

Fault versus Blame



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“One Improved Unit” is an original column appearing sporadically on Monday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by the founder and editor Skyler J. Collins. Archived columns can be found here. OIU-only RSS feed available here.

Distinguishing between *fault* and *blame* is important to me. How I react to a situation depends on the difference. Here’s how I define either and why I react in the way that I do toward them.

What is Fault?

I’d argue that fault is as simple as cause and effect, and not necessarily willful. It means that you are the cause to some effect. For example, if I fall out of a tree by accident and land on someone, I am at fault for injuring them. Because I am at fault, I must compensate them as guided by custom and arbitration. I caused their injury, the fault was mine, but in the case of this particular accident, I am not to be feared by the injured party as their enemy or someone bent on doing them harm.

What is Blame?

To be blameworthy is to be at fault, but to be at fault is not always to be blameworthy. Blame, I’d argue, can only be assigned to a willful cause to an effect. In the previous example, fault was assigned to an accidental fall from a tree, causing an injury, but blame was not. Had I willfully jumped from the tree to land on and injure someone, then I would be both at fault and to blame. In other words, one is worthy of blame if they willfully cause injury or damage to someone or something (among other causes).

Why the Difference?

I think this distinction is important as it concerns how I react to a situation. If someone fell out of a tree by accident and injured me, I would expect them to make me whole, but I would not fear them as dangerous to my future health. However, if someone willfully jumped from a tree in order to injure me, I would not only expect them to make me whole, but I would consider them a predator. As such, I would take all necessary precautions to mitigate the risk that they represent to my life, up to and including killing them. To be at

fault is one thing, but to be assigned blame means the actions were willful. If those actions are injurious to person or property, then all necessary steps may be taken to insure one's safety from those who are to blame for their injury.

Fault, Blame, and Parenting

The distinction between fault and blame is important to how I parent as well. If one of my kids injures their sibling or another kid, my reaction will depend on whether they are merely at fault, or are worthy of blame. Was the injury accidental, or willful? If it was accidental, I will guide and help my kid make things right with the other kid. If it was willful, then I as a concerned parent will not only make things right with the other kid, but also dig deeper to find and heal the root cause of my kid's desire to injure someone else. Understanding when my kid is to blame for an injury sets me as a parent on a certain course of corrective action, whereas mere fault does not.

Final Thoughts

Focusing on distinguishing between fault and blame when a situation arises can help to prevent knee-jerk and possibly regretful reactions. It begins the process of thinking things through and choosing the wisest course to right wrongs. This distinction is a recent development for me and like all new ideas needs continual thought and practice.

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