For a long while now, philosophers have wondered the questions, “Does blame have societal value? Why or Why not? If it does, what is the value blame has?” Through extensive critical thinking, some philosophers have developed theses of their own answering these questions. Throughout this essay, I will be critically analyzing the arguments of specific philosophers in the end showing blaming attitudes should be permissible in society.

The position that I align with the most is the position that Martha Nussbaum holds on blame’s value in society. First, we must differentiate two often confused terms that relate greatly to blame, anger and frustration. Blaming often stems from some sort of anger of a person, while frustration is separate. According to Nussbaum, one’s frustration stems from an upsetting event that one believes inadvertently occurred. On the other hand, anger comes from one’s belief that something bad that happened to him or her was deliberate. For example, let’s say that you were on an important phone call with a company who is considering hiring you and you really need this job. Suddenly, you lose service and the call is dropped. The phone company did not intentionally drop your call, you would be frustrated, not angry, in this example. Nussbaum alludes to Aristotle numerous times throughout her essay. In terms of
anger, Aristotle says that “the person sees... the item damaged has to be seen as significant and not trivial, and that is why pain is a consequence... the pain of anger typically also makes internal reference to the (believed) wrongful act of another person” (Nussbaum 43).” With this reference, Nussbaum makes the reader infer that blame is a logical response to what a person finds valuable and the need to show that their values deserve the respect of others. It makes sense that blame acts in this manner. Imagine that you value family time, but you do not value going out to dinners. In scenario one, the only way that you can get home to see your family is through a friend, but that friend won’t take you home out of spite. In the second scenario, you are with your family, who are deciding whether they want to go to dinner. Once again, the only way that you go out to dinner is through a friend, but that friend won’t take you out of spite. In this scenario, the only time you would significantly blame your friend it would be for depriving you of the thing that you value. With all this in mind, Nussbaum makes the argument that blaming attitudes are permissible because of the values they describe for people.

Now we go to some of the opponents of blame attitudes being permissible. First, I take you to the beliefs of Christopher Evan Franklin who believes that we should try to remove blame from societies. Right away, Evan Franklin questions the reader “Aren’t sadness and disappointment more enlightened responses to blameworthiness than resentment and indignation?” (Evan Franklin 207). To answer his question: while sadness and disappointment are more enlightened responses, they are by no means as effective responses. Let’s use the example that we used so often in class; you asked
a friend if they can pick you up from the airport and your friend said yes, even though she knowingly will not be able to. When you land from your flight, while it would be more enlightened to express disappointment in your friend, it is not that effective in explaining to her that she should never do that. Instead, by showing indignation, you are clearly expressing that what she did cannot happen again by through an emotion that is not considered enlightened. Evan Franklin furthers his position through the perspectives of philosophers George Sher and Ray J. Wallace. Sher’s belief is that to blame someone is simply to react to them in a way produced by a combination of the belief that they acted badly and the desire that that this was not the case. Evan Franklin refuted Sher’s perspective by arguing that his belief allows attitudes such as resentment and indignation to be permissible. Then Wallace’s view is presented, stating that valuing X (X can be anything) does not require that we blame someone who disvalues X. Valuing requires only that we have some sort of emotional attachment to X. Once again, Evan Franklin discredits this theory by saying his belief allows attitudes such as resentment and indignation to be permissible. Throughout Evan Franklin’s argument, he made it clear he is not in favor of indignation and resentment in the context of blame, but there was a lack of support in what about those attitudes harm society.

Lastly, we move to the ideology of Michele Moody-Adams. Throughout her argument, Moody-Adams refers to the inability thesis that she defines as “the claim that sometimes one’s upbringing in a culture simply renders one unable to know that certain actions are wrong” (Moody Adams 293). She explains that this thesis is tied up
in also providing a freeing excuse. She is saying that blame falls under this thesis where someone’s upbringing can be a provided background to why they are not culpable for the blame, therefore avoiding traditional blaming attitudes. From what is being understood, Moody-Adams is arguing that using upbringing is not viable excuse for culpability for a person’s wrongful action. I agree that this excuse can potentially degrade society because, with the inability thesis, there cannot be a set of standards that everyone can live. However, as a society, we must grant some leeway for people who are clear outliers, who would not understand the norms of society and cannot be made culpable. An example of this would be someone who was effectively held captive by a cult their entire life and was taught that damaging property was a sign of respect. If this person went into the real world and damaged someone’s property, the owner would rightfully be furious, but the upbringing of the person in the cult would suggest that he shouldn’t be culpable of anything.

All in all, throughout all the philosophers’ ideologies on whether blame attitudes should be encouraged in society, there was a large lack of support on how these attitudes are harmful to society. Logically it makes the most sense that blaming attitudes are constructive in society.