Whitewashing Blame

Submitted to the American Philosophical Association

(Central Division) 2021 meeting

Word count: 2896

Abstract: I argue that influential recent discussions of blame by George Sher, T.M. Scanlon, and Miranda Fricker have whitewashed blame, characterizing it in ways that deemphasize or ignore its morally problematic features. In particular, they treat blame as little more than a wish (Sher), or as appropriate by definition (Scanlon), and infer from blame's having one useful function that it is a good practice overall (Fricker). These case studies of whitewashing, I argue, support two methodological conclusions. An accurate conception of blame must pay closer attention both to blame's harms, and to comparisons between blame and alternative, non-blaming reactions.

To whitewash, according to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, is "to gloss over or cover up vices, crimes, or to exonerate by means of a perfunctory investigation or through biased presentation of data." The British Empire whitewashed a violent and exploitative colonization of India, a country that still remembers being told: "we gave you the railroads." The disappearance and murder of Cindy Gladue was allegedly whitewashed in court, its harms repeatedly minimized. In a classic Biblical passage, Jesus compared the Pharisees to "whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and of everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness." With its vices covered up, something that has been whitewashed appears better than it is.[1]

I believe that many recent discussions have whitewashed blame. They have made it seem more innocent and more valuable than it is. They have said little about revenge, lynching, blaming a rape victim for her short skirt, or the scapegoating of Muslims and Jews. They have

[1] See Encyclopedia Britannica (2003); on the British *raj* in India, Gilmour (2018); on Cindy Gladue, Cunliffe (2018); and Biblica (2011), *Matthew* 23:27-28. The term "whitewash" also has other, distinct uses, apart from its literal use to refer to a solution used to paint walls white. For example, "whitewashing" can also refer to the use of White performers to portray people of color, or to the assimilation of minority groups into a dominant White culture. These other uses of the term raise the question whether blame has also been "whitewashed" in these other senses. I think the connection to other senses of "whitewashing" is likely to be indirect. It is far from obvious, to say the least, that blaming reactions by White people are generally better, kinder, or more 'innocent' than blaming reactions by people of color, and therefore more accurately described by what I call "whitewashing" characterizations of blame. Nevertheless, it is possible that whitewashing characterizations of blame incorporate norms, standards, or ideals dominant in White cultures, such as certain norms of politeness, into a conception of the nature of blame. I suspect that some conceptions of blame do indeed do this; but I leave these speculations aside to focus on "whitewashing" in the more classical, not explicitly racialized sense. For a helpful systematic discussion of racialized whitewashing, see Tehranian (2009).

described blame in general terms that make it sound particularly appealing. And they have often made blame seem to be the only live option—the only appropriate way to respond to a variety of wrongs. Non-blaming interventions, protests, and conversations then fall out of consideration entirely.

In what follows, I undertake three case studies of influential discussions of blame—by George Sher, T.M. Scanlon, and Miranda Fricker—arguing that each one whitewashes its topic. I will conclude by suggesting what resisting whitewash will require: more serious attention both to the harms of blame, and to non-blaming reactions to wrongdoing.

I. George Sher

"To blame someone," George Sher writes in *In Praise of Blame*, "is to have certain affective and behavioral dispositions, each of which can be traced to the combination of a belief that that person has acted badly or has a bad character and a desire that this not be the case"(Sher 2006, 115). Blame, Sher thinks, is closely tied to phenomena such as anger or other hard feelings, hostile behavior, reproach, and, in the case of self-blame, apology. But it does not require actual anger, hostility, reproach, or apology. A *disposition* to those reactions amounts to blame, as long as it is tied to the belief and desire Sher mentions. As Sher (2006, 96) puts it, "anyone who blames someone is at least disposed to become angry at him, to reproach him, and so on."

Sher's stated characterization of blame can seem too minimal. Blame, many have thought, requires actual hostility, or at least actual anger or other affective reactions that Sher treats as

inessential.[2] But this objection can be difficult to defend without defending a competing view of the nature of blame. I want to consider, instead, the striking way in which Sher's characterization changes.

In his concluding chapter, Sher defends blame by arguing that it is inseparable from a commitment to morality: "the cases for living as morality requires and for blaming those who do not must stand and fall together"(135). Sher's defense focuses mainly on blame's belief and desire, leaving aside the dispositions.[3] By the end of the chapter, Sher speaks of "the belief-desire combinations that I have said add up to blame"(130).

Sher ends his book with a return to the importance of blame: "That we would be better off if we were to weaken the connection between blame and rancor may be the kernel of truth in the anti-blame ideology, but that we would be better off if we abandoned blame itself is the larger falsehood in which that kernel is embedded"(2006, 138). The phrase "blame itself" seems clearly intended to contrast with "the connection between blame and rancor," which Sher does believe we should at least partly abandon. But the connection with rancor, or other hard feelings, is naturally understood, on Sher's view, as a dispositional connection. For Sher, blame disposes us to rancor. On Sher's stated characterization of blame, a connection to rancor is itself part of "blame itself." Blame *is*, for Sher, a disposition to anger and other similar reactions, organized around a belief-desire pair. This makes the contrast with "blame itself" hard to understand, unless "blame itself" is simply the belief-desire pair.

This stripped-down conception of blame continues to be attributed to Sher. According to Fricker (2016, 182n11), "Sher defines blame as involving a belief-desire pair"; Shoemaker and Vargas (forthcoming, 6n12) talk of "the proposal advanced by Sher (2006), according to which

[2] See Wallace (2011), Wolf (2011), Bell (2013), Smith (2013), and Tognazzini (2013).
[3] For objections to this focus, see Hieronymi (2008).

blame consists in a belief-desire pair." These attributions do not match Sher's initial characterization of blame. But they are also not entirely misreadings, since Sher himself slides toward this view. It is a strikingly minimal characterization of blame as simply believing someone has acted badly or has a bad character and wanting this not to be so. It makes no attempt at all to distinguish excusing an action from blaming. And it is not the characterization with which Sher started. The paradigmatic reactions Sher noted as commonly associated with blame have been replaced in center stage by a belief in badness and a desire that someone be or have done better.

II. T.M. Scanlon

According to T.M. Scanlon (2008, 128),

> To claim that a person is *blameworthy* for an action is to claim that the action shows something about the agent's attitudes toward others that impairs the relations that others can have with him or her. To *blame* a person is to judge him or her to be blameworthy and to take your relationship with him or her to be modified in a way that this judgment of impaired relations holds to be appropriate.

Scanlon imagines blaming his friend Joe for making cruel jokes about him at a party. In response, Scanlon might "for example, cease to value spending time with him in the way one does with a friend, and I might revise my intentions to confide in him and to encourage him to confide in me"

(2008, 129-30). Blame, for Scanlon, takes someone's attitudes to impair the relationships they can have, and reacts in a way that "reflects this impairment"(2008, 123).

As Angela Smith points out, impaired relationships sometimes call for love or affection, rather than reproach. When these reactions are judged appropriate, Scanlon seems forced to count them as blame. As Smith (2013, 38) puts it, "It is clearly going too far to suggest that showing extra love and affection toward someone can count as a way of blaming him!" Turning to less extreme cases, even withdrawals of love and affection may not appropriately be called "blaming" reactions. In Scanlon's own example, we might wonder whether simply losing interest in spending time with someone, or losing trust in her, must count as blame. Including all reactions one judges appropriate seems to stretch "blame" into a much broader category that lumps blame together, by definition, with many other reactions we find appropriate. Blame, we might think, goes beyond simply losing interest.[4]

Smith's objection to Scanlon can be seen as a charge of whitewashing. But I think even this objection underdescribes the extent of the whitewash. As with Sher, attention to changes in characterization is instructive. Scanlon soon, and often, drops talk of "judging" a reaction to be appropriate, characterizing blame instead as the reaction that is in fact appropriate. He writes that "To blame…is to hold the attitude…that this impairment makes appropriate"(2008, 131). In summarizing "five elements that are central to the general account of blame that I am offering,"

[4] Smith's preferred amendment to Scanlon's view addresses its excessive breadth by characterizing blame in terms of an "element of moral protest"(Smith 2013, 38). Chislenko (2019a) argues that this view treats all or at least many non-blaming protests as cases of blame. If this is right, Smith's view may whitewash blame as well. For more detailed discussion of the various formulations of Scanlon's view, see Chislenko (2019b).

Mason (2011), Wallace (2011), and Wolf (2011) criticize Scanlon for leaving out what they see as an essential emotional element in blame. These criticisms are not exactly accusations of whitewashing, since they do not claim that emotional blame is generally worse or more vicious than affectless blame. But they are partly similar to accusations of whitewashing, to the extent that they see Scanlon as making blame look generally milder than it is. For Scanlon's replies, see Scanlon (2011, 2013).

Scanlon ends with "5. The *response* (blame) that is appropriate"(2008, 138). More precisely: "To blame a person is to have attitudes and intentions that are made appropriate by the way in which that person's faults impair one's relation with him or her"(2008, 186-7). On this view, there is, by definition, no such thing as inappropriate blame. Nor are there any appropriate responses to relationship impairment *other* than blame. Blame is, by definition, whatever response the impairment makes appropriate.

It can be tempting to reply that when Scanlon treats blame as appropriate by definition, this is a loose way of speaking which he does not literally believe. If this were so, it might still trouble us that *this* is someone's loose way of describing blame. But this is not just a loose way of speaking. On the contrary: thoughts of appropriateness play a substantial role in Scanlon's defense of blame. For Scanlon, one of the tasks of a descriptive theory of blame is to explain "various facts about what I call the ethics of blame," including "why we should blame—why blame is not an attitude we would do better to avoid"(123).[5] Scanlon's answer appeals in part, not to his characterization of blame in terms of reactions judged appropriate, but to a view of blame as actually appropriate (2008, 168-9):

> Assuming that one's relationship with a person has requirements that he or she can fall short of, the rejection of blame would involve either denying that the other person's actions can have a meaning that impairs this relationship or denying that when this happens some adjustment in one's own attitudes is appropriate….The latter…involves adopting an attitude of inferiority that is demeaning to oneself.

[5] One might wonder why the aim is to *explain* this "fact", known in advance to be true, rather than to help us think about whether it is true. But we can leave this aside.

If Scanlon allowed the appropriateness of any "adjustment in one's own attitudes" other than blame, he could not insist that the rejection of blame is a rejection of appropriate attitude adjustment altogether. He would have to allow the possibility of other adjustments, besides blame, that react appropriately and avoid a demeaning attitude of inferiority. His resistance to the rejection of blame here depends on his identifying blame with "appropriate adjustment," treating all appropriate responses to relationship impairment as cases of blame.

III. Miranda Fricker

Miranda Fricker (2016, forthcoming) offers what she calls a "paradigm-based explanation" of blame. This kind of explanation looks not for a conceptual analysis or a definition, but for "a paradigm of the phenomenon we want to understand, not only in the sense that it constitutes a clear and central exemplar but also in the sense of being a candidate for an explanatorily basic form"(2016, 165).[6] Fricker (2016) aims to identify a paradigm of blame, and to use it as "the basis for a vindicatory explanation of the role that blame plays in our lives"(167).

Fricker's "proposed paradigm form of blame is Communicative Blame—blame that is performed in the most simple and socially immediate sort of interpersonal exchange: I wrong you, and in response you let me know with feeling that I am at fault for it"(2016, 171). Communicative Blame is a speech act that "is fundamentally aimed at promoting greater alignment between the moral understandings of the blamer and the blame by enlarging the moral awareness of the wrongdoer"(2016, 175). For Fricker (2015, 166), blame's

[6] This is not in very sharp contrast with Scanlon, who calls his discussion "an interpretation of blame rather than an analysis"(2013, 84).

> overarching transformative function is offered as the core of the answer to the general question whether our practice of blame can be seen, when we step back from it, as serving a positive purpose, or whether we would collectively do better to 'rise above' blame to some other way of living with each other's wrongdoing.

Let us accept that the aim of moral alignment is a good one. Nevertheless, this "general question" is a false dichotomy. Serving one positive purpose is entirely consistent with being, overall, a bad practice, which we would collectively do better to 'rise above'. A practice—say, the use of fossil fuels—can serve its purpose badly, if humans are bad at using it. Or it can serve its purpose in ways so harmful that the purpose is not worth it. An emphasis on blame's positive function or 'point' can gloss over other, less "positive" features of blame.

Moreover, Fricker focuses on one particular function, point, or purpose of blame: the function of bringing the wrongdoer and the blamer into moral alignment.[7] Some things are hard to understand in terms of a single function; forgiveness seems to be one example, as do laughter and human hands. Why should Communicative Blame not have many different functions, too? Saying "God damn it, you left your shoes out again!" can aim simultaneously at moral alignment, self-expression, protection, domination, and withdrawal from a relationship. As a point of doctrine, this is consistent with Fricker's view, according to which "there may well be more than one point in blaming each other for wrongdoing"(2016, 166). But Fricker chooses a particularly

[7] Fricker notes that blame can affect a blamee's psychology in ways that change what moral reasons she has; blame can then bring the wrongdoer's moral *reasons*, as well has her moral understanding, in alignment with the blamer's. Blame thus creates "twin alignments"(2016, 167). Her paradigm of blame can then be described as focused either on one function, of creating twin alignments, or on two functions, one corresponding to each alignment. Either way, we can ask whether blame has additional functions that might be less desirable.

valuable function to emphasize; the value and centrality of the others are not considered, and may still be an open question. A description of a single function, or family of functions, of blame is rather like a list of "pros" and "cons", with part of the "pro" side filled in and the rest left blank.[8]

These criticisms can seem unfair. Fricker insists that blame's powerful role in reaching moral alignment "may be used for good or ill"(2016, 182), and is apt to be misused by those in power. She catalogues a range of "pathologies of blame," in which blame is unreasonably demanding, disproportionate, too prolonged or misdirected, or otherwise misguided or unfair (168-70). And she recognizes the possibility of discovering that "the proper point of Communicative Blame might be better achieved by a further softened, perhaps indirect stance towards the wrongdoer"(174). How much emphasis do bad cases of blame deserve?

The key issue here, I think, is not emphasis, but doctrine. For Fricker, blame's "alignments in moral consciousness…provide the basis for a vindicatory explanation of the role that blame plays in our lives, by revealing Communicative Blame as essential to the interpersonal normative energy that perpetually regenerates and develops shared moral consciousness"(2016, 167). The word "essential" is worth noticing here. In her view of Communicative Blame as "essential," alternatives to blame drop out. There is no attention to the non-blaming protests, the forward-looking conversations, and the interventions that aim to *avoid* guilt and blame, which make Communicative Blame look like one option among others. Although Fricker makes a range of helpful remarks about the pitfalls of blame, her discussion

[8] Compare Fricker (2016, 177), where she concludes that Communicative Blame's aim of twin aligment "shows that at least our paradigm of blame is not an expression of anything bad, but rather aims at bringing the wrongdoer to see things in part from the wronged party's point of view"(177). The latter does not rule out the former. Why can blame not have the latter aim, while *also* expressing something bad?

draws an inference from one good feature of blame to the overall goodness of blame, and indeed, to the view that blame is essential. As in the case of fossil fuels, or foot binding, or revenge, one valuable function does not make a practice essential, or even, on the whole, worth keeping, although a consistent emphasis on that function can make it seem so. It offers only the appearance of a vindicating explanation.[9]

IV. Conclusion

I have argued that three influential recent conceptions of blame are whitewashing conceptions. Sher treats blame as little or no more than a wish. Scanlon characterizes blame very broadly, and at key moments, his defense of blame treats it as appropriate by definition. Fricker appeals to blame's function of moral alignment to 'vindicate' the practice, ignoring both blame's other functions and alternative ways of seeking moral alignment. These characterizations are confusing in theory and dangerous in practice. Overdoing the praise of blame can lend an often hateful, vengeful, moralizing, oppressive practice an undeserved appearance of legitimacy.

Since whitewashing characterizations of blame do not whitewash or mislead intentionally, their aims can also be served by accurate characterizations. As with revenge, or fossil fuels, the nature and value of a practice is best brought out by a balanced consideration of its desirable and its morally problematic features. We can end by asking: what lessons can we learn from a discussion of whitewashing that might help us avoid it? What are the conditions that a non-whitewashing characterization of blame would have to meet?

[9] Discussions of revenge offer a helpful parallel, and, in my view, some similar cases of whitewashing, though I do not have the space to consider them here. For defenses of revenge, see especially Barton (1999), French (2001), Hershenov (1999), Kaufman (2012), and Levy (2014).

The discussion so far suggests two such conditions. First, a non-whitewashing characterization of blame must give significant attention to blame's harms. For Fricker, for example, "Communicative Blame aims to make the wrongdoer feel *sorry for what they have done*…. to inspire that admixture of judgement and moral emotion that is *remorse*"(2016, 173). Is remorse, or feeling sorry, a worthwhile goal? Is it a kind of suffering, and if so, is that suffering desirable? If not, then even if it is unavoidable, it may be appropriate to have mixed feelings about causing it. And if the harm is avoidable, we must consider the extent of the risk, and of the human tendency to go astray in a reaction with so many uses and so many pitfalls.

Second, a non-whitewashing conception of blame must assess blame's value with reference to a range of alternative, non-blaming reactions. Some alternatives may be much worse; even self-righteous or self-serving blame may be preferable to "writing someone off," seeing her as an object to be managed rather than a person to have a relationship with, or killing her. Other alternatives may be preferable to blame: a nonjudgmental conversation, a family intervention, or a nonviolent protest may be more respectful, more clearly appropriate, a better expression of commitment to morality, and a more effective way of reaching moral alignment. The desirability of various reactions may vary from case to case, and it can sometimes be unclear which reactions are alternatives to blame and which ones are instances of it. But we do not live in a world in which blame is our only option, or the only way to achieve various constructive aims. Blame's being *one* way to achieve those aims is therefore not a vindication; we must also ask what else we could do instead.

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