WHAT IS COUNTER-PRODUCTIVE ABOUT ANGRY BLAME?

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1. Introduction

Theorists are divided concerning the productivity of angry blame. Some argue that it has tremendous instrumental values or serves crucial social functions.[1] But some argue that it is counterproductive, and we should thereby eliminate, or drastically revise, blame as a kind of moral practice.[2,3] This latter line of reasoning—what I will refer to as the *counterproductivity critique of angry blame*—typically depends on a negative characterization of blame's content or functionality. The characterization could be, for example, that blame conceptually involves a hideous desire for payback,[4] that blame distorts moral judgments, or that blame leads to superficial rather than deep investigation of the relevant subject matter. Friends of angry blame, however, tend to resist these negative characterizations and instead paint the nature and functionality of blame in a brighter light.

In this paper, I raise a new counterproductivity critique of angry blame. Unlike existing critiques, I start from the observation that angry blame serves two *positive* social functions—a function of issuing a moral protest and a function of initiating and facilitating a moral dialogue. However, a tension arises when it comes to jointly achieving the two ends: angry blame achieves its protest function in such a way that the blamer ends up not treating her target as a peer of moral dialogue, which undermines its dialogue function. Angry blame is thus counterproductive not because its functions are necessarily bad when considered separately, but because of a systematic tension in achieving both functional goals simultaneously.

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1. E.g., McGeer (2013), Vargas (2013, 2021), Shoemaker (2018), Cherry (2021), Silva (2021).
2. E.g., Pettigrove (2012), Pettigrove & Tanaka (2014), Pereboom (2014, 2021), Nussbaum (2016), Flanagan (2016, 2021).
3. What is a "practice"? Here is a tentative definition adopted from MacIntyre (2007, 187): a practice is a "coherent and complex form" of "socially established" human conduct that has its internal aims, goals, or norms; both attitudes and actions can constitute a form of human conduct.
4. Some philosophers have appealed to a similar reason in arguing that angry blame is intrinsically bad (e.g., Holmgren 2014; Paytas 2022).

The plan is as follows. Section 2 offers a more precise definition of the meaning of counterproductivity. Section 3 describes the existing counterproductivity critiques of angry blame and subsequently presents a dilemma showing why many remain unpersuaded. Section 4 then raises a new counterproductivity critique of angry blame. Section 5 discusses and replies to several possible objections to my critique. Section 6 concludes.

2. Defining the Counterproductivity of Angry Blame

I endorse an ecumenical assumption regarding the nature of angry blame: it includes those instances of blame constituted by either an angry emotion or its outward manifestation; the paradigmatic examples thus include resentment, indignation, and their outward manifestations. I do not commit to the stronger claim that blame must always include anger. There could be a separate category of dispassionate blame, but that is not the focus of the current project. I also do not commit to any claim about the explanatory priority between private and public blame. Both unexpressed resentment and expressed resentment, for example, count as angry blame, and we need not take a stand on which is more basic than the other.

What does it mean, then, to claim that angry blame is *counterproductive*? Counterproductivity should be distinguished from harmfulness and inefficacy. A practice might not be very efficient in bringing about a desirable effect, or might have negative personal and social consequences, without being counterproductive. As a first pass, it seems that a harmful or inefficient practice only becomes counterproductive when the harm or inefficacy somehow *counts against the aim of the practice itself*:

> **Counterproductivity (First Pass)**. A practice is counterproductive just in case it leads to a negative consequence detrimental to the very aim of the practice itself.

For example, pulling all-nighters before exams are counterproductive. This is not just because pulling an all-nighter physically harms the student. More importantly, it makes the student too exhausted to perform well in the exam, thus counting against the very reason why she pulls an all-nighter in the first place—to get a better score. Similarly, the claim that angry blame is counterproductive implies both that it is potentially harmful or inefficient, and that these results count against why we blame in the first place.

Three further modifications are required. First, we need to disambiguate between the aim of a practice *type* and the aim of a practice *token*. These often go together but can also come apart. One way to explain this distinction involves distinguishing between the *functions* of a practice-type and the *intentional purposes* of the person engaging in a practice-token. Here is then a more accurate way of stating the earlier claim that a practice tends to count against its own aim: the *tokens* of a practice tend to be detrimental to the aim, or function, of the *practice-type* itself.

Second, we have considered a type of practice in isolation from other practices, but in reality they can be intimately related to each other. Specifically, a practice often makes sense only in reference to a *broader system* that it is an integral part of. For example, it would be a non-starter to consider the aim and significance of the Christian ritual of baptism without considering how baptism figures into the broader practice of Christianity. Importantly, sometimes a practice-type can be counterproductive as long as its tokens tend to be detrimental to the aim of the broader system that this practice-type is an integral part of. The earlier definition of counterproductivity should be modified to take into account this possibility.

Third, the earlier characterization refers of *the* aim of a practice, which implicitly assumes that a practice-type can only have one general aim. But a practice-type may very well have multiple aims or functions that cannot be easily reduced to each other. With these three amendments in mind, I propose the following definition of counterproductivity:

Counterproductivity. A practice-type X is counterproductive just in case its tokens tend to lead to a negative consequence that is detrimental to the fulfillment of either (i) one or more aims/functions of the practice-type X or (ii) one or more aims/functions of the broader practice that X is an integral part of.

Defining counterproductivity this way has two important implications. First, it distinguishes between counterproductivity on one hand, and mere harmfulness or inefficacy on the other. Second, it clearly indicates the extent to which blame's counterproductivity is not merely an empirical matter. Whether blame systematically leads to certain negative consequences is indeed subject to direct empirical investigation. But this is only part of the problem. Fully addressing the counterproductivity debate also requires asking what aims or functions blame has, what broader system it is an integral part of—both of which are, in a large part, theoretical questions that require substantial philosophical work.

3. Existing Versions of the Counterproductivity Critique

All existing counterproductivity critiques of angry blame start from a negative characterization of its content or functionality. This section will summarize their main arguments and subsequently present a dilemma that shows why many remain unpersuaded. My aim is not to offer knock-down objections to the existing critiques, but to demonstrate a dialectical difficulty common in them due to their shared argumentative strategy. Basically, two possible kinds of replies—what I will refer to as the *accidentality reply* and the *disassociation reply*—remain available to opponents of these critiques. This makes it extremely difficult, though not impossible, to convince someone that neither reply works. It is thus worth considering a different version of the counterproductivity critique, which I aim to establish in Section 4.

One form of the counterproductivity critique is based on claims about blame's *negative content*. Nussbaum contends that angry blame

conceptually involves a desire for payback or retribution (2016, 23) or a desire to down-rank the wrongdoer's relative social standing (2016, 28). Both desires lead to negative consequences. A central aim of blaming is to help the victim, but focusing on getting back at the wrongdoer does not really help alleviate the victim's suffering. It is not a way of solving the victim's problem, but rather a way of "cycling it round and round" (Nussbaum 2016, 109). Nussbaum concludes that "following the lead of anger and its promise of self-respect is usually counterproductive" (2016, 107).[5] Pereboom (2014, 2021) also presents a counterproductivity critique based on angry blame's negative content. He contends that angry blame presupposes *basic desert*.[6] Because Pereboom denies that wrongdoers basically deserve adverse treatment, he takes the basic desert presupposition to be a negative feature of the cognitive or representational content of angry blame (2021, 34–35). He therefore sees angry blame as having a strong tendency to cause widespread *undeserved harm*, thus counting against the aims of the practice itself.[7]

Another form of the counterproductivity critique is based on observations about angry blame's negative functionality rather than content. Pereboom makes an argument of this form by highlighting two such negative aspects in his more recent (2021) work. First is that angry blame can "distort judgments of blameworthiness" (Pereboom 2021, 42). The thought is that being angry makes us shortsighted, concerned with justifying our anger instead of thinking clearly and searching for

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5. Flanagan (2016, 2021) advocates a similar line of criticism but with more reservations; instead of wholeheartedly endorsing the counterproductivity critique, Flanagan's main aim is to demonstrate the conceptual possibility of a moral ecology without angry blame.

6. Pereboom defines basic desert as follows: "the agent would deserve to be blamed or praised just because she has performed the action, given an understanding of its moral status, and not, for example, merely by virtue of consequentialist or contractualist considerations" (2014, 2); also see Pereboom (2021, 11–12) for a more complicated definition.

7. Basic desert skepticism can also be used to directly challenge angry blame, e.g., because it is epistemically irrational or intrinsically disvaluable. Here I put aside this challenge, given that it is beyond the scope of the counterproductivity critiques.

moral reasons on both sides. Second is that angry blame can alienate the wrongdoer. As Pereboom puts it, anger is "frequently non-optimal in realizing moral improvement" (2021, 43) and it has a disposition to "allow only a humiliating or else a defiant response" (2021, 43). The distorting and alienating effects of angry blame make it counterproductive, because "aims of the practice of holding morally responsible are frequently deflected by anger" (Pereboom 2021, 3). For Pereboom, these distorting and alienating effects alone warrant a skeptical conclusion about angry blame, "whether or not it presupposes basic desert" (2021, 3).

Though I have focused on Nussbaum and Pereboom, similar critiques of angry blame can be frequently found in many others (e.g., Pettigrove 2012; Pettigrove and Tanaka 2014; Levy 2015; Morris 2018; Caruso 2021; Waller 2022).[8] These critics also make a further inference from angry blame's counterproductivity to a skeptical conclusion that its role in our moral lives should be either eliminated or drastically revised. It should be replaced by or transformed into a different, forward-looking moral practice. Nussbaum claims that it should transform into "transition-anger" (2016, 6), which she thinks can play a positive but fairly limited role in directing our moral outrage toward forward-looking goals. Pereboom proposes to replace angry blame with "blame as moral protest" (2021, 44), where anger has, at best, a minimal role to play.

However, many have remained unconvinced by the counterproductivity critique, and a common strategy involves resisting the above negative characterizations of angry blame's content and functionality.[9] Friends of angry blame instead cast it in a brighter light, pointing to its

positive consequences and functions (McGeer 2013; Vargas 2013, 2018, 2021; Shoemaker 2018; Cherry 2019, 2021; Silva 2021). I do not aim to settle this debate here, but I think that it is unsurprising that many remain unpersuaded by the existing critiques. I will illustrate this in the form of a general dilemma: Either (i) the negative characterization of angry blame in these criticisms is *essential* to angry blame, or (ii) it is only *accidental* to angry blame. If (i), then it turns out very difficult to convince angry blame's proponents to support such a negative characterization. If (ii), then it is easier to establish the characterization but very difficult to warrant a skeptical conclusion that we should abandon or radically revise angry blame. The upshot is not that the existing critiques are incorrect, but that they have limitations when it comes to persuading someone who does not already find the use of anger in blaming somewhat suspicious. It is therefore worth considering whether a different strategy would supply a dialectically more effective critique of angry blame; for the least, doing so would help bolster the skeptic's case, by presenting a new angle via which angry blame can be challenged.

To illustrate the dilemma above, first consider Nussbaum's characterization of angry blame as conceptually involving a retributive desire. The natural reading is that Nussbaum would take the first horn of the dilemma and treat this as an essential feature of angry blame. But it is fairly difficult to convincingly establish such a strong claim. There is evidence that one can use to cast doubt on the conceptual connection; for example, some empirical studies show that, perhaps surprisingly, anger toward injustice has a stronger association with endorsing the more constructive policies than the more destructive ones (e.g., Tausch et al. 2011; for a review, see Silva 2021). One might also appeal to ordinary cases where angry blame and retributive desire seem to come apart, such as blaming loved ones (Shoemaker 2018; Cherry 2019). That is, the critique leaves open what I will refer to as the *accidentality reply*, which consists in acknowledging the association between angry blame and the relevant negative feature but insisting it be a merely accidental one. Nussbaum could choose the second horn instead and

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8. Another route to challenging angry blame, which some of these authors also endorse, involves arguing that it is intrinsically disvaluable (e.g., Holmgren 2014; Paytas 2022). Though this is not a critique based on counterproductivity, it has been used to address the aptness reply to the counterproductivity critique (Paytas 2022).

9. Another possible reply involves arguing that angry blame can be apt even if it is counterproductive (Bell 2009; Shoemaker 2018, Srinivasan 2018; also see Wallace 2019).

claim that angry blame only accidentally involves a retributive desire. But it is then unclear why the conclusion to draw is that we should abandon or radically revise angry blame. The alternative is to make individual and collective efforts to disassociate the undesirable, accidental connection between angry blame and retributive desire, and by doing so better support the efficiency of blaming practices. In the absence of evidence that such disassociations would be extremely costly or unlikely to work, Nussbaum's skeptical conclusion regarding angry blame would appear unwarranted. I will refer to this as the *disassociation reply*—the reply that we should make efforts to disassociate angry blame from the relevant negative feature, rather than abandon or radically revise angry blame itself. Given the availability of either the accidentality reply or the disassociation reply, it makes sense why many remained unpersuaded by Nussbaum's critique.

The same dilemma applies to Pereboom's (2014, 2021) criticism based on angry blame's distorting and alienating effects. We can similarly ask: Is the tendency to bring about these effects an essential feature of angry blame as a kind of a practice, or is it an accidental feature? The essentiality claim would easily support a skeptical conclusion, but it leaves open the accidentality reply. That is, one may maintain that angry blame only accidentally distorts judgments and alienates its targets. The negative effects of anger have indeed been well documented in the psychological literature (for a review, see Litvak et al. 2010). But the empirical results are consistent with thinking that angry blame only accidentally rather than essentially distorts judgments and alienates its targets. Some have argued that anger can serve as a typical and effective means in revealing unobvious moral facts to us, instead of distorting judgments (e.g., Lorde 1981; Cherry 2021). Some have also argued that anger need not alienate one's targets, and whether it does so contingently depends upon the psychological tendencies of the

blamee (Srinivasan 2018; Cherry 2021).[10] Again, it is difficult to dismiss these replies and defend an essentiality claim. Here it is important to distinguish the claim that (i) angry blame essentially has *distorting and alienating effects* from the claim that (ii) angry blame essentially leads to *biases of some sort*. My suggestion is that (i) is extremely difficult to establish, but Pereboom is on firm grounds in defending the weaker claim (ii). It is difficult, after all, to imagine a practice of angry blame without any biases associated with it. But this alone is not enough to establish a skeptical conclusion, because the same can be said about almost any moral practice; whatever practices we end up preserving, even including deliberation and inferences, are likely to lead to biases of some sort anyway.[11]

However, if Pereboom were to base his argument on the claim that angry blame accidentally has distorting and alienating effects, then one may disagree with his skeptical conclusion and argue that we should restructure our moral ecology to better support anger's efficacy instead. As a general matter, our agential practices often can be improved and supported by modifying or restructuring the "ecological" features in our social environment (Vargas 2018; Timpe 2019)—those features traditionally thought of as being external to the agent, such as the social rules and norms, institutions, and the material conditions. Timpe (2019, 29–30) argues that, for example, though autism spectrum

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10. There is also plenty of evidence indicating that angry blame can help enable social cooperation, rather than alienating one's social others. Anger has been shown to, for example, inspire cooperation and collective action (Becker & Wright 2011; Spring et al. 2018); promote support for positive, non-violent policies to resolve an intergroup conflict (Tagar et al. 2011); and predict active engagement in political actions (Ford et al. 2019). In addition, evolutionary psychologists have suggested that angry blame involves an evolved mechanism due to its effects of teaching social partners moral lessons and enabling social cooperation (Cushman 2015; Henrich & Muthukrishna 2021). Though these studies do not always concern angry blame's direct effect on the *blamee*, a defender of angry blame may cite the results as inductive evidence against an essential connection between anger and alienation.

11. I will explain how anger's biases are related to my new counterproductivity critique later in Section 4.

disorder seems to impair a person's communicative capacities, we can in fact restructure our moral ecology to better support their interpersonal communication. If angry blame has various negative accidental effects, then one possible conclusion is that we should make efforts to restructure our moral ecology to mitigate or eliminate these effects. In the absence of evidence that such restructuring would be extremely costly or unlikely to work, Pereboom's skeptical conclusion regarding angry blame would appear unwarranted. That is, the critique would leave open the disassociation reply.

Lastly, consider Pereboom's counterproductivity argument based on basic desert skepticism. Though I am not able to fully address issues about desert here, we could identify a similar difficulty with this argument when it comes to convincing Pereboom's opponents. We could ask: Does angry blame essentially presuppose basic desert or only accidentally so? If the former, then this leaves open the accidentality reply. It becomes extremely difficult to convincingly establish the characterization, because many ordinary cases of angry blame do not seem to relate to issues about desert at all. For example, one might angrily blame one's friend for being a few minutes late to an appointment, but it is a stretch to claim that one therefore implies that one's friend deserves any adverse treatment. And even if angry blame always presupposes a concept of desert, it is unclear why this association is with basic desert specifically. An alternative view is that angry blame presupposes desert but does not presuppose whether the relevant kind of desert is basic or non-basic. Pereboom himself acknowledges the possibility of maintaining our practice of angry blame but replacing the concept of basic desert with non-basic desert (2021, 29–30; 97–98). He understands this to be Dennett's (2003) and Vargas' (2013) proposal, as these theorists suggest that desert is ultimately based on various forward-looking considerations. Pereboom then faces a further argumentative burden to show that the desert supposition in angry blame cannot be explained by non-basic desert only. But if he retreats to an accidental claim about the relationship between angry blame and basic desert, then one may again appeal to the disassociation reply, inferring

that we should make efforts to disassociate the two instead of drawing a skeptical conclusion.

The general structure of the dilemma should now be clear. It turns out to be extremely difficult to establish that angry blame essentially has some negative feature (this leaves open the accidentality reply), but merely showing that angry blame is accidentally bad does not warrant a skeptical conclusion (this leaves open the disassociation reply). The upshot is not that the existing counterproductivity critiques cannot work, but that their argumentative strategy has its limitations—it leaves its opponent with two kinds of replies that are extremely difficult, though not impossible, to be dismissed. It is thus not a surprise that many defenders of angry blame remain unconvinced by the existing critiques.[12]

4. A New Counterproductivity Critique of Angry Blame

I propose an alternative strategy: to develop a counterproductivity critique by starting from the claim that angry blame has various *positive* functions. These include issuing a moral protest and initiating and facilitating a moral dialogue. But I shall argue that a tension arises when it comes to achieving the two functions jointly. Angry blame achieves its protest function in such a way that it requires the blamer to not treat her target as a peer of moral dialogue. This requirement undermines its dialogue function. Angry blame is thus counterproductive not because its functions are necessarily bad when considered separately, but because of a systematic tension that exists in achieving its functional goals. The upshot is that we must make radical changes to this moral

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12. For a related diagnosis of blame skepticism, see McCormick (2022). My dilemma shares with McCormick the general concern regarding the difficulty for the skeptic to identify a necessary feature of our responsibility practices (2022, 144). But our diagnoses are different. First, I include in the scope of the dilemma both eliminativism and revisionism regarding angry blame, but McCormick only targets eliminativism and defends revisionism herself. Second, McCormick does not discuss the skeptic's burden to argue why disassociation or restructuring moral ecology is not an available option.

practice.

4.1 The Functions of Angry Blame

I shall argue that angry blame has two positive social functions: a function of issuing a *moral protest* and a function of initiating and facilitating a *moral dialogue*. The claim is not that these are the only functions of angry blame; it may have additional functions such as social signaling (Shoemaker & Vargas 2021), but those will not be my focus here. I will adopt a causal role view of function like Cummins' (1975). On such a view, the functions of a practice-type are those causal roles that satisfy the following two conditions: (i) enough tokens of this practice are disposed to play these roles in the broader system that this practice is an integral part of, and (ii) the fact that (i) is true partly explains why this broader system works well. For example, the human heart's function is to pump blood, because enough human hearts are disposed to pump blood in the circulatory system that human hearts are an integral part of, and this fact partly explains why the circulatory system works well—via the transportation of oxygen and nutrition, and waste.

One function of angry blame is to issue a *moral protest* (Hieronymi 2001; Talbert 2012; Smith 2013). A familiar kind of moral protest involves the outward expressions of a negative moral attitude, in the form of speech acts, facial expressions, etc. Importantly, expressing these negative attitudes is a *typical and effective means* to draw attention to and challenge either a false moral claim or a substandard moral treatment that is implicated in the transgressor's conduct (Smith 2013, 43). The moral protester calls out the transgressor and stands up for herself. Arguably, simply having and clinging to a negative moral attitude (e.g., holding on to one's anger against social injustice) may sometimes already count as challenging a false claim and a way of standing up for oneself; such cases would be *private* rather than *public* moral protest. Though moral protest can often have complicated goals and mechanisms, the primary goals of a moral protest concern the *victim herself*. It is, at least in some contexts, a typical and effective means to

help promote the victim's self-respect and reinforce her moral beliefs, even when doing so fails to persuade the wrongdoer that their action is wrong (see Talbert 2012).

Another function of angry blame is to initiate and facilitate a *moral dialogue*. By a "moral dialogue," I mean a process where the interlocutors—typically the victim and the transgressor—engage in a conversation through exchanging moral reasons with each other. The most familiar forms of moral dialogue happen verbally and in face-to-face interactions. In these dialogues, the interlocutors share their side of the subject matter and often come back and forth; for example, the victim points out how they feel hurt by the transgressor's action, the transgressor gives a justification or excuse, the victim replies by challenging that justification or excuse, and so on. It need not be the case that all the moral reasons exchanged are good reasons; a dialogue using bad reasons is still a dialogue. However, it must be the case that the type of speech acts the interlocutors engage in is meant to exchange reasons. The two sides must talk *with*, not simply talk *to*, each other. For example, rhetorical speech meant to glorify one's own accomplishments does not count as part of a moral dialogue. Moral dialogue can also happen non-verbally, remotely, and virtually, as long as both sides communicate their reasons using a medium that can be understood by each other.[13]

Applying the causal role theory of function, we can see why angry blame has both a protest and a dialogue function. The protest function satisfies the two conditions of the causal role theory. First, enough in-

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13. My understanding of angry blame's dialogue function is in various ways similar to what McKenna (2012) calls blame's function to facilitate a "moral conversation," but there are a few differences. Importantly, McKenna treats linguistic conversation as a metaphor or an "analog" (2012, 89) in order to understand a moral exchange happening in the case of moral blame, but I use the term "moral dialogue" more literally to refer to the verbal and non-verbal conversations surrounding a moral transgression. Relatedly, instead of understanding moral conversations in this metaphorical way, I will focus on the moral dialogue that blame facilitates *after* the wrongdoing. Given these differences, I opt to use the term "moral dialogue" instead of "moral conversation" to label my claim for the sake of clarity.

stances of angry blame do have a strong disposition to play the role of issuing a moral protest; the angry tones of blame make it a typical and effective means to grab others' attention and challenge the relevant false moral claim or substandard treatment. Second, the fact that angry blame is such a typical and effective means partly explains why the broader moral system operates well. Specifically, a well-functioning moral system must be one in which the individual moral agents have a sufficiently high degree of self-respect; and angry blame's disposition to protest, via its effects in promoting individuals' self-respect, plays a part in explaining this feature. None of this implies that angry blame is the *only* or the *best* possible means to protest against wrongdoing; it only requires that it is a *typical and effective means* to do so. After all, the fact that angry blame has a protest function does not preclude the possibility that other practices may also have a protest function. Similarly, to claim that anger's disposition to protest partly explains why the broader moral system operates well does not imply that it is impossible for the moral system to operate well without it. It only involves claiming that angry blame's protest in fact plays an explanatory role.

The dialogue function also satisfies both conditions. First, enough instances of angry blame have a strong disposition to initiate and facilitate a moral dialogue. Sometimes the moral dialogue happens with the very act of blaming itself, but sometimes the moral dialogue happens after the victim blames the transgressor. The angry tones of blame again make it a typical and effective means to draw both sides' attention and make them aware of the need to exchange their moral reasons. Second, the fact that angry blame has this disposition partly explains why the larger moral system functions well. A well-functioning moral system must be one in which the individual moral agents have a sufficient degree of moral understanding of why they should and should not act in certain ways. Anger's disposition to initiate and facilitate a moral dialogue, via its effects in promoting mutual moral understanding, plays a part in explaining this feature. Both conditions are thus satisfied in order for moral dialogue to count as one of blame's functions. Again, this does not imply that angry blame is the only or the

best practice that we can possibly have at serving a dialogue function; the claim is only that it has a dialogue function and plays a role in explaining the actual operation of the broader system of our existing moral practices.

I have argued that angry blame has a protest function and a dialogue function. Though I have appealed to the causal role theory of functions, I am inclined to think that the plausibility of the claim does not depend on this particular theory. Even if one adopts, for example, an etiological account of functions (e.g., Wright 1973), it remains plausible that both anger's protest and dialogue partly figure in the explanation of why we currently have the practice of angry blame now. It is also important to point out that many proponents of angry blame are likely to accept the claim that it has the two positive functions, because these are exactly the kind of observations that they tend to use to push back against the skeptics. A skeptic, therefore, may adopt the strategy of first granting this fairly positive picture of angry blame's roles, and then showing that it nonetheless remains counterproductive.

4.2 Argument for Angry Blame's Counterproductivity

The protest and dialogue functions are both positive social functions. But I shall argue that a tension arises when it comes to jointly achieving the two ends: angry blame achieves its protest function in such a way that it ends up requiring the blamer to not treat her target as a *peer of moral dialogue*. Let me define this conception of peerhood first:

> A person *A* treats another person *B* as her *peer of moral dialogue* just in case *A*'s immediate response to *B*'s equally informed disagreement about whether a moral claim *P* is true would involve suspending *A*'s initial judgment about *P* and *A*'s initial angry emotion based on this judgment.[14]

By "equally informed disagreement," I refer to the disagreement be-

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14. This definition of peerhood is similar to some views about "epistemic peers" in the literature on peer disagreement (see Elga 2007; Sherman 2015).

tween *A* and *B* when they are given equally good evidence or reasons. This does not require their evidence or reasons to be exactly the same; they may have access to different, but equally good kinds of evidence. Treating someone as a peer of moral dialogue thus does not imply suspending judgment and anger as long as disagreement occurs; it only implies doing so when the disagreement is with an interlocutor who possesses equally good evidence or reasons as one's own. Such a response implies that an individual does not take herself to be in a special epistemic position, and that she takes both sides to be equally capable of knowing the relevant moral fact—as long as they are provided with equally good evidence or reasons. This is why I refer to this conception of peerhood as "peer of moral dialogue."

I contend that, for angry blame's dialogue function to operate, it requires the blamer to treat her target—the blamee—as a *peer of moral dialogue*. Specifically, the blamer needs to treat the blamee as a peer of moral dialogue when it comes to the moral facts about (i) whether the action at issue is *morally wrong* and (ii) whether the blamee is *morally blameworthy* for the action. Intuitively, the blamer communicates the message that she has been wronged, and that her target—the alleged wrongdoer—is blameworthy for wronging her. To the extent that the blamer is still in a *dialogue* with the blamee, however, this implies that she is expecting possible disagreements and open to change her mind. If the blamee is given equally good evidence and reasons as the blamer, but still disagrees with the blamer about either (i) or (ii), then the blamer's immediate response should involve changing her mind. More specifically, this involves suspending her initial judgment that the action is wrong or blameworthy, and accordingly temporarily suspending her initial angry attitude toward the blamee. Note that this does not prevent the blamer from engaging in further inquiry about the subject matter. Quite often, even after putting aside her initial anger, the blamer is still in a good position to continue going back and forth with her interlocutor to collaboratively deliberate regarding the relevant moral fact. But the immediate response should involve at least temporarily suspending the angry emotion that initiated the moral di-

alogue; and this involves treating the blamee as a peer of moral dialogue.

There are two further reasons for thinking that this peerhood condition is necessary for angry blame's dialogue function to operate. First, this helps explain the distinction between genuine and feigned moral dialogues. Imagine that *A* angrily initiates a conversation with *B*, but that she privately does not intend to change her mind even if *B* disagrees with her after being equally informed. It is intuitive to claim that *A* then merely *pretends* to be in a dialogue with *B*; her real goals involve persuading or educating *B*, rather than engaging in a dialogue in the form of mutually exchanging reasons—which is the sense of moral dialogue at issue. I take the best explanation of this intuition to be that a genuine moral dialogue is differentiated from a feigned moral dialogue according to whether one treats another as a peer of moral dialogue. A second reason for the necessity claim involves examining the personal commitments that one makes when taking part in a dialogue. When *A* decides to engage in a dialogue with *B*, *A* is not just committed to giving *B* her reasons and listening to *B*'s reasons; *A* is also committed to a particular way of *redirecting her attentional resources* according to how the dialogue unpacks. Specifically, it seems plausible to claim that the dialogue-initiator is thereby committed to investing her attentional resources in such a way that is conducive to promoting mutual understanding. This then implies that, were *A* and *B* to disagree with equally good evidence in hand, then the attentional resources would be directed *away* from *A*'s own anger and *toward* contemplating about how to best settle the disagreement instead. If *A* were to refuse to redirect her attentional resources this way, then it seems reasonable to claim that *A* did not make the kind of attention-distributing commitment that is constitutive of participating in a moral dialogue in the first place. Note that this commitment involves a *disposition* to suspend one's initial anger if an equally informed disagreement were to happen. Such disagreement may not actually occur between the blamer and the blamee, either because the blamee may never become equally informed or because the blamee ends up agreeing with the blamer;

still, the blamer's disposition to temporarily suspend her anger if she were to face equally informed disagreement is plausibly constitutive of participating in a moral dialogue.

My opponent may argue that in non-moral contexts, dialogues can happen between someone and her epistemic inferior. It seems possible, for example, for a physic teacher to have effective dialogues with her students even while treating them as epistemic inferiors, as long as she does so in a respectful and not patronizing way. Cannot the same happen in cases involving moral dialogue? I contend that there is an asymmetry here. Unlike the educational context, the blaming context already involves a *default oppositional tension* between the blamer and the blamee. Even the proponents of angry blame would agree that it tends to draw a potential *opposition* between the two individuals. Further, the moral issue that causes this default oppositional tension is the very same subject matter of the moral dialogue that happens between them. It then seems to me that, if the blamer takes the blamee to be an inferior of moral dialogue about the very issue that causes the oppositional tension between the two, then she is not committed to having a moral dialogue in the first place. This is because she already treats the blamee as someone to be taught, persuaded, or helped, rather than as an equally competent collaborator in joint inquiry.

My next contention concerns how angry blame serves its protest function. I believe that angry blame achieves this function in a way that requires the blamer to *not* treat the blamee as a peer of moral dialogue. That is, when the blamer angrily protests, her immediate response to equally informed disagreement with the blamee is *not* to suspend her angry emotion. There is a strong case for thinking that angry blame as protest essentially involves a disposition to remain in place despite equally informed disagreements.

It is worth emphasizing that the claim is not meant to apply to all kinds of protesting activities; there may be a form of non-angry moral protest that is compatible with treating one's interlocutor as a peer of moral dialogue. My claim is specifically that using *angry blame* as moral protest is incompatible with treating the blamee as a dialogue peer at the same time. There are two reasons to support this. First is that this helps explain what distinguishes cases where the angry blamer genuinely protests from cases of feigned moral protest. Imagine that an angry blamer claims that she is using anger as the means to protest against a wrongdoing, but that she privately intends to suspend her anger if the blamee disagrees with her after being equally informed. It is intuitive to claim that she then merely *pretends* to use angry blame to protest against the wrong; her real goals involve figuring out if the blamee actually agrees with her about the relevant moral fact or not. I take the best explanation of this intuition to be that angry blame's protest function requires treating the blamee not as a peer of moral dialogue. A second reason involves examining the personal commitments that someone makes when using angry blame to protest against a wrongdoing. As someone decides to make a moral protest, she is thereby committed to, in one way or another, *standing up for herself*. And if her immediate response to equally informed disagreement is to stop standing up for herself, then it seems that she lacks such a commitment; the protester should at least sometimes continue standing up for oneself despite such disagreements. Note that this does not cause any problems with moral protests in general, since it is perfectly consistent to suspend one's judgment about a particular issue but remain firm in standing up for oneself. The trouble is specifically with angry blame—as the angry blamer protests, her anger is meant to be *constitutive of her way of standing up for herself*. Thus, the earlier commitment to continue standing up for oneself despite equally informed disagreements now becomes the commitment to continue *feeling angry* despite equally informed disagreements. If the blamer does not continue feeling angry in such cases, then it seems reasonable to conclude that she did not make the kind of commitment that is constitutive of using her anger as a means of moral protest in the first place. Therefore, in order for angry blame to serve its protest function, it requires the blamer to not treat the blamee as a peer of moral dialogue.

This observation is related to the literature on the various cognitive biases associated with angry blame (e.g., Alicke 2000; Litvak et al. 2010;

Alicke et al. 2011). Consider, for example, Alicke's (2000) work on how anger contributes to what he calls a "blame-validation" mode of assessment. He describes blame-validation in several different ways, but an important characterization involves how it alters one's *default position* and relative *evidential standard.* For example, he writes that the blame-validation mode plays a role in "altering evidential standards" (2000, 568) so that the blamer thinks that "blame is the default attribution" and "adjustments for mitigating circumstances are often insufficient" (2000, 558). My hypothesis is that this is what happens when angry blame plays its protest role. Because the angry blamer, while protesting, does not treat the blamee as a peer of moral dialogue, she will take herself to be in a privileged epistemic position. As a result, it would be *relatively difficult* to adjust her pre-existing belief about her target's moral blameworthiness. However, I do not think that this means that her belief is necessarily irrational or distorting. The mere fact that she is strongly committed to her pre-existing belief, while holding a relatively high evidential standard when it comes to changing her mind, may not contradict any requirements of rationality. Proponents of angry blame may even claim that such a commitment is *conducive* to moral protest, since it makes for a firmer and more stable stance of standing up for oneself when compared to one that can be easily dismantled by equally informed disagreements.

However, a serious problem arises when we put angry blame's two functions side-by-side. For angry blame to achieve its protest function, it requires the blamer to *not* treat the blamee as a peer of moral dialogue. But for angry blame to achieve its dialogue function, it requires exactly the opposite. Angry blame's two functions thus imply opposite expectations on the psychological stance of the blamer. It is, I suggest, in this sense that angry blame is counterproductive. Though the two functional goals are generally positive, a close examination of how angry blame serves these functions demonstrates a tension when it comes to achieving both ends together. Specifically, angry blame's biases— such as the tendency to contribute to the blame-validation mode of assessment—may help its moral protest function, but only at the cost

of undermining its moral dialogue function. We should thereby make radical changes to the moral practice of angry blame.

5. Objections and Replies

5.1 *Objection 1: Evidentialism About Peerhood*
One might reply that my argument falsely assumes that a rational agent can freely choose whether to treat someone as a peer of moral dialogue, independent of what her evidence indicates. It might be suggested that she only needs to *respond to evidence* about whether the blamee is a peer of moral dialogue, by looking at, for example, evidence regarding their relevant rational capacities. If so, then there would not be any tension regarding whether to treat someone as a peer. Isn't this enough?

I have two responses. First is that my conception of peerhood is defined in terms of one's disposition in response to equally informed disagreements. Facing such disagreements, even if one thinks that one's interlocutor is just as rationally competent as oneself when it comes to arriving at the relevant moral fact, this does not necessarily mean that one will suspend the relevant judgment or angry emotion based on that judgment. Specifically, my earlier arguments imply that, for angry blame to serve its protest function, the blamer is expected to continue feeling angry despite such disagreements—*even if* she believes that the blamee is just as rational as herself. This will then still undermine angry blame's dialogue function. Second, the counterproductivity critique will occur anyway when it comes to *unconfirmed peers* (Sherman 2015), cases where we simply lack enough evidence regarding whether others have the same kind of rational capacities as us. I suspect that many cases of moral interactions happen between unconfirmed peers, especially when the person we blame is a stranger; consider, for example, the increasing interactions between online social network users today. In such cases, even an evidentialist could accept the claim that the totality of one's evidence does not settle whether one's interlocutor is a peer of moral dialogue. We can then raise the same critique

when it comes to cases like this: angry blame's protest function poses a requirement on the blamer that undermines its dialogue function.

5.2 *Objection 2: A Middle Way?*

A second objection involves the claim that there is a middle way between treating someone as a peer of moral dialogue and treating someone not as a peer of moral dialogue. There may be an in-between state such that it can achieve both moral protest and moral dialogue, or at least can get close to achieving both functions.

However, I do not think that this can resolve the problem. I am not sure what this in-between state is exactly like, but there are several options. It might be (a) constantly shifting between treating someone as a peer and not as a peer, (b) suspending judgment about whether someone is a peer, or (c) treating someone not as a peer, but only an inferior of moral dialogue to a fairly small degree. There are serious difficulties with each of these options. (a) seems psychologically unrealistic and requires a lot of mental gymnastics. (b) is also psychologically unrealistic, since it expects the blamer to suspend their judgment about an issue that has significant bearings on the very target action that she deems morally wrong. (c) thus appears the most promising option for the middle-way view. Cannot the angry blamer take herself to be in a *just slightly more epistemically privileged position* compared to the blamee, and in doing so achieving both the protest and the dialogue functions?

I have two replies. First, in the context of angry blame, even this slight asymmetric treatment of the blamee may already cause a serious tension with achieving a dialogue function. I suspect that equally informed disagreement happens quite frequently between a blamer and a blamee. Though it is rare for two individuals to have the exact same evidence or reasons, it is very common in moral disagreements that their respective reasons are of comparable strengths or are on a par with each other. Thus, even if the blamer treats the blamee as only a slightly inferior of moral dialogue, this already implies that she routinely continues feeling angry despite equally informed disagreements

with the blamee. This tendency then seems in tension with thinking that she uses angry blame as a form of moral dialogue.

Second, I maintain that the tension between angry blame's two functions still exists even if we modify the earlier claim about peerhood. For suppose that, for the sake of argument, angry blame can serve its dialogue function when the blamer treats the blamee as *either* a peer of moral dialogue *or* a slight inferior of moral dialogue. This still cause a tension with angry blame's protest function. This is because, as the angry blamer protests, treating the blamee as a slight inferior of moral dialogue means that one should at least *significantly decrease one's confidence* about the rationality of one's anger facing equally informed disagreements. Since anger is supposed to be constitutive of the angry blamer's protest, it follows that she would significantly decrease her confidence about her stance of standing up for oneself facing equally informed disagreements. This already seems to contradict the kind of commitment that is constitutive of using one's anger as a means of moral protest in the first place.

5.3 *Objection 3: The Essential vs. Accidental Dilemma*

A third objection is as follows: Why doesn't the earlier dilemma that I raised against the existing counterproductivity critiques apply to my own critique? That is, one might argue that the features of angry blame that I identify are either (i) essential or (ii) accidental features of angry blame. One might then argue that (i) leaves open the accidentality reply, whereas (ii) leaves open the disassociation reply, both of which are difficult to be dismissed. What makes my critique any different?

My reply is the following. I do not mean for my critique to avoid the dilemma entirely, and my contention is to embrace the essentiality horn. The discussion in Section 4 is meant to motivate an essential connection between the peerhood condition and how angry blame serves its functions. Specifically, angry blame's dialogue function *essentially* requires the blamer to treat the blamee as a peer of moral dialogue, because otherwise the blamer's disposition contradicts the kind

of commitment constitutive of using angry blame as a form of moral dialogue. Similarly, angry blame's protest function *essentially* requires the blamer to treat the blamee not as a peer of moral dialogue, because otherwise the blamer's disposition contradicts the kind of commitment constitutive of using angry blame as a means of moral protest. I also suggested that positing such essential connections helps explain the distinction between a genuine moral protest or dialogue and a feigned one. My critique is thus no different from the existing counterproductivity critiques in that it requires an essentiality claim to succeed. The key difference, however, is that neither of my essentiality claims involves believing that angry blame has an *essentially negative* content or functionality. I acknowledge that angry blame can be a typical and effective means to achieve a protest or a dialogue function, when they are considered in isolation; the problem only arises when it comes to jointly achieving both ends. Thus, I believe that my critique makes for a dialectically more effective objection, since a proponent of angry blame is more likely to accept its premises compared to a premise about some essentiality negative content or functionality of angry blame.

6. Conclusions

I have raised a new counterproductivity critique against angry blame. Unlike the existing critiques, my argument starts from the observation that angry blame serves positive functions. I think that this makes it dialectically more effective than the existing critiques when it comes to convincing someone not already finding angry blame suspicious. For the least, my critique helps bolster the skeptic's case, presenting a new angle via which angry blame can be challenged. The conclusion is that we should make radical changes to the practice of angry blame.

What may such radical changes look like? Here are three possibilities. The first possibility is to replace the practice of angry blame with *protesting without anger* (Pereboom 2014, 2021; Paytas 2022). If this is possible, then the blamer may not need to be committed to continuing feeling angry when facing equally informed disagreements; non-angry moral protests thus have the potential to serve both a protest function

and a dialogue function at the same time. The second possibility is to replace the practice of angry blame with *multiple different practices with their respective functions*, such as protest blame, dialogue blame, etc. Perhaps by clearly identifying what kind of angry blame one engages in and what function is contextually relevant, we can mitigate the counterproductivity issue. A third possibility is to rethink angry blame not as an *episodic event*, but rather as a multi-stage attitudinal or behavioral *process*. Perhaps by clearly identifying different stages of the process and which function is contextually relevant to which stage, we can also mitigate the counterproductivity issue. I take it that fully fleshing out these possibilities, as well as their advantages and difficulties, is important future work.[15]

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