

2023

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Recommended Citation

Yager, Edan (2023) "Is It Your Fault? Or Is It Mine?," *Soaring: A Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 2023, Article 5.

Available at: <https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/soaring/vol2023/iss1/5>

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Is It Your Fault? Or Is It Mine?

Is It Your Fault? Or Is It Mine?

“How much longer will the world be an accomplice ignoring terror? Close the sky right now! Stop the killings! You have power but you seem to be losing humanity” (Zelensky). This is a topic that much of the world is familiar with: the bombing of the maternity hospital in Ukraine. But who did you think of when you read that statement? Putin? America? Notice that neither his name nor our country had been mentioned anywhere in that statement. You may have thought of one or both due to our conditioned response to blame others or other organizations for actions that affect us. We have become so entangled in something that most of us, individually, have not been directly involved in because of our need for assigning blame and responsibility to others. It has been pounded into our minds simply from living with others that when something happens, it is because someone did something that resulted in a consequence or a reward, at which point we take responsibility. Blame is a concept that is larger than us as individuals. Several more prominent factors at play can influence our ability to blame and our want to push it onto others. However, we like to blame one another because it is easier to blame one another than realize that it was not the direct fault of any individual but instead, outside factors that we cannot control. We take responsibility for events because that is how we know to live and navigate the world. However, we do not need to do this; it’s purely psychological. We can see this demonstrated by how intricate and complicated the reasons and outcomes of blaming others are, as will be described throughout the rest of my research.

The Water Phoenix, by Bola Ogun, and “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” by Ursula K. Le Guin, both explore the concept of morals and blame within the

right of responsibility. Ogun and Le Guin’s work both tie in the two concepts of morals having an impact on blame and how that affects who is held responsible to see how they relate to one another in terms of a more extensive relationship that is bigger than oneself and dives into the intricate workings of society. The struggle of the mermaid in *The Water Phoenix* deals with who she can morally hold accountable for her mistreatment and imprisonment. We as an audience are left with the intentional dilemma of whether or not she can hold the children who visit her cage daily responsible for possibly enabling her captivity or if she can hold anyone responsible for her captivity at all. The mermaid’s frustration and anger at her situation show the importance of the balance and difficulty of pinning blame on one person. “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas”, a short story about a society whose perfection thrives on the suffering of a single child, dives into who should feel responsible for the child’s suffering and to what extent, rather than who to delegate it to. It looks at society as a whole rather than one individual. Do we blame society for not freeing the child? Do we let one child suffer for the entire population without guilt? To what extent, if any, should society and individuals be held accountable? Understanding blame and responsibility in ourselves and others benefits society as a whole in our lives and in our fiction.

Both Ogun and Le Guin are telling a story of error in their works of fiction. Yes, they are wonderful to listen to and they grab our attention, but what is it that they are individually attempting to leave with their audience? We like these stories because they create drama and give an excuse for what we feel and cannot explain. These stories are our present-day myth-making:

they explain or excuse the things that we do not want to know, and thus they create a mythology around blame. They give us guidance towards what we want to hear, and they give us a reason for what we want to do, blame others.

Olga creates a story in which trust is lost when a man refuses to let the mermaid he claims to love free. He did not do anything to her directly, however, he is not helping the situation either. By withholding what she desires, her freedom, he makes it much easier for the mermaid as well as the audience to blame him. He does everything in his power to make her less mad at him, further complicating the game of blame. He thinks if he can just say the right words the mermaid will forgive him and they can continue their love affair. However, because of his inaction, the trust has been lost and to the mermaid, the relationship is over. It shows the power of trust and its relation to our actions. Le Guin tells us a slightly different story in Omelas. She toys with a world that appears to be a Utopia if the reader uses a blame-free lens, or a Dystopia if a blameful lens is used when looking at the suffering of a single child. In reality, it is neither a Utopia nor a Dystopia as it walks a fine line that is not often seen in literature. You can make the conscious choice to blame or avoid blame when associating with the child, however, you have to make a choice. Would you save the child knowing that another will take its place? Could you walk away into the unknown with the knowledge that there is a child suffering in the back of your mind? Or would you stay for your happiness in the perfect society of Omelas knowing that you cannot change a thing? These are the impossible questions that the reader is faced with as they read of this distorted world created to challenge these questions. By acknowledging this, we acknowledge that accountability is larger than we are. Therefore, Omelas is neither a

Utopia nor a Dystopia. A single person cannot take down an army nor can they change a system on their own. Blame is no different, so why would we attempt to tackle the problem of what to do about the society when in reality, we simply cannot? When we blame, we use our morals, values, experiences, and what some would call our hearts. The hatred you might feel for the mermaid's captor or the extreme unease that takes over you show just that: we have become dependent on blame even though it is detrimental to our existence.

The definition of dependence is the lack of ability to do things on your own any longer; you rely on something for your existence and without it, you no longer know how to function. In order to reverse this, we first must acknowledge that blame myths exist in our society, and we then must step back and look at what we ourselves are creating in society. By distinguishing the two, we can see what is fact and what is fiction. The facts are what is healthy and necessary to continue forward and heal. Blame, responsibility, and accountability are what cause trauma and pain. Because of this, it causes more harm than it does in our attempt to solve a mystery. By understanding our morals and views of blame, we have the ability to better ourselves and each other. Once we are able to better ourselves, we can directly better our society as a whole. Our world is built and molded from intricate relationships between individuals and groups. If we can understand where we are coming from in our own beliefs, we can then look to see others' points of view and understand them the way we understand ourselves. Let us take *The Water Phoenix* for example: had the mermaid chosen to eat rather than starve herself out of spite, she would not have to have been force-fed to stay alive. As a result, she would have had no reason to blame her partner for threatening her with

force-feeding as he would not have had to take any action to keep her alive. If she had understood that she was killing herself, and he could not let that happen, they could have had an understanding. Once we have the ability to understand someone, we can respect them. Respect is what can build relationships and strengthen bonds. In the case of the mermaid and her human partner, respect could have saved their relationship or at least allowed it to end on good terms.

Blame is not something that is singlehandedly tied to one person or a relation between people. Instead, blame is a more complicated process than simply saying he/she did it, or it is their fault. Blame has many more factors that play into it, such as luck or morals. In the article, "Luck, Blame, and Desert," the first author who explores this idea of blame being more extensive than we as individuals is Michael Cholbi. To put this idea into an operational perspective, Cholbi gives us the following example: "Two neighbors may each fail to shovel their sidewalks after a blizzard, but it is a matter of outcome luck that the postal carrier slips and falls in front of one dwelling rather than another." In other words, both neighbors can shovel their sidewalks to a perfect clean; there could be not an inch of snow left. Then, as the postman comes by, they walk perfectly fine by house one, but right as they get to the middle of the sidewalk of house two, there is a tiny patch of ice that no one saw and they slipped on it. House one could have just as easily had the patch of ice. Therefore, it was not the fault of house two's owner: he shoveled just as well as the owner of house one. It was also not the fault of the postman as no one else had slipped on the ice that they had seen, they did not see the ice themselves, and it was a reasonable assumption to make that there would not be any that they could slip on. What Cholbi is saying is that there are other factors at play

in this argument of blame that we cannot control. Because of this, we cannot directly assign blame to one individual when, if fate had not had a specific event happen, the incident that caused blame would have never happened.

Another author Allen Speight agrees with this theory of blame being larger than we as individuals can place ourselves or one another in his article, "Listening to Reason': The Role of Persuasion in Aristotle's Account of Praise, Blame, and the Voluntary". He argues in Aristotle's work, that Aristotle claimed voluntariness and persuasion were vital factors in individuals making a conscious decision to deviate responsibility of an adverse event onto others or take it on themselves. By saying this, Speight tells the reader there are some lines that we cannot cross, such as blaming animals and young children; they do not know any better, and therefore, we cannot hold them accountable. However, there is also the factor of influence that may have an impact on someone when deciding to place blame. Psychology states that when giving answers in a group of people, an individual can be asked a question as simple as what is two plus two. However, if people are placed in that room to give the wrong answer specifically, the individual being tested can and most likely will change their answer to fit in. Concerning the theory of blame stated in these articles, one could know that someone is not at fault or see the situation as something different than others. However, when they start speaking with others, they could 'change' their opinion to fit in and make themselves stand out less, thus, becoming more comfortable. For example, in "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas," instinctually, we have a desire to decide if what is happening is right or wrong. This stems from the creation of blame as a way to justify actions. One may decide that it is okay for the child to be held

for the society to flourish while another may believe just the opposite. What could then happen, however, is the individual who believed, let us say that it was right for the child to be held, might be persuaded that it is acceptable by a larger group who believe the opposite based on reasoning. This, in turn, could shift who the individual chooses to hold accountable in the end.

I agree with both Cholbi and Speight in the fact that blame cannot and should not be tied to us as individuals. There are a number of other factors at play that we ourselves, cannot account for. However, we cannot say that blame does not have something to do with people as individuals because blame is purely our humane desire to have someone be held accountable when things go wrong. We have to blame because we have created blame itself. Therefore, when blaming others, we do not account for those other factors that play into a situation, might explain some of why the situation occurred, played out how it did, or help to explain an individual's actions. We simply cannot because doing so would stop our empathy and growth as human beings. If we look at this from the lens of a relationship, we can see that if a relationship were to end, both parties would most likely blame each other; they might not look into other factors that had a play in it, such as a job offer or differing views on a topic. Or they might even blame a third party, such as if a man or woman made an advance on one or both parties. Unfortunately, we fail to realize there can be a third party at times, or even in the heat of the moment. We choose not to read it to the full extent because that is what is easier for us as people to process.

In blaming others, we are showing our moral character and our values. Blame was created by society to help us process moments when what happened doesn't match our morals or assumptions. It is a

way to acknowledge that something has gone wrong while distancing ourselves from (or embracing) responsibility, and it has driven how we live for so long. We blame those close to us because we can let the responsibility fall on someone else rather than on ourselves. This concept of deflecting accountability is argued in "A Theory of Blame" by Bertram F Malle and others. They say that blame is a complicated concept that relies on several different factors of human emotions. "It is both cognitive and social; it regulates social behavior; it fundamentally relies on social cognition; and, as a social act, it requires warrant," (Malle) to enact. Blame is more complicated than a simple 'you did it' answer; it involves factors such as social interactions and ways of thinking. It requires a need for someone to be put in the hot seat but only when something "goes wrong". If nothing happened, there would be no need to hold someone accountable. When we blame someone, we attempt to tell their own story. But, much like Malle's article and the following, Janica Nadler's article "Blaming as a Social Process: The Influence of Character and Moral Emotion on Blame", in blaming others, we look at how it shows more about us as individuals and our values than we even realize.

As humans, we have it instilled into our brains and our customs that we need blame. However, what we fail to realize is that ". . . blaming is social because it is about attributions of other people and their intentions," (Nadler). We have created an atmosphere in which it is easy to blame and we rely on it to function properly. This takes our personal views of a situation, of people, and of our own morals/experiences to create a story that explains why something happened. For most, that involves someone making *something* happen. When we hold someone accountable for negative reactions, we make

a choice to rely on blame as it gives us a safety net to fall back on. In choosing to put the blame on others, we engage in this process that runs our society and creates relationships because it shows us what we need to see and believe to feel safe and secure. Both explain that we need to blame others to get this comfort. This argument explores some of the most relevant and concerning theories of blame. It explains why we blame each other in relationships: we have a need for closure. Accountability mentally allows us that closure.

Learning from our own mistakes and accepting those mistakes is better than simply just saying you can do better. We can truly improve by working together and on our own by creating a blame-free environment and allowing growth to happen. As explored earlier, blame can be thought of in a series of events that happen to have a person involved, but the outcome of these events has to do with the luck and outside factors of the environment and situation. Because of this, it is not fair or healthy to assign blame. Unfortunately, we have it instilled in us that whether it be responsibility (positive blame) or blame (negative) an event isn't over until blame has been determined. In Wendy Johnson's article, "We Need to Ditch Individual Blame," she brings up the idea of workplace norms. We have a system of how things have always been done, and, therefore, how they should continue to be done. "Mistakes are more likely to be due to systems and the prevailing culture of 'how things are done around here,'" in the workplace scenario and many other scenes across the nation. This need for things to stay the same and be 'perfect' creates a scenario in which no one can win as we are not perfect and cannot predict everything or accomplish everything. If we acknowledge that things were once a certain way, but there is no longer a need for them to stay that way, we create a space of

growth as individuals as well as groups. Through growth, we can allow ourselves to deviate from the standard and avoid blame. In short, we can accept mistakes, learn from them, and move on.

We need to stop focusing on creating conducive environments for learning about who is at fault in a situation. Instead, we need to focus on what happened, what we can do to fix it, and what we can learn from it. Another article that explores this, much like Johnson's, is Claudia Zuorick's "The Road Out of Blame." So much of the time, we fail to realize "what lies beneath the blame, and this can be found within each person's early life history," such as what one's childhood looked like and what values their family holds to a standard. By looking at why we choose blame to handle our emotions, we can get ahead of ourselves to stop blaming others. If we look at this from a lens of relationships, you can be better individuals and work together as a couple by looking at the facts and making an educated decision and response based on the facts. This is for several reasons: you eliminate the worry of your partner not understanding, you are focused on your and your partner's advancement so that you do not have to have the constant fear of mistrust. You have a more robust trust system because you know that you can count on one another to better yourself.

Although it has become exceedingly evident that there is a benefit to having a blame-free society for a not only group but individual growth as well, both the arguments that blame is necessary in relationships, and it is what makes our world run in aspects such as court proceedings. According to Susan Krauss Whitbourne, Ph.D., it is impossible not to blame. We have options on who to defer blame and responsibility to; this can include ourselves, others, or a higher power. Although she

makes the argument that these are the reasons we cannot avoid blame, in reality, she simply gives us the excuses which we use to assign blame and responsibility: “Blame is an excellent defense mechanism Blame is a tool we use when we’re in attack mode We’re not very good at figuring out the causes of other people’s behavior, even our own It’s easier to blame someone else than to accept responsibility People lie,” (Whitbourne). These are reasons why we blame, not facts of why we cannot stop blaming others. Not once does she state why we have to have someone held accountable. She shows us that blame is purely in our heads and in our society. As mentioned above, blame is a psychological concept created by society. There are benefits such as cooperation, learning, acceptance, and trust in a blame-free society. This leads to not only individual growth but also group growth. We use blame because we know it, and it’s easy. We use it, but we do not need it.

Let us look at this from the lens of a failed relationship. For example, take a court case of divorce: yes, something happened to end the marriage. Does it necessarily matter to the end result what happened? The two individuals (because that is what a relationship is made of) are in court, deciding that there will not and cannot be a future for their relationship. They may have made that decision at different times and in different ways, but both parties came to the conclusion. In order for a marriage to

truly fail, trust must be lost. If something is lost, one simply does not know where it is; it is just gone. To move forward, it does not matter why the divorce happened, only that it did and the marriage is no longer existent. Blame-free environments allow us to do better and grow. We make mistakes. We learn from those mistakes and we move forward. That is how we grow and trust one another. Trust is built from the absence of blame. When we blame, we break that trust. The difference is that someone breaks trust. Facts make trust lost.

There are so many other intricate factors that control our world and contribute to how we live and the ways in which we navigate one another and our surroundings. But the reality is that blame, responsibility, and accountability have been ingrained into our brains, our societies, and into our cultures for so long. Why can we not choose to make ourselves and our community better by making the conscious effort to realize it is not someone’s fault but rather something that happened that we can move on from and learn from? For a genuine relationship to work, there has to be a strong level of trust. If we choose to believe in that trust, we can build stronger relationships; healthy relationships that help us to grow and change for the better. Relationships that will heal what a lack of trust and an abundance of blame broke in the past.

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