

WARREN SHIBLES

BLAME AND THE GERMAN SUBJUNCTIVE

"And so when we are hindered, or disturbed or distressed, let us never lay the blame on others, but on ourselves, that is, on our own judgments. To accuse others for one's own misfortune is a sign of want of education; to accuse oneself shows that one's education has begun; to accuse neither oneself nor others shows that one's education is complete." (Epictetus (1916), *Enchiridion*, sect.5)

Abstract

Blame is shown to be abusive and unnecessary. It is based largely on a faulty view of emotion as well as on faulty subjunctive thinking. Although the subjunctive has almost disappeared from English, German uses it widely. A careful use of the subjunctive can help us avoid false blame, retribution and revenge.

Whereas the subjunctive has nearly disappeared from English, German still uses it widely. Its use has some important implications for the concept of blame.

Blame will here be regarded as an emotion and analyzed in accordance with the cognitive theory of emotion. Both Rational-Emotive Therapists and philosophical psychologists have come to hold the cognitive theory of emotion. (Ellis 1962, 1977; Ellis/Grieger 1979; Maultsby/Klärner 1984; Schwartz 1986; *Journal of Rational-Emotive Therapy*; Gordon 1987; Lyons 1980; Rorty 1980; Shibles 1974, 1978) According to the theory:

- (a) Emotions are not just feelings.
- (b) Emotions (*Gefühle*) are assessments (evaluations, i.e., self-talk or utterances) which produce bodily feelings (*Empfindungen*).
- (c) We ourselves ultimately cause our emotions by our assessments. They are not caused merely by external events. Only we can make ourselves bored, angry, revengeful (blaming), etc.

(d) We can change our emotions by changing our assessments.

(e) Assessments which produce negative emotions are typically fallacious, e.g., faulty expectation, blame without evidence, believing something is "bad in itself" (misuse of value terms), etc.

(f) Therefore, we can prevent and eliminate negative emotions by clarifying our assessments.

An analysis of blame and the German subjunctive allows us to do that.

What I term a "meta-emotion" is an emotion about an emotion, for instance, fear of fear, fear of embarrassment, fear of love, etc. It is also possible to have a meta-meta-emotion: "I fear the boredom of depression." In this regard, *Blamage* ("shame, disgrace") is interesting. It refers not, as in English ("blame"), or French (*blamer*), to blaming, but rather to the emotional result of blame: shame. "Blame" is exposed as an emotion involving the value assessment that someone or something is bad. A bodily feeling (*Empfindung*) follows from such assessments. Shame, in one sense, can be an emotion of the emotion blame, that is, a meta-emotion.

Blamieren may, however, derive from the Greek, meaning "to blaspheme". The French, *blamer*, derives around the 11th and 12th century through Latin from the Greek *blasphemein*, to say what is false or bad, to blaspheme, to curse. *Blamieren* is recorded in low German in the 15th century. In the 16th century, the French word, *blâmer* (older: *blasmer*) meant to blaspheme, find fault with, condemn. Early forms of German *blamieren* meant to abuse, belittle, slander, scorn, despise, insult, cast a slur on, ridicule, scold (Jones 1976:150; Dauzat 1971:91).

Farrell (1971) gives several contemporary expressions for blame and censure:

(a) "To judge a person or thing as deserving condemnation": *tadeln* ("censure"); *jemandem einen Vorwurf machen aus etw.* (used in negative) ("reproach"); *übelnehmen, verargen, verübeln* (*übel* means "bad", a value

term, and *üble Laune* refers to a "bad temper") (pp.43f.).

(b) "To fix the responsibility for something done": *verantwortlich machen für etw.*; *schuld sein an etw.* ("to be to blame for") (p.44).

Schamgefühl ("sense of shame, modesty") conforming to the cognitive theory of emotion when defined as "the feeling of humiliation which springs from a consciousness of having offended against standards of propriety, etc." (p.308). "Shame" is also reflexive (*sich schämen*, "to be ashamed"), suggesting however remotely, that we cause our own shame. This contrasts with *beschämen* which involves causing others to be ashamed or arousing shame in others.

It has been argued that it makes no sense to retributively blame anyone, because to change the past is not within our power, and we could not in the situation have done other than we did do, or else we would have done so (Shibles 1987). "I could have done such and such", is conditional, subjunctive, and contrary to fact. The pragmatic value of blame, then, is not backward, but forward looking. The basic purpose of blaming is to change future behavior or correct unfairnesses. Retributive blame may be rejected for rehabilitative blame, correction rather than punishment. Blaming is a form of fallacious thinking, and a misuse of the term "bad". We note the easy transition in German from *verargen* ("blame") to *verärgeren* ("anger"). *Verärgeren* implies an attitude, is more than a momentary outburst, but need not involve outward display of feeling (Farrell 1971:16). We keep needless negative emotions alive by dwelling on them. Faulty thinking leads to anger. It is no good to say, "You could have done otherwise". We cannot go out of our skin. (*Kein Mensch kann aus seiner Haut heraus.*) We cannot suddenly become someone else.

Modals of blame: Modals, the subjunctive and conditionals present as-if's, hypotheticals, assumptions, degrees of doubt, nonreality and the impossible. They concern words such as: *if, would, could, should, might, may, doubt, appear to, want, wish, hope, supposed to, imagine, believe* etc. These are either value terms, counterfactuals, hypotheticals

or statements of desires. They involve degrees of certainty because of hearsay or lack of knowledge, and so, could's may's and might's. *Möchte (gern)* ("should, would like") refers, for example, to the emotion of anxiety. Emotions also accompany subjunctives and modals.

We blame because something is regarded as bad, because we think what was done need not have been done, because we think, "one could have done otherwise". We may explore the meaning of "could" in this statement:

(1) "I could have done otherwise." (*Ich konnte ...* Indicative. This suggests I really could have done so.) *Ich habe anders handeln können.* "I could have done otherwise." Note the use of "could" in the following joke:

*Beim Wetteramt läutet das Telefon.
"Herr Meteorologe, können wir morgen gutes Wetter kriegen?"
"Für wieviel Personen, bitte?"*

(2) "I could have done otherwise." (*Ich könnte/hätte ... können ...* Subjunctive. This suggests uncertainty or doubt.) To distinguish the English, we could instead write:

(3) "I 'could' have done otherwise." It is an assumption and presumptuous to say that one could have done otherwise than what one did do. That "could" be false. (*Das könnte falsch sein.*)

"Could have" equivocates between other modals, such as: *would have, might have, should have, was allowed to, had to, wanted to, knew enough to*. One may not have known enough to do otherwise. "Could" can easily create a category-mistake. Also we may have the impression, belief, or feeling that we could have done otherwise. Belief and feeling statements use the subjunctive. To "Who stole the money?" we can reply, "It could (should) have been the cat?" (*Sollte es die Katze gewesen sein?*)

A feeling can be objective (or indicative) or subjective and hypothetical (subjunctive). We can in German "feel" that someone could have done otherwise in either sense. "I feel that ..." is already an opinion,

and to put it in the subjunctive would make it a meta-emotion, a feeling, of a feeling, an hypothetical hypothetical. It may be perhaps translated as, "I would feel that ...". It may suggest: "I perhaps feel that perhaps he could have done otherwise."

The subjunctive qualification is useful. If one could not do differently, then blame is unwarranted. The subjunctive expresses mere supposition, "Suppose that ...". Another form is to qualify "done" by the subjunctive:

(4) "I 'could' have 'done' otherwise." In the present, German gives us two forms of "do":

(a) *Ich tue* (indicative), "I (really) do."

(b) *Ich täte* (subjunctive) "I would do" or "I 'do'."

The same applies to the past tense. Thus, German can be more cautious than English in presenting the above expression. It is like saying,

(5) "It is claimed that I 'could' have 'done' otherwise." We claim to be able to do otherwise than we did. It may be impossible. The subjunctive protects our conjecture and takes the absolute certainty out of language. We say, "If I could, I would have done otherwise" (*Wenn ich könnte, würde ich anders handeln.*) "If I 'could', I (would) 'do' something else." Part of the meaning of "could" is a wish or hope:

(6) "If only he had not done it." (*Wenn er es nur nicht getan hätte.*) This may be compared with: "If only I could be young again." (*Könnte ich nur wieder jung sein.*) "If I were a bird, I would fly to you." (*Wenn ich ein Vöglein wär, flög ich zu dir.*) In one sense, it suggests a request, to ask one to do otherwise:

(7) "You could have done otherwise, please." It is to say you could have done so if you so wished, just as we can say, "If you wish, you can help me." (The German uses the subjunctive here for can (could).)

"Wenn du wolltest, könntest du mir helfen." It is also like a plea:

(8) "How could that have happened?" (*Wie könnte das geschehen sein?*)

The subjunctive expresses emotion in these ways. When an act is given a negative value, a negative emotion follows: blame, guilt, revenge, resentment.

If we cannot say what an offender will do in the future, how can we be so certain that he or she could have done otherwise in the past? It is a false assumption that people can always do anything at all. We cannot always expect a child to do other than the child did. Even promises are conditional. "I promise" (*Ich verspreche dir ...*) is best put in the subjunctive (*Ich verspräche dir ...*).

It is an equivocation to jump from, "Someone could have done otherwise", to "You could have done otherwise". It is also equivocation to jump from, "You 'should' not have done it", to "You 'could' have done otherwise". The latter expression may only suggest the moral expression:

(9) "He should have done otherwise". In German, *sollen* means both "should" and "claim to". *Er soll reich sein*, means, "He is reputed to be rich". But to say one must (*muß*) have been able to do otherwise, is too absolute.

(10) "He must have been able to have done otherwise." But even being convinced (*überzeugt*) employs the subjunctive in German. Because of the belief in such an absolute necessity, punishment goes with blame. But to punish is to suggest that the pain given will somehow change what was done, make one have done otherwise, do the impossible. And it is not clear what it is about a person (actions, thoughts, or emotions etc.) which is being blamed. One is punished as if (*als ob*) one could have done otherwise. But, in terms of one's full situation, emotions, abilities and thinking:

(11) "If one could have done otherwise, one would have done otherwise." It is no good to say, "If I were you ..." (*Wenn ich an Ihrer Stelle*

wäre ...; Wenn ich Sie wäre ...).

Punishment, then, is irrelevant. Future correction, rather than past blame is needed. And we cannot command, or tell the offender to change, or say, "You *must* change". We may wish rather to rehabilitate and educate the offender appropriately. Punishment does not do that. To blame is to try to command both the past and the future. We may ask, "Could one have done otherwise than to blame and punish others?" Several statements render this point as follows:

*Wenn mancher Mann wüßt, wer mancher Mann wär, zeigte
mancher Mann manchem Mann manchmal mehr Ehr.*

*Am Abend wird man klug für den vergangenen Tag, doch
niemals klug genug für den, der kommen mag. (Fr. Rückert)*

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