a relationship, can explain why third parties may lack standing).¹⁷ (ii) Furthermore, the majority view in the literature is that one either has standing or one lacks it – standing does not come in degrees.¹⁸ So, it’s unclear how appeals to standing could account for quantitative differences of blame. In *Wronged Partner*, bystanders also have standing to blame, but for Anne a stronger kind of blaming response seems fitting. (iii) Finally, many reasonably argue that the Business (or Non-meddling) Condition for standing only pertains to *expressed* blame, not private blame (Johansson Werkmäster and Werkmäster 2025b: 34; Todd 2019: 348). There cannot be any meddlesome interference with norms of privacy, intimacy, or agency when blame is not expressed. But even if Anne kept her blame private, it still seems that a different blaming response is called for from her when her partner is wronged than when a stranger is wronged—it’s not merely appropriate that she expresses her blame in one case but not the other. For these reasons, I think standing cannot sufficiently capture the phenomenon.

In sum, we have good reasons to reject the premise (ii) that partial relationships only give us WKRs for blaming attitudes. It’s not plausible that they give us prudential reasons for blame, and it’s controversial that they give us moral reasons for blame—and even if they would give us moral reasons, that doesn’t automatically mean these are WKRs for blame since sometimes moral reasons are actually fittingness reasons. Furthermore, even though sometimes relationships can give us standing to blame where it would otherwise be morally objectionable, standing cannot explain all cases where different blaming responses seem fitting due to relationships.

One could object at this point that this doesn’t yet show that the original premise (ii) – partial relationships give us only WKRs for blaming attitudes—is false since

¹⁷ The view that blame from a third party is meddlesome if the wrong constitutes a violation of a relationship-specific norm is proposed by Seim (2019). Note, however, that it’s not uncontroversial that relationship-norm violations are required for relationships to impact standing.

¹⁸ Standing is commonly viewed as a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, such as the Non-Hypocrisy Condition, the Non-Complicity Condition, and the Business Condition (e.g. Bell 2013; Fritz and Miller 2018; Seim 2019; Todd 2019). If the would-be blamer does not fulfill one or more of the conditions, they lack standing. To my knowledge, the only account challenging this binary view of standing is Upadhyaya (forthcoming). And even if standing itself could be a matter of degree, then this is still different from saying that certain agents have standing to *blame differently*.

there could be a third category of WKR besides moral and prudential reasons. Thus, the WKR solution cannot yet be rejected.

This objection is, in my opinion, correct. By showing that it's implausible that the two paradigmatic kinds of WKRs apply in partiality cases of blame, I didn't yet show that it couldn't be the case that there are other WKRs that do so. But we have cast considerable doubt on premise (ii). What would further strengthen the argument would be if there were reasons to believe the opposite claim "partial relationships give us RKR for blame". This would shift the onus back to the WKR proponent. So, let's look at this possibility.

4.2 Why Partial Relationships Might Give us RKR for Blame

There are two considerations, independent of one's precise account of the nature of blame, that speak in favor of relationships providing RKR for blame.

One reason to think that partial relationships give us RKR (not only for blaming attitudes but for other (dis)favoring attitudes generally) is that partiality cases seem very different from the paradigmatic WKR cases. Namely, it doesn't seem counterintuitive to say that your relationship makes your blaming attitude *fitting*—contrary to WKR cases (Howard 2023).¹⁹ In the paradigmatic WKR cases, the agent has reasons for having an attitude toward an object which doesn't by itself merit the attitude. The threat of the evil demon gives you a reason to admire him, but this doesn't make him admirable—this is not a reason in virtue of which the demon *merits* your admiration. In contrast, we do not have this clear intuition in the case of reasons given by relationships. That the person who was wronged is your friend seems to merit your indignation, or rather your stronger indignation compared to if the victim is a stranger.

One can object that this is too quick: Of course—so the objection goes—it doesn't seem counterintuitive, as in paradigmatic WKR cases, that you fittingly react with a stronger blaming reaction toward the person who wronged your friend since the person is in fact *blameworthy*. After all, whether or not you stand in a relationship with the victim, blame is the fitting response. (We wouldn't praise the person!) In contrast, the demon is not admirable, but you have a WKR to admire him *despite* his being despicable. Thus, it's easy to say that partiality cases seem very different from WKR cases, but this doesn't yet mean that relationships provide RKR for blaming attitudes. What would be a stronger argument is if there were plausible cases where you as a friend refrain from blaming a blameworthy wrongdoer or even have an attitude that is opposed to blame, *and* we still have the intuition that your attitude is fitting. Then it would be clear that partiality cases are not like WKR cases.

Are there cases like this? Maybe. Imagine this time that your friend is the wrongdoer. We could plausibly think of a situation where it wouldn't seem fitting that you would blame her (despite her being blameworthy), but where the fact that you are her friend would make it seem fitting that you are tolerant toward her, be understanding, offer your help or advice, and so on. These kinds of positive attitudes reflect

¹⁹ Howard argues against Olson's thesis that the partiality problem is an instance of the WKR problem by noting that, contrary to the threat of the demon, "the fact that My Pal is my pal can seem to merit my preferring that they're rescued."

your goodwill toward your friend and thus are opposed to the paradigmatic blaming responses of resentment or indignation that, according to Strawson, tend to come with a “partial withdrawal of goodwill” (Strawson 1962 [2013]: 80) and so sometimes seem to have a “retributive flavor”.²⁰ In WKR cases, your attitude (taken by itself) is a mistake—it would be incorrect to admire the despicable demon; there is a mismatch between your attitude and the properties of the object. On the other hand, it doesn’t seem like the same obvious mistake to not blame your blameworthy friend or even to show understanding or offer her your help. If this is on the right track, it’s implausible that partiality cases are structurally the same as WKR cases. Contrary to WKR cases, it’s not counterintuitive to say that the fact that you are the victim’s or the wrongdoer’s friend makes your different (non-)blaming attitude fitting.²¹

Second, reasons given by partial relationships seem to impact blaming attitudes not indirectly but *directly*, which speaks for them being RKR (according to the *Impact* criterion). You should immediately feel indignation when you hear that your friend was wronged in virtue of being their friend. Being partial towards someone does not only involve taking facts relevant to the person as reasons for action but also feeling certain emotions. According to Kolodny, partiality involves “emotional vulnerability”, which means being disposed to have a range of emotions depending on how the person one is partial toward fares, and believing that one has (noninstrumental) reason in light of the valuable relationship for being so disposed (Kolodny 2003: 150–152). Similarly, it is widely held that having certain emotions and attitudes is an essential feature of friendship. For example, Helm states that “friends must be moved by what happens to their friends to feel the appropriate emotions: joy in their friends’ successes, frustration and disappointment in their friends’ failures” (Helm 2023). This suggests that partial relationships give us reasons that *directly* influence emotional responses, which is characteristic of RKR.^{22,23}

²⁰ For example, Watson (2013: 110) interprets Strawson as saying that reactive attitudes have a retributivist aspect. Strawson says: “So the preparedness to acquiesce in that infliction of suffering on the offender which is an essential part of punishment is all of a piece with this whole range of attitudes of which I have been speaking” (Strawson 1962 [2013]: 80). In the last decades, others have argued for a “civilized” (McGeer 2013) understanding of blame, i.e. as not being retributivist but as rather, for example, being about a relationship modification (Scanlon 2008) or as having a communicative aim (McKenna 2012). Recently, however, there has been some pushback from the retributivist side (MirzaeiGhazi 2024).

²¹ As an anonymous reviewer suggested, it may be that the positive attitudes of goodwill and the blaming attitudes are reactions to *different aspects* of the same event, and not incompatible; instead, the positive attitudes might occlude the blaming attitudes. I think this is plausible; however, we’d have to see whether the strategy works in all cases. For example, there might be cases where understanding and tolerance are the fitting responses to a friend’s wrongdoing but understanding and tolerance seem incompatible with, at the same time, blaming her for having acted that way.

²² One could object that friends are concerned with the other’s welfare, but that blame is a response to *wrongdoing* and a wrong can occur without reducing welfare. However, Kolodny notices that in a relationship one is not only emotionally vulnerable to the other’s welfare, but also to the other “in their own right”. He illustrates this—fittingly—with an example where the relationship impacts blame: “A can also be emotionally vulnerable to B and r [the valuable relationship] in their own right, however, and not simply to how B and r fare. For example, A may feel indignant when B’s standing or merit is questioned, even though such questioning may not mean that B fares poorly” (Kolodny 2003: 152). On this view, partiality involves a general emotional vulnerability toward the person (not only toward their welfare).

²³ Even if this isn’t sufficient to show that they are RKR, at least reasons given by partial relationships do not have one typical feature of WKRs.

In sum, there are good reasons to doubt the WKR solution to the partiality problem for blame. Not only is it implausible that relationships give us WKR for blame, but there are reasons to think that they may give us RKR for blame. If we accept that different blaming responses may indeed be fitting due to relationships, there is still another solution to the partiality problem that doesn't require rejecting (BB). I develop this solution in the next two sections.

5 The AN/AR Solution: Agent-Relative and Agent-Neutral Fittingness of Blame

In the literature on the general partiality problem for the FA analysis of value it is sometimes suggested to solve it by distinguishing agent-relative and agent-neutral value and the pro-attitudes that are fitting for a neutral agent and those that are fitting for a particular agent.²⁴ There are then two biconditionals, one agent-neutral and one agent-relative:

(FA–AN) X is agent-neutrally valuable if and only if it is fitting for a neutral agent to value it.

(FA–AR) X is valuable relative to agent Y if and only if it is fitting for Y to value it.

Note that only the agential component (“for a neutral agent” and “for Y” instead of “for all agents”) of the biconditional is modified while the attitudinal component (the pro-attitude of valuing) remains unchanged.

However, the agent-neutral/-relative distinction (AN/AR distinction) is not straightforward. When discussing the distinction in relation to value or reasons, some authors complain that we lack any pre-theoretical understanding of it and should be skeptical of the AN/AR distinction in general.²⁵ Without aiming to satisfy the skeptics, let me gloss the distinction the following way, namely in terms of perspectives from which the valuable object in question is being assessed. This is how Bader draws the distinction: The agent-neutral perspective is one from which all particularities of one's perspective are abstracted (Bader 2016: 43). (The agent-neutral perspective is not the same as the perspective of an ideal observer or a god-like perspective. As Bader puts the point, “rather than adopting a view from nowhere, one needs to adopt the viewpoint of no one in particular” (Bader 2022: 262).) This results in the assessment of the value being invariant across perspectives. A neutral agent is someone who does not stand in particular relations to anybody or anything. Everybody can take on the agent-neutral perspective when abstracting from the particularities of

²⁴For a similar proposal, see Lemos (2011). For a discussion, see Olson (2009: 369) and Zimmerman (2011: 456–57). For a recent proposal distinguishing between what is agent-neutrally and idiosyncratically fitting, see McHugh and Way (2022). It's natural to apply the agent-relative/-neutral distinction, since partiality is commonly seen as generating agent-relative reasons (Keller 2013: 16–19).

²⁵For skepticism about agent-relative *value*, see Schroeder (2007). For a critique of agent-relative/-neutral *reasons*, see Rønnow-Rasmussen (2009).

one's perspective. In contrast, the agent-relative perspective is the perspective of the particular agent, which includes the relation in which the agent stands to the value that is being assessed (Bader 2016: 43–44). Agent-relative value is then perspective-dependent—it results from centering the evaluation of agent-neutral value on a particular perspective.

If we accept the gloss of the AN/AR distinction in terms of perspectives, it is more accurate to replace “fitting for a neutral agent”/“for agent Y” with “fitting from the agent-neutral perspective”/“the perspective of agent Y” in the biconditionals. We would then have the following agent-neutral and agent-relative versions of (BB):

(BB–AN) Agent X is *agent-neutrally* blameworthy to degree n for A if and only if it is fitting *from the agent-neutral perspective* to blame X to degree n for A.

(BB–AR) Agent X is blameworthy to degree n *relative to agent Y* for A if and only if it is fitting *from Y's perspective* to blame X to degree n for A.

The distinction between agent-neutral and agent-relative blameworthiness has the right structure to solve the partiality problem. As a reminder, this is the partiality problem for blame:

Partiality problem (blame): (1) two persons can be of equal blameworthiness, (2) two persons are of equal blameworthiness if and only if it is fitting (for all agents) to blame them equally, (3) it is sometimes fitting (for certain agents) to blame persons of equal blameworthiness differently due to personal relationships.

If we apply the agent-relative/-neutral distinction to the partiality problem, we get the following – the *AN/AR solution*:

Partiality problem (blame – AN/AR): (1) two persons can be of equal *agent-neutral* blameworthiness, (2) two persons are of equal *agent-neutral* blameworthiness if and only if it is fitting *from the agent-neutral perspective* to blame them equally, (3) it is sometimes fitting *from the perspective of particular agents* to blame persons of equal *agent-neutral* blameworthiness differently due to personal relationships.

And (3) is the case if the persons differ in *agent-relative* blameworthiness. Thus, there is no contradiction anymore between (1), (2), and (3), and the partiality problem is solved.

The AN/AR solution to the partiality problem sounds promising, but it has two problems:

Problem 1: The AN/AR solution does not modify the attitudinal component of (BB). This seems problematic because this would mean that it is always the same kind of blaming attitude that is agent-neutrally and/or agent-relatively fitting. We would then only have agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons for and against *the very same attitude*. But this isn't sufficient to capture the phenomenon. Depending

on the perspective of the blamer, sometimes qualitatively different blaming attitudes seem fitting. (Plausibly, even if it would be fitting for all agents to blame a wrongdoer, it is sometimes not fitting to blame her in the same way.)

Problem 2: There is the problem that we have the intuition that sometimes we want to say that a person is in fact agent-neutrally blameworthy even though it is *not fitting from the agent-neutral perspective* to blame her. Sometimes it doesn't seem fitting for anyone to blame, or it seems fitting only for persons standing in a partial relationship with the wrongdoer or the victim to blame. But still, *intuitively*, we want to say that the agent is blameworthy, period, not just blameworthy relative to certain agents.²⁶ This would speak against (BB–AN). An example is the case of self-directed blaming attitudes. There seems to be an asymmetry between self-blame and other-blame; sometimes it is merely fitting for the wrongdoer to blame herself but not for other persons (Nelkin 2022).²⁷ Another example where the wrongdoer cannot be fittingly blamed by a neutral agent, yet we would still like to say that she is blameworthy, is the following:

Self-destruction: Chloé continually endangers her career by drinking too much. Dani, a close friend of hers, confronts her, harshly criticizing her behavior. Meanwhile, it is doubtful that strangers could fittingly blame Chloé since she merely wrongs herself.²⁸

The intuition that we want to say that Chloé is blameworthy, period, is especially pressing when we acknowledge that everyone can judge that she is blameworthy—everyone can judge that she is responsible for her actions and that she wrongs herself by acting this way. (The same holds in cases of self-directed blame where everyone can judge the wrongdoer to be blameworthy while only she can fittingly blame herself.) However, if we think that we need to be able to say that Chloé is agent-neutrally blameworthy, then this means that we have to reject the AN/AR solution and need to modify (BB) in some other way. The only biconditional we can keep without problems would be the following:

(BB – general): X is blameworthy to *some* degree if and only if it is fitting for *some* agent (i.e. from *some* perspective) to blame X to *some* degree.

²⁶ In the next section, I argue that the intuition actually is not that an agent can be agent-neutrally blameworthy without it being fitting for anyone to blame her but that an agent can be *culpable* without it being fitting for anyone to blame her.

²⁷ Nota bene, Nelkin focuses more on cases where “*higher* degrees of self-blame [are] called for compared to other-blame” (Nelkin 2022: 110) rather than cases where *only* self-blame is fitting.

²⁸ One could object, again, that this case is one of standing to blame and standing has nothing to do with fittingness. However, it is not clear that fittingness doesn't include standing (Achs 2024). Also, there are authors, especially Bell, who are skeptical about standing to blame but who still argue that blame is positional in the sense that “in some cases, the fittingness of blame depends on the relationship between the subject and the target” (Bell 2013: 278). Achs and Bell would classify *Self-destruction* as a case about fitting blame.

But this biconditional is quite trivial. (BB – general) is significantly less informative than the original (BB), and it lacks any normative relevance.²⁹ While the original biconditional told us what attitudes in what degree an object called for from everyone, (BB – general) just says that a person is blameworthy to *some* degree if it is fitting for *some* agent to blame her to *some* degree. This would then leave us with too much leeway in our attitudes. The biconditional loses its normative pull. This cost seems too high.

One way to solve both problems for the AN/AR solution is to take a closer look at how the terms “blame” and “blameworthiness” are used in these examples and then to specify the attitudinal component of (BB) (in addition to modifying the agential component). This solution is proposed in the next section.

6 AN/AR Solution: Different Ways to be Blameworthy

I take the two problems for the AN/AR solution in reverse order, starting with Problem 2—the problem that we have the intuition that we would like to say that someone can be agent-neutrally blameworthy without it being fitting for a neutral agent (i.e. from the agent-neutral perspective) to blame her. We can explain away this intuition and solve Problem 2 by recognizing an ambiguity in the usage of the term “blameworthiness” and making the coarse-grained distinction between culpability and blameworthiness. Problem 1 can be solved by looking at blameworthiness in more detail and making the more fine-grained distinction between three categories of blaming attitudes—resentment, indignation, and guilt—and by examining whether they are agent-relative or agent-neutral attitudes.

6.1 Being Culpable and Being Blameworthy

Traditionally, there are two ways to start an analysis of responsibility and blameworthiness. Either one starts by focusing on the wrongdoer and asks how she is related to her action, or one starts from the stance of the blamer and asks whether it would be fitting to have a blaming attitude toward the agent. On the first approach, *being blameworthy just is being morally responsible for a wrong action*, and whether someone is morally responsible for an action is independent of there being someone who could fittingly *hold* the person responsible by having a blaming attitude. Instead, being responsible means fulfilling certain control and epistemic conditions. So, strictly speaking, this should *not* be called “blameworthiness” if we think that *being blameworthy is being worthy of the attitude of blame*. Rather being responsible for a wrong action is necessary for, and what grounds, being worthy of the attitude of blame. I will use “*culpability*” for blameworthiness in the sense of being responsible

²⁹The following similar biconditional is proposed by Achs and Na’aman (2023: 2538) for evaluative properties in general: “An object has an evaluative property of type P, to *some* degree, in *some* tone, relative to *some* agent, at *some* time if and only if a valuing response of type P, to *some* degree, in *some* tone, by *some* agent, at *some* time, is fitting.” Besides the problem of normative irrelevance, this biconditional is also in tension with the FA analysis since it allows there to be facts that bear on fittingness without bearing on whether the object has an evaluative property (Achs and Na’aman 2023: 2542).

for a wrong action in a way that can serve as a basis for being fittingly blamed. I thereby follow Smith, who distinguishes “being responsible” and “being appropriately held responsible” and argues that “judgments of culpability are conceptually prior to both blaming attitudes and expressions of blame, in the sense that the latter entail but are not entailed by the former” (Smith 2007: 467). Smith understands being responsible for an action as the action being attributable to the agent “in a way that is required for it to be a basis for moral appraisal”. Different theories of responsibility give different answers to the question under which conditions an action can be attributed to an agent in this way—one can just plug in one’s favorite.

An agent can be culpable without it being fitting for anyone to blame her since being culpable is merely necessary for being blameworthy. The culpability understanding of “blameworthiness” underlies the intuition that we want to say that agents like Chloé, who can only be fittingly blamed by persons standing in close relationships with them, or agents who cannot fittingly be blamed by anyone other than themselves, are nevertheless blameworthy. They are blameworthy in the *culpability* sense since their actions are attributable to them and their actions are wrong. This, however, doesn’t mean that they are also blameworthy in the relevant sense of “blameworthy” for (BB), which refers to the attitude of blame. So, the intuition that agents like Chloé are agent-neutrally blameworthy is false. The intuition should be understood in the sense that these agents are *culpable* and that everyone can judge that they are culpable. However, even though they are not agent-neutrally blameworthy, they can be agent-relatively blameworthy. (Chloé can be blameworthy relative to Dani.) Thus, contrary to initial appearance, cases like these are not counterexamples to the AN/AR solution. Problem 2 is solved.

6.2 Being Agent-Relatively and Agent-Neutrally Blameworthy in a Strawsonian Sense

What is still unclear, however, are the notions of agent-relative and agent-neutral *blameworthiness*. If the attitude of blame is something different than a mere judgment of culpability, what is it? And can we make sense of saying that this attitude can be agent-relative and agent-neutral? This would be necessary to make the AN/AR solution plausible. By taking a closer look at this attitudinal component of (BB), Problem 1 can also be solved. We will see that to solve the partiality problem, it is not sufficient to merely modify the agential component of (BB), but that different blaming attitudes are fitting depending on the blamer.

6.2.1 The Blamer as the Victim, Bystander, or Wrongdoer

Blame in a Strawsonian sense is understood in terms of reactive attitudes, and what kind of reactive attitude is fitting depends on the position of the blamer, namely whether the blamer is the victim, a bystander, or the wrongdoer herself. On a Strawsonian view, there is not *one* blaming attitude, but there are *three* distinct categories. The paradigmatic example of what Strawson calls the “personal” reactive attitudes is resentment, which is a response to the violation of the demand for goodwill toward oneself, i.e. the blamer is (typically) the victim of the wrongdoing. The “impersonal”

or “vicarious” analogue to resentment is indignation, which is a response to others’ violation of the demand for goodwill toward other persons, i.e. the blamer is (typically) a bystander.³⁰ And guilt is the paradigmatic self-directed blaming attitude, which is a response to the violation of demands on oneself for others, i.e. the wrongdoer blames herself.

Thus, toward the same wrongdoer, it is fitting to respond with different reactive attitudes depending on one’s position as either the victim, a bystander, or the wrongdoer herself. So, “blame” in (BB)—the attitudinal component—should be understood as a placeholder for the attitudes of resentment, indignation, or guilt.

6.2.2 Agent-Relative and Agent-Neutral Blameworthiness

This, however, doesn’t yet help us much to solve the partiality problem. Even though blaming is always positional in the sense that it is done from the perspective of either the wrongdoer, victim, or bystander, and is, in this sense, always relative to the blaming agent’s perspective, this is not the sense of agent-relativity that is relevant for the partiality problem. The partiality problem states that different blaming attitudes are fitting for certain agents *due to personal relationships*. The question is whether we can draw the AN/AR distinction on the level of the reactive attitudes, and have partial and impartial versions of them, where the partial ones are the responses when personal relationships are involved. On a Strawsonian view, it looks like resentment and guilt are always agent-relative, and can be partial or impartial, while indignation is agent-neutral and impartial:

Let’s start with resentment. Resentment is a personal reactive attitude and the response to the violation of the demand for goodwill toward oneself. The demand for goodwill, however, differs depending on the nature of the relationship between the parties. According to Strawson, reactive attitudes are a constitutive part of normal human relationships—they reflect that we deeply care about others’ intentions and attitudes toward us. This is not merely the case for the relationship we have with others qua members of the moral community, but Strawson makes clear that the reactive attitudes also essentially characterize personal relationships and that different relationships demand *different forms of goodwill*.

We should think of the many different kinds of relationship which we can have with other people—as sharers of a common interest; as members of the same family; as colleagues; as friends; as lovers; as chance parties to an enormous range of transactions and encounters. Then we should think, in each of these connections in turn, and in others, of the kind of importance we attach to the attitudes and intentions towards us of those who stand in these relationships to us, and of the kinds of reactive attitudes and feelings to which we ourselves are prone. In general, we demand some degree of goodwill or regard on the part of

³⁰ Indignation is only *typically* felt by a bystander and resentment by the victim. Strawson states that “one can feel indignation on one’s own account” (Strawson 1962 [2013]: 74) and it also seems plausible that one can feel resentment, even if, strictly speaking, one isn’t the victim, namely if one’s personal interests are involved.

those who stand in these relationships to us, though the forms we require it to take vary widely in different connections. The range and intensity of our reactive attitudes towards goodwill, its absence or its opposite vary no less widely (Strawson 1962 [2013]: 67).

So, I demand a higher degree of goodwill from my friend, or a different form of goodwill, than from strangers, and whether my friend's actions reflect good or ill will toward me matters to me more than whether the actions of a stranger do so, and the varying "range and intensity" of reactive attitudes reflect this fact.³¹

The fact that the demand for goodwill differs in partial relationships compared to the merely moral relationship we have with anyone, however, implies that resentment cannot be agent-neutral—it is always agent-relative. If a friend wronged you, she violated a different (or stronger) demand than if a stranger performed the same action toward you. Agent-neutral resentment would then misrepresent the facts. If you would abstract from the fact that you stand in a relationship with her, the demand that she violated would have been a different one, and thus a different kind of resentment (a weaker one) would be fitting. But why should this counterfactual have any normative relevance? She in fact violated a stronger demand. Agent-neutral resentment would misrepresent this.³²

For the same reason, guilt is always agent-relative. If I wronged my friend, I violated a stronger demand than if I had done the same action toward a stranger. Trying to abstract from the relationship between me and my friend and taking on an agent-neutral perspective would misrepresent this fact. Thus, guilt and resentment are both agent-relative reactive attitudes—they always already essentially include in which relationship the wrongdoer and the victim stand.

Of course, we can also feel resentment and guilt when there is no personal relationship involved, so when we were wronged by a stranger or we wronged a stranger. So, resentment and guilt are agent-relative (since they take into account *in which* relationship *the blaming agent* stands with the wrongdoer (in the case of resentment) or the victim (in the case of guilt)) and there can be partial and impartial versions—partial resentment and guilt are fitting when *there is* a personal relationship between victim and wrongdoer and impartial resentment and guilt are fitting when *there is no* such relationship.

For the AN/AR solution to work, a plausible notion of agent-neutral blame and agent-neutral blameworthiness are necessary. Indignation seems a suitable candidate. Indignation is the reaction to the ill quality of will of others as manifested toward another. Strawson describes the impersonal reactive attitudes, paradigmatically

³¹ The dependence of blame on personal relationships is not unique to Strawson's account, but others, prominently Scanlon (2008), argue that what blaming response is fitting depends on whether specific relationship-norms were violated.

³² This is not to deny that bystanders can fittingly react with a stronger blaming response toward A wronging A's friend B than toward A wronging a stranger C. Everyone can recognize (from the agent-neutral perspective) that wronging a friend merits more blame than wronging a stranger. However, then the fitting response would be *indignation*, not *resentment*. Resentment is the blaming response of the victim of the wrongdoing. Agent-neutral *resentment* would misrepresent the fact that you, the victim, were wronged by *your* friend and that your friend violated a stronger demand when she wronged *you*.

indignation, as the “sympathetic or vicarious or impersonal or disinterested or generalized analogues” (Strawson 1962 [2013]: 73) to the personal reactive attitudes, paradigmatically resentment. Indignation expresses the “generalized” or “disinterested” demand that all persons, just as fellow members of the moral community, are shown a reasonable degree of goodwill—this is why Strawson speaks of “moral” indignation. Taking on the perspective of a member of the moral community and blaming a wrongdoer from this perspective results then in agent-neutral blame.³³

Thus, we have coherent notions of agent-relative and agent-neutral blameworthiness. Agent-neutral blameworthiness can be understood in terms of it being fitting from the perspective of anyone just qua member of the moral community to be indignant toward the wrongdoer. Agent-relative blameworthiness, on the other hand, can be understood in terms of it being fitting from the perspective of the particular agents to feel resentment or guilt, and agent-relative blame takes into account whether the blamer stands in a partial relationship with the wrongdoer or victim. So, not merely the agential component of (BB) is modified to solve the partiality problem, but the attitudinal component differs depending on the blamer. Depending on the blamer’s perspective, either resentment, guilt, or indignation is fitting, and depending on whether the blamer stands in a partial relationship with the wrongdoer or victim, different forms of the reactive attitudes are fitting. Thus, problem 1 is solved—we can account for the intuition that, even if it would be fitting for anyone to blame the wrongdoer, qualitatively different blaming attitudes are fitting.

We can understand (BB–AN) and (BB–AR) then like this:

(BB – AN’): X is indignation-worthy if and only if it is fitting from the agent-neutral perspective (i.e. the perspective of a member of the moral community) to be indignant toward X.

(BB – AR’): X is resentment-worthy or guilt-worthy relative to Y if and only if it is fitting from Y’s perspective to feel resentment or guilt toward X.³⁴

So, in *Wronged Partner*, it is fitting from the agent-neutral perspective to feel equal indignation toward the two wrongdoers; they are equally agent-neutrally blame-worthy (or, indignation-worthy). But how can we explain Anne’s stronger blaming response? Since she isn’t the victim of the wrongdoing, one could think that indignation is the fitting reactive attitude—but then why does she feel stronger indignation if indignation is agent-neutral? Considering that Strawson describes resentment as

³³ One might wonder whether there can also be a partial version of indignation when our friend wrongs a third party. However, I think we can explain the intuition that a different reaction is fitting in this case by saying that what is fitting is *personal disappointment*, in addition to indignation which is fitting for all members of the moral community. Telech and Katz (2022) argue that reactive disappointment is a form of blame distinct from angry blame like indignation. Reactive disappointment evaluates an agent as failing to live up to a worthwhile standard or ideal, against the background of the disappointed’s normative hope in the disappointee. Applying this, one could say that we hold our friends to higher standards and are then personally let down when they commit a wrongdoing. So, one can still hold that indignation is agent-neutral while at the same time saying that a different response is fitting for us when our friend is the wrongdoer.

³⁴ In the case of guilt, X and Y are the same person.

a *personal* reactive attitude, which takes the particular interests of the agent into account, and indignation as not involving particular interests, but as impersonal, detached, and disinterested, it is plausible that Anne actually feels resentment, not indignation, toward Steve. Anne's personal interests are involved since she stands in a partial relationship with the victim and being partial involves a special concern for the other person. Due to this special concern, Anne fittingly feels resentment when her husband is wronged.

Thus, the AN/AR solution to the partiality problem can capture cases like *Wronged Partner*. The two wrongdoers are of equal agent-neutral blameworthiness. From the agent-neutral perspective it is fitting to blame them equally. However, Steve differs for Anne in agent-relative blameworthiness—from Anne's particular perspective, which takes into account her relationship with the victim and her personal interests, it is fitting to feel resentment toward Steve. (Anne could also feel indignation, and blame qua member of the moral community by abstracting from her personal relationship. Contrary to the previous cases of resentment and guilt, she can take on the agent-neutral perspective without misrepresenting the facts, namely the fact that a moral demand was violated.) Thus, the AN/AR solution can solve the partiality problem for blame.

We can also now see that reasons given by partial relationships satisfy the *Essence* criterion for RKR. Since some of the reactive attitudes, namely resentment and guilt, by their nature take into account in which relationship the blamer stands to the wrongdoer or the victim, partial relationships can pertain to the fittingness of blame.

What implications does the distinction between agent-relative and agent-neutral blameworthiness have? One could wonder whether this ramification is less theoretically attractive than a unified analysis of blameworthiness in terms of fittingness of blame and could risk that the analysis could be fractured even further (for example, in terms of fittingness of blame in a particular situation given particular agents at a particular time). I do not think this is a threat. On a Strawsonian view, there is already not one blaming attitude, but there are three kinds of reactive attitudes. And the reactive attitudes are essentially about in which relationships the parties stand toward each other. So, they naturally divide into agent-relative and agent-neutral ones, with the agent-relative attitudes of resentment and guilt having a partial and impartial version. Other contextual factors (by not being part of the nature of the reactive attitudes) would then not bear on the fittingness of the attitudes but rather on the all-things-considered appropriateness.

Finally, what implications are there regarding the aforementioned problem that different blaming responses toward persons who committed the same wrongdoing seem morally problematic? First, fittingness is merely one condition for all-things-considered appropriateness of blame, i.e. if blame is neither agent-relatively nor agent-neutrally fitting, it is morally objectionable. But fittingness itself does not yet imply that blame is morally appropriate. Second, whether in cases like *Wronged Partner* agent-relatively fitting blame can be morally appropriate, depends on one's view of morality and its relation to partiality. Morality is usually seen as giving us impartial, agent-neutral reasons. But it is also widely accepted that we are sometimes morally permitted or even required to act on agent-relative reasons, since morality would be overly demanding if it would not make room for partiality toward oneself,

one's intimates, or one's projects. To answer whether agent-relatively fitting blame is morally appropriate, one would need an account of how to weigh agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons for blame, which is a task for another day. But showing that blame can be agent-relatively fitting at least opens the door for the possibility that different blaming responses are morally appropriate.

7 Conclusion

In this paper, the partiality problem for blame was discussed and it was argued—in opposition to the WKR response—that different blaming responses toward the same wrongdoer might indeed be fitting due to the partial relationship between the blamer and the wrongdoer or the victim. If we accept this, the partiality problem for blame can be solved by distinguishing between agent-relative and agent-neutral blameworthiness. It was shown how the notions of agent-relative and agent-neutral blameworthiness can be understood when assuming a Strawsonian view of blame in terms of the reactive attitudes of resentment, indignation, and guilt. As a result, we also do not need to reject Strawsonian approaches to blameworthiness even though (BB) in its original form cannot be accepted. Strawsonians must recognize the need to modify (BB) in response to the partiality problem—for example, along the lines of (BB–AN') and (BB–AR')—but they also have the resources to do so and to draw a plausible distinction between agent-relative and agent-neutral blameworthiness within their framework.

Acknowledgements Earlier versions were presented at Université de Fribourg, Lund University, and Université de Neuchâtel. I am grateful to the audiences at these occasions, especially to Simon-Pierre Chevarie-Cossette, Shervin MirzaeiGhazi, Wlodek Rabinowicz, Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen, Paul Russell, Anthony Taylor, and Jakob Werkmäster. I would especially like to thank Ralf Bader and Balder Ask Zaar for their incredibly helpful comments on the manuscript, as well as the two anonymous reviewers whose comments significantly improved the paper.

Funding Open access funding provided by University of Fribourg. This work was supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation, Doc.CH project 'Partiality and Moral Responses' (Grant Number 222600).

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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