

The Whitewashing of Blame

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Abstract: I argue that influential recent discussions have whitewashed blame, characterizing it in ways that deemphasize or ignore its morally problematic features. I distinguish “definitional,” “creeping,” and “emphasis” whitewash, and argue that they play a central role in overall endorsements of blame by T.M. Scanlon, George Sher, and Miranda Fricker. In particular, these endorsements treat blame as appropriate by definition (Scanlon), or as little more than a wish (Sher), and infer from blame’s having one useful function that it is a good practice overall (Fricker). I use an analogy with revenge to illustrate the mechanisms of whitewashing, including broadening a concept to include available alternatives to it and inference from one feature of a practice to an overall conclusion about that practice. Several features of blame make it particularly prone to whitewashing, including blamers’ personal or emotional stake in blaming and widespread disagreement about the nature of blame. I argue that a non-whitewashing treatment of blame must pay closer attention both to blame’s harms, and to comparisons between blame and alternative, non-blaming reactions.

Keywords: Blame, responsibility, whitewashing, revenge

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I. Attributions of Whitewash

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

The past fifteen years have seen a resurgence of interest in the nature and value of blame. Philosophers writing about free will and responsibility, moral emotion, and injustice have increasingly seen a need to better understand and assess blame as a reaction to oneself and others. My contention in this paper is that influential recent discussions have whitewashed blame, in ways that are important to understand and to resist. They have made it seem more innocent and more valuable than it is. They have said little about lynching, victim blaming, or the scapegoating of

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.

Muslims and Jews, ignoring active discussions of these phenomena in other contexts.² They have described blame in general terms that make it sound particularly appealing as a way of caring about morality or standing up for what is right. And they have often made blame seem to be the only appropriate way to respond to a variety of wrongs, obscuring the possibility of interventions, protests, and conversations that repair or hold accountable without blaming. This narrowing of our options to the category of blame is both confusing in theory and dangerous in practice.³

This whitewashing has not been intentional, malicious, cynical, or sinister. Nevertheless, as those who resist blame emphasize, blame can be destructive in making its target feel “judged, shamed, berated, attacked,...hurt” (Pickard 2011, 216), “rejected, worthless,...and uncared for” (Pickard 2017, 175), and in encouraging “a sense of entitlement to inflict punishing attitudes on others” (Westlund 2018, 268). The whitewashing of blame underemphasizes or obscures its tendencies to hurt others and oneself, undermine relationships, reinforce oppression, and escalate conflict or hostility. The more we lose sight of blame’s tendencies toward these harms, the more likely we are to perpetuate them. By helping to develop an accurate picture of the nature and value of blame, more careful attention to whitewashing can lessen these harms, help advocates of blame to more compellingly describe blame’s valuable features, and illustrate mechanisms and effects of whitewashing that may be found in discussions of many other concepts and phenomena.

² For helpful discussions of these three phenomena, see Ore (2019), Lugo-Ocando (2015), and Thomas (2015), respectively.

³ Describing the alternatives is a delicate task, since, as we will see, the concept of blame is often broadened to include apparent alternatives as cases of blame. For recent discussions of alternatives to blame and of their advantages, see Pickard (2016), Tannenbaum (2018), Westlund (2018), and Chislenko (2019).

I will distinguish three types of whitewashing. In *definitional whitewash*, a general characterization of something identifies it with a category that is in fact less morally problematic. *Creeping whitewash* gradually abandons a stated characterization, describing something in more appealing ways that are inconsistent with one's own stated views.⁴ *Emphasis whitewash* allows particularly admirable (or at least unproblematic) examples, paradigm cases, or features to dominate a discussion. Drawing these distinctions can be helpful in many contexts, as a step toward identifying and resisting instances of whitewashing. They are particularly useful in the context of recent discussions of blame, where I think we can find all three types.

We can also distinguish different kinds of argument that something has been whitewashed. A *conception-dependent* argument defends or appeals to a conception of the phenomenon that the argument claims has been whitewashed. The whitewashed discussion is then said to be whitewashed, because it makes the phenomenon appear more attractive or innocent than the correct conception does. A *conception-independent* argument for attributing whitewash does not depend on a particular, substantive conception of the phenomenon at hand. Conception-independent arguments can come in different forms. A *procedural* argument, we might say, identifies whitewashing procedures or mechanisms, such as creeping whitewash or inattention to problematic features, that lead to a whitewashed conception or otherwise paint the phenomenon in an overly favorable light. If a discussion uses whitewashing procedures that we see as problematic, this gives us grounds for attributing whitewash. Other arguments can be conception-independent but not procedural. An *argument from counterexamples* might point out examples that seem incorrectly included or excluded in a conception of some phenomenon, in ways that make the phenomenon seem more valuable. Suppose some definition of blame counts showing extra

⁴ My term echoes recent discussions of “concept creep”; see Whitney (2021).

kindness, affection, and gratitude as a form of blaming. We might point out that this implication is implausible. The intuition that gratitude is not a kind of blame can provide part of the basis for a comprehensive conception of blame, but it is not itself a conception of blame. And yet it can allow even those with no settled views about the nature of blame to identify definitional whitewash. Whatever the correct conception of blame is, we might think, surely a conception that includes gratitude as a form of blame is overly rosy.

It is tempting to think that, to establish that something has been whitewashed, we need to have an accurate picture to compare against the allegedly whitewashed one. But we can identify illegitimate procedures or troubling counterexamples before reaching a general conception. Whitewashing is perhaps most common, most misleading, and most important to identify and resist when we are not yet sure what the correct conception is. It can then be naïve or backwards to expect an accurate general conception before checking for whitewash and other forms of bias.

Although many phenomena have been subject to whitewash, several features of blame make it particularly prone to being whitewashed. First, blamers often have a strong personal or emotional stake in blaming. Imagine that you blame a friend for walking away in the middle of a difficult conversation, in which you were raising an important issue but got a little too angry. When your blaming is intensely charged, you might be especially pulled to see it in a positive light. Second, blaming others can often be a way to avoid taking responsibility for one's own wrongs, faults, or vices. This is especially clear in "blame games," as when siblings each say the other started their fight. Whitewashing itself is, similarly, a common way to avoid taking responsibility for one's own wrongs, faults, or vices. Some of the motivations for blaming are thus themselves also motivations for whitewashing one's blame. The powerful human tendency to avoid responsibility motivates both blaming others and whitewashing one's blame. Third, in the case of blame, there is strikingly widespread, fundamental disagreement about the nature of the

phenomenon. While it is fairly uncontroversial that anger is an emotion and revenge is an action or behavior, there is a large, active debate about almost every aspect of the nature of blame, including whether it is an emotion, action, judgment, or other basic mental kind.⁵ We thus have little common ground in assessing whether a discussion of blame whitewashes it. Conception-dependent arguments for attributing whitewash have no widely shared conception of blame to which they can appeal. In practice, blamers' personal or emotional stake in blaming can also make it difficult to think clearly about what one is doing in blaming.

These features of blame leave it prone to whitewashing both in ordinary life and in theoretical discussion. They also offer good reasons to guard against the whitewashing of blame. Because blaming and being blamed are personally important, widely used in shifting and avoiding responsibility, and still somewhat opaque to us, having an unbiased picture of blame should matter to us. Moreover, many people believe that appropriate blame helps justify some forms of harmful response, such as punishment, revenge, angry reproach, or ostracism. It is worth taking extra care to be sure that these responses are justified.

These considerations motivate a closer look at the whitewashing of blame. They also suggest how we might proceed. When there is widespread, fundamental disagreement about the nature of a phenomenon, arguments that avoid controversial assumptions about the nature of the phenomenon can be more widely compelling. Procedural arguments can be especially helpful in identifying illegitimate procedures that may be common across a variety of discussions. My argument in this paper will be conception-independent and mainly procedural, although, to avoid suggesting that the whitewashing of blame is intentional, I will mostly talk of mechanisms rather

⁵ For a helpful overview, see Tognazzini and Coates (2018).

than procedures. I will not rely on any one conception of blame.⁶ Nor will I argue that blame is bad, or good. Instead, I aim to identify and resist some whitewashing mechanisms that I think are both tempting and widespread. Avoiding whitewash will help us see more clearly what blame is, and whether or when it is appropriate. I hope the discussion that follows will be useful to the full spectrum of blame's defenders and detractors, who all have reason to want an accurate conception of blame.

I turn now to three particularly influential discussions of blame by T. M. Scanlon, George Sher, and Miranda Fricker; I argue in §II that, in each case, whitewashing plays a central role in a favorable overall assessment of blame. In §III, I illustrate the mechanisms and dangers of such whitewashing through an analogy with revenge. §IV returns to the significance of whitewashing blame, and offers some concluding remarks about the challenges of describing blame without whitewashing. These challenges are both theoretical and moral. Resisting whitewash will require paying more serious attention to hateful, punitive, biased, and self-serving forms of blame, and to non-blaming reactions to wrongdoing. Obscuring the very possibility of non-blaming reactions is a key effect of whitewashing blame, which can make it look as though blaming is our only reasonable option.

II. Three Case Studies

1. T.M. Scanlon

⁶ I develop a conception of blame in [redacted for blind review], but I leave it aside here.

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).

Scanlon's characterization of blame is arguably an example of definitional whitewash. As Smith (2013, 38) points out, impaired relationships sometimes call for love or affection, rather than reproach; and "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 such reactions seems to stretch "blame" into a much broader category that lumps blame together with many other appropriate

reactions. Blame, we might think, goes beyond simply losing interest.⁷ These examples offer an argument from counterexamples for attributing whitewash to Scanlon's discussion. They may be convincing to some people, but not to others with a conception of blame similar to Scanlon's.

Scanlon offers an especially striking example of creeping whitewash. After describing blame as a reaction the blamer's "judgment of impaired relations holds to be appropriate," he soon, and often, characterizes blame 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," Scanlon ends with "5. The *response* (blame) that is appropriate"(2008, 138). Later in the chapter, he writes: "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 later statement, there is, by definition, no such thing as inappropriate blame. Nor are there any appropriate responses to relationship impairment *other* than blame. These characterizations explicitly identify blame with a kind of appropriate response.

It is natural to object that such characterizations are a loose way of speaking, which Scanlon does not literally believe. I think this objection is right to doubt that they express his considered view. As we saw, Scanlon also describes blame without characterizing it as appropriate. And he

⁷ For discussion of Smith's criticism, see Chislenko (2020). Mason (2011), Wallace (2011), and Wolf (2011) also 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).

discusses cases of inappropriate blame at length. One might still be troubled, and ask: why is *this* someone's loose way of describing blame? Loose talk can be influential, leading others to speak less loosely.⁸ More importantly, when Scanlon appears to identify blame with appropriate responses to relationship impairment, this may be *neither* his considered view, nor just a loose way of speaking. 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).⁹ Scanlon's defense of blame relies on a view of blame as the appropriate response (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.

Why would the rejection of blame deny that *some* adjustment in one's own attitudes is appropriate? If Scanlon did not identify blame with appropriate attitude adjustment, he could not suggest that the rejection of blame is a rejection of appropriate attitude adjustment altogether. He would have

⁸ See Boulton (2021), discussed in §IV below.

⁹ 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. I also leave aside the extent to which Scanlon's characterization of blame can offer a defense of blame once the assumption of blame's appropriateness is removed.

to allow the possibility of other adjustments, besides blame, that react appropriately and avoid a demeaning attitude of inferiority. We could then rightly ask why we would not do better to avoid blame and turn instead, as much as we can, to other adjustments of our attitudes. Creeping whitewash thus plays a central role in Scanlon's defense of blame, by allowing him to avoid asking why blame is the only response that can avoid a demeaning attitude of inferiority. Without a shift to characterizing blame as appropriate, there would be much more room to consider a rejection of blame.

2. *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. To blame a catcaller or a drunk driver, on Sher's view, is to believe that he acted badly or has a bad character, to want him not to have acted badly or have that bad character, and to be disposed to anger, hostility, and/or reproach toward him.

Sher's characterization of blame may be an example of definitional whitewash. Many have thought that blame requires actual hostility, or at least actual anger or other affective reactions that Sher treats as inessential (Wallace 2011, Wolf 2011, Bell 2013, Smith 2013, Tognazzini 2013). Removing hostility from a characterization of blame may make blame sound too appealing or too innocent. But this is controversial, and hard to show convincingly without relying on a particular

conception of the nature of blame. So rather than insist on definitional whitewash, we can look instead to creeping whitewash—to the striking way in which Sher’s characterization changes.

As Sher (2006, 112) initially puts it, blame is “a set of dispositions organized around a central desire-belief pair.” But in the course of Sher’s defense, the dispositions begin to drop out: “Because the beliefs and desires are clearly prior, I will, for the most part, restrict my attention to them. If we can explain why they are called for, the dispositions they sustain should pose few additional problems”(116).¹⁰ This restriction of attention eventually becomes a restriction in conception. By the end of the chapter, Sher speaks of “the belief-desire combinations that I have said add up to blame”(130). On this picture, blaming a catcaller or drunk driver need not involve even a disposition to become angry or hostile. Believing that drunk driving is wrong, and wishing someone had not done it, would already count as blame.

By the end of his discussion, it seems that what Sher calls a “more stripped-down notion which takes blaming to consist exclusively of having the relevant desires and beliefs”(138) is, to a large extent, Sher’s own conception of blame. This stripped-down conception continues to be attributed to him. According to Fricker (2016, 182n11), “Sher defines blame as involving a belief-desire pair”; Shoemaker and Vargas (2021, 598n12) talk of “the proposal advanced by Sher (2006), according to which blame consists in a belief-desire pair.” These attributions do not match Sher’s initial characterization of blame in terms of dispositions to reactions such as anger and hostility. But they are also not entirely misreadings, since Sher himself slides toward this view. The paradigmatic dispositions Sher initially treats as central to blame are gradually replaced in center stage by a belief in badness and a desire that someone be or have done better. The resulting conception, on which “the belief-desire combinations...add up to blame”(Sher 2006, 130), is a

¹⁰ For doubts about this, see Hieronymi (2008).

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 does not even attempt to distinguish excusing from blaming; on this “stripped down” conception, any wish that someone not have performed a bad action counts as blame. Imagine you believe that your daughter acted badly in playing with another child’s toy, and you want her not to have done it. On this picture, you are already blaming her. With its tendencies toward anger and hostility set aside as inessential, blame then sounds relatively innocent. Wanting people not to do bad things is praiseworthy, or at least defensible.

3. Miranda Fricker

Miranda Fricker (2016, 2019, forthcoming) offers what she calls a “paradigm-based explanation” of blame. This kind of explanation looks not for a conceptual analysis or 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). Variant forms and misuses can then be understood as derivative of the paradigm case. According to Fricker, “Sometimes in philosophy we can explain and thereby vindicate a practice... by making explicit its most basic role in our lives. In effect, one can paint a philosophical portrait of the practice—a picture that reveals what the practice is fundamentally like, what its point is”(2016, 165). 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 blamee by enlarging the moral awareness of the wrongdoer”(2016, 175). Fricker thinks this is a good aim. If, as she later puts it, “The role played by Communicative Blame in our moral relations is *to bring the wrongdoer and the blamer into an aligned moral understanding* of what has gone on between them”(2019, 246), this role vindicates the practice of blame, while also offering a way to say what is wrong with misuses of blame that “could not serve its proper point”(2016, 175). Blame that is too vengeful, too prolonged, or misdirected fails to bring the wrongdoer and the blamer into an aligned moral understanding, even though it still partially shares that aim.

Since Fricker aims to avoid definition in favor of paradigm-based explanation, her discussion of blame is not a significant instance of either definitional or creeping whitewash. Instead, it offers an important example of emphasis whitewash, in three related ways.

First, Fricker focuses almost exclusively on one particular feature of blame: its point, aim, or function. She rarely asks *how* blame serves its function. As she puts it: “If a valuable point is revealed, then the portrait may amount to a vindication; if the point is disvaluable in some way, then we may have discovered a reason to modify, curtail, or even abandon the practice (whether or not we actually could)”(2016, 165). Here, the ends seem to justify the means. Blame’s

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.

Fricker 2016, 166

This general question offers a false dichotomy: Serving a positive purpose is 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 a good purpose badly, if humans are bad at it. Or it can serve its purpose in ways so harmful that the purpose is not worth it, even though the purpose is a good one. Like blame, fossil fuel use serves many good purposes. But this does not yet show that we would not collectively do better to ‘rise above’ it.

Second, Fricker focuses on one particular function, point, or purpose of blame: the function of bringing the wrongdoer and the blamer into moral alignment.¹¹ In the case of forgiveness, Fricker writes (2019, 257) that “Forgiveness, like most human practices, surely serves a family of purposes or functions, and...the relative value of this or that function remains an open question.” 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 as well? Saying “God damn it, you left your shoes out again!” can aim simultaneously at moral alignment, self-expression, protection, threat, 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

¹¹ 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 as 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.

Fricker seems to have chosen a particularly valuable function to emphasize; the value and centrality of the others may still be an open question.¹²

Third, and relatedly, Fricker says little about alternatives—other reactions that might fulfill the same function. We can also aim at moral alignment in a non-blaming conversation, intervention, or protest. We might say: “Honey, I see where you’re coming from, and I don’t blame you. A lot of people drink when they grieve. But try to see this from our point of view. Your family is hurting right now. You need to stop drinking and be with us.” How should we evaluate practices of blame, in relation to other practices with the same basic point? Evaluating blame without considering alternatives is a bit like evaluating fossil fuel use without considering the possibility of renewable energy. It is hard to see how a paradigm-based explanation, or any other functional explanation, can vindicate a practice without considering whether other practices can do a better job in the same role. Is blame the only way of reaching a shared moral understanding? Is it the best way? It is certainly one common way, but not yet clearly “vindicated.”

Is Fricker’s discussion of blame so very whitewashed? 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

¹² Compare Fricker (2016, 177), where she concludes that Communicative Blame’s aim of twin alignment “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. Blame could have the latter aim, while also expressing something bad.

softened, perhaps indirect stance towards the wrongdoer”(174). How much emphasis do bad cases of blame deserve?

These are important acknowledgements. But it is also important to remember that Fricker’s overall assessment of blame is that “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). Fricker’s conclusion of “vindication” raises emphasis to the level of doctrine. Blame, as she points out, has the function, or “positive purpose,” of reaching moral alignment. One might accept this, and still go on to ask how well blame serves this function, whether its harms are worth it, or whether other, non-blaming reactions might serve this purpose better. Instead, Fricker concludes that blame’s function vindicates the practice, despite its pitfalls. Fricker’s emphasis on moral alignment plays a central role in an overall “vindication” of blame.

In this passage about vindicatory explanation, it is worth noticing Fricker’s characterization of blame as “essential.” Fricker’s vindicatory explanation does not argue that blame’s advantages are, as Pettigrove (2012, 359) puts it in a discussion of anger, “comparative advantages,” relative to other available alternative reactions with a similar point. Alternatives to blame are not rejected by means of an argument. Instead, they simply receive little attention—so little that they cease to show up as options at all. Blame then seems “essential”; the wealth of forward-looking conversations, non-blaming interventions, and other paths to shared moral understanding seem to disappear. This is, I think, the biggest danger in emphasis whitewash: it can make both flaws and alternatives shrink in our minds until we forget them. In the absence of other options, a single function or purpose then *appears* to vindicate a practice as a whole.

III. Ways of Whitewashing: An Analogy with Revenge

We have now seen three examples of whitewashing discussions of blame. These discussions slide into characterizing all blame as appropriate (Scanlon); downplay and then drop blame's connections to reactions of anger, hostility, and reproach (Sher); or emphasize blame's particularly attractive function of reaching a shared moral understanding (Fricker). In all three cases, the discussions then reach an overly quick endorsement, praise, or vindication of blame.

To make these attributions of whitewashing convincing and to bring out their importance, it will help to imagine a parallel set of whitewashing discussions of revenge. In parallel with Sher, we might say that to get revenge is to believe that someone has done something harmful, to desire that she not have done it, and to react with hostility. Perhaps a mere disposition to hostility characterizes motives of revenge, whereas actual hostility characterizes acts of revenge. In Scanlon's case, we can repeat verbatim. To get revenge on someone, we can say, "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." In the case of revenge, it may be more obvious that these characterizations are incomplete. They do not yet seem to capture the specific character of revenge as an act type or as a motive. Nor do they clearly distinguish revenge from other, related reactions that might be thought to be alternatives to revenge.

We can also offer a paradigm-based explanation of revenge. A natural paradigm, with a long and rich history, might be called Matching Revenge. In Matching Revenge, one inflicts the same harm on a perpetrator that the perpetrator earlier inflicted. One takes an eye for an eye, breaks a window for a broken window, or steals an Amazon package from someone who stole yours. In a derivative or less paradigmatic case, one might inflict a different, lesser, or greater harm. Matching Revenge has a discernible point, which Adam Smith (2002, 112-3) summarizes well:

“To bring [someone] back to a more just sense of what is due to other people, to make him sensible of what he owes us, and of the wrong that he has done to us, is frequently the principal end proposed in our revenge.”¹³ As Forschler (2012, 5) puts it, revenge can be powerful and effective in offering “a way of saying: ‘What you did feels like *that*.’” Matching Revenge thus serves a crucial positive function. It “gets even,” or restores one’s status, in a way that powerfully insists to its target, to a broader community, and to oneself that one has been seriously wronged. This function or point can be taken as the heart of a vindicating explanation of the practice of revenge.¹⁴

Why might this not be a fully satisfying “vindicating explanation”? Perhaps most obviously, it glosses over the significance of the harms inflicted by revenge. The intended harm is often extremely damaging. Unintended harms are also significant, and can be even greater. Any revenge that is disproportionate—or even *perceived* to be disproportionate—can easily lead to further cycles of revenge (Bohm and Kaplan 2011). There can be great potential for collateral damage. Apart from its often terrible consequences, revenge can itself be inconsistent with basic forms of respect or consideration that humans owe to each other, and a violation of rights to not be harmed in various ways. In claiming to vindicate the practice of revenge, the Matching Revenge paradigm would go from noticing one positive function to a conclusion of overall legitimacy, glossing over the ways in which revenge can be wrong or inappropriate despite its positive function. The vindication might also be unsatisfying in failing to explain why it treats Matching Revenge, not escalating revenge, as the paradigm. Both the choice of paradigm and the partial exploration of details tilt the playing field toward vindication. They offer a partial list of “pros” and “cons”, with

¹³ For discussion, see Forschler (2012, 3).

¹⁴ For other defenses of revenge, see Barton (1999), French (2001), Kaufman (2012), and Levy (2014).

a spotlight on the “pros”, a few “cons” in small print, and the rest omitted. And they give no consideration to available alternatives.

A consideration of revenge helps illustrate several mechanisms of whitewashing. First, what I called definitional and creeping whitewash can both proceed by a kind of *conceptual broadening*. If we characterize revenge as the appropriate response to a harm, we identify it with a broad category of appropriate responses, creating the impression that revenge is the only way to respond appropriately. We might then say, as Scanlon does of blame, that not pursuing revenge is demeaning to oneself. Thus Levy (2014, 668-9) writes that “*not* to react vengefully—to react with, for example, indifference, amusement, immediate forgiveness, or even greater sympathy for the perpetrator than for the victim—is actually insulting and therefore *immoral*.” This sounds plausible if we treat all angry and indignant reactions as vengeful ones, ignoring the possibility of anger and indignation without revenge.

Second, an emphasis on the advantages or desirable features of a reaction naturally works in tandem with conceptual broadening. If we ignore, or only briefly mention, revenge’s tendencies to escalation and collateral damage, we might more easily forget our other options.

Third, the resulting characterization can appear vindicating as a result of a particular kind of inference, which can be called *inference from one good feature*. From the fact that revenge functions to protect one’s social or moral status or one’s sense of self-worth, one can conclude that revenge is a valuable practice, and worth preserving. Conceptual broadening, apparent requirement, and emphasis on advantages all naturally combine to make the inference seem sound. Together, they can lead us to conclude that, as Levy (2014, 629) puts it: “Our vengeful reactions to harmful crimes are not ugly or shameful; on the contrary, they manifest a deep valuation of victims and a bitter denunciation of individuals who actively renounce this valuation through their criminal behavior.”

By itself, identifying mechanisms of whitewashing does not support any conclusion about the target of whitewash. Romantic love, philanthropy, and forgiveness can all be whitewashed in similar ways by ignoring their pitfalls, characterizing them too broadly, or inferring too quickly that they are “vindicated.” They are not thereby bad. The lesson of the analogy with revenge is procedural: certain familiar mechanisms of whitewashing should make us suspicious when we see them, and do not offer satisfying defenses of their subject. These are the same mechanisms we saw in the discussions by Scanlon, Sher, and Fricker. If we find these moves implausible in defenses of revenge, we should question them in the case of blame as well.

On the other hand, the revenge analogy is limited in important ways. First, there may be less fundamental disagreement about the nature of revenge than about the nature of blame. Revenge is typically described as an action or behavior, rather than a judgment or emotion, involving “the infliction of harm in return for perceived wrong” (Stuckless and Goranson 1992, 25; see Barton 1999, Forschler 2012). This makes it implausible to broaden the concept of revenge to include all or most appropriate or self-respecting reactions to being wronged. To many readers, whitewashed conceptions of revenge such as Levy’s appear clearly incorrect.

Second, although people do seek revenge, the tendency to approve of or defend revenge as a standard response to wrongs is not dominant either in theoretical discussion or in popular culture. Writers on both sides of various philosophical and political debates, as Kaufman (2012, 319) puts it, “typically share the assumption that revenge is obviously morally impermissible.” Blame, by contrast, is often a standard and accepted response. Many of us live in a “blame culture” (Timms 2022), in which, as Fast and Tiedens (2010, 97) put it, “blame becomes embedded in the shared culture of groups and organizations.” People who are used to blaming in a socially accepted way can find it unappealing to be told that they or others are making blame sound too innocent or too valuable.

These two contrasts help explain why the analogy with revenge is useful; the same whitewashing mechanisms that operate in discussions of blame are easier to recognize in the context of revenge, in part because we are less confused about what revenge is and less drawn to defend it. The contrasts also help explain why the whitewashing of blame deserves especially close attention. To the extent that blame is more widespread, more accepted, and its nature more contested, attributions of whitewashing will be both more difficult to assess and less appealing to consider. The analogy with revenge is then useful partly by contrast; it helps us see why the whitewashing of blame is hard to recognize and resist.

IV. Avoiding Whitewash

The writers I have discussed aim not to whitewash, but to capture the wide variety of blame and to bring out what is valuable about it—particularly when that value is missed or underemphasized. These purposes are good ones. Whitewashing characterizations of blame need not be malicious, self-serving, cynical, or intentionally misleading in the ways that many defenses of colonial exploitation are. I do not think that any of the writers I discussed whitewash blame intentionally. But in overselling blame, and too quickly concluding that blame is appropriate, praiseworthy, or vindicated, they take otherwise valuable pursuits too far. And in this context, excess is dangerous. Overdoing the praise of blame can lend even its more hateful, vengeful, moralizing, oppressive manifestations an undeserved appearance of legitimacy.

The analogy with revenge can help us see the significance of whitewashing. There is no merely verbal dispute about the word ‘revenge’ here. By making revenge seem generally a good practice, whitewashing can lead people to inflict or condone grievous harms, and ignore much

better alternatives. The same can be said about blame. Fast and Tiedens (2010, 97) summarize empirical research on various “far-ranging negative outcomes” of blame:

Repeated blaming leads to several negative consequences, including decreased health and well-being...and damage to one’s reputation.... Blaming is also harmful in group settings. Groups and organizations in which blame is routinely expressed are less psychologically rewarding for their members, less conducive to learning and innovation, and less productive than those in which people feel safe to take personal responsibility for their own mistakes.

Fast and Tiedens focus mainly on blame within ongoing cooperative organizations such as corporations. But it is also familiar that blame often plays a central role in domestic violence, mass shootings, war, genocide, and harmful forms of exclusion such as social ostracism and refusals to grant asylum to refugees (Lugo-Ocando 2015, Thomas 2015, Ore 2019). As Fricker (2016, 180-82) points out, blame can also be used to secure moral alignment with oppressive views and practices, such as depriving girls and women of educational opportunities. Moreover, Fast and Tiedens (2010, 97) present evidence that unlike many other reactions, blame is “socially contagious”: “merely observing someone make a blame attribution for a failure increases the odds that the observer will...engage in subsequent blaming for other, unrelated, failures.” Whatever its value may be, blame can often be harmful or dangerous, and its harms can easily spread.

We also know that whitewashing has important practical effects, both in undermining the integrity of a practice and in perpetuating its harms. Recent investigations of “reputation laundering” have found nations with the poorest human rights records pouring large sums of money into public relations firms and universities in attempts to reshape their image (Booth 2010a;

Cooley, Prelec, and Heathershaw 2022). Whitewashing is well funded in part because it creates the public support that governments, leaders, and other agents need in order to remain in power and continue their practices (Booth 2010b). None of this shows that blame is an inherently bad or disvaluable practice like genocide or domestic violence. But if its harms are great and whitewashing perpetuates them, it matters whether we whitewash blame. Avoiding whitewash is likely to help us either give up or stop a harmful practice, or continue it while better avoiding its harms.

Importantly, whitewashing a practice can be harmful even if the practice overall does more good than harm. We can grant that romantic love is not, overall, a harmful practice that needs to end. Yet a culture that whitewashes romantic love can leave people unprepared for its many harms, encourage them to undervalue friendships and other non-romantic relationships, and lead to lower self-esteem and even suicide among single people. We need not believe that love and blame are always bad. But we should still be concerned to avoid a picture that covers up their dangers.

Sher (2006, 138) laments the prevalence of an “anti-blame ideology.” We should avoid a “pro-blame ideology” as well. As with revenge, the nature and value of a practice is best brought out by a balanced consideration of its admirable and its morally problematic features. We have now seen *why* we should avoid whitewashing blame. We can conclude by asking: How can we effectively avoid whitewashing blame?

One approach to avoiding whitewash is what Victoria McGeer (2013, 163) describes as “civilizing blame,” or “showing how it can be a normatively acceptable, even valuable response to wrongdoing” despite its unattractive features. McGeer believes this project is “important to pursue, but not...at the expense of taking the bile out of blame”; in other words, “any satisfactory account of blame...should direct us to a psychologically plausible phenomenon, however unsavory, that answers to our ordinary conception of blame”(163). On her view, emotion is a “canonical

feature” of blame (169). McGeer argues that “emotions constitute for us a *uniquely* powerful form of communication, the specific features of which militate against any normative recommendation that we should suppress them (to whatever extent possible) in contexts that make blame appropriate”(181). Despite blame’s often “angry, punitive edge”(163), McGeer argues, we should not try “to take the emotional guts out of blame”(183).

McGeer is exemplary in taking seriously blame’s “unsavory” features, such as its tendency to be punitive. Defenses of blame are more likely to be convincing when they take those features into account. She also helpfully brings out the ways in which a balanced assessment of blame is important not only for those who resist blame, but also for blame’s advocates. Contrasting “civilizing” blame with other writers’ goal of “sanitizing blame,” or “purifying blame of what they take to be features they find normatively problematic”(163), she insists that “it is psychologically unrealistic to identify blame with the purified phenomenon that sanitizing theorists target”(164). Defenders of blame, too, have good reason to want a psychologically realistic portrayal that will allow the defense to withstand reflection.

On the other hand, avoiding whitewash is distinct from what McGeer calls “civilizing.” Civilizing is a form of defense, aiming to bring out why blame is valuable. Avoiding whitewash is an attractive goal for both defenders and detractors, as well as those who are undecided or aim only at descriptive accuracy. Indeed, there is something odd about *aiming* to defend blame before one has a fully accurate picture of it. Holding a vindictory aim in advance can easily lead to whitewash, even if one aims to avoid it. McGeer’s discussion is a case in point. Not all emotions are vengeful emotions; and, presumably, not all emotions are blaming emotions. But McGeer does not ask which *other* emotions might share the power of the blaming emotions. Without consideration of other, alternative emotional reactions, the unique power of emotion will not offer a compelling defense of blame. We might *neither* blame, nor “take the emotional guts of blame,”

but instead take the blame out of our emotions, to whatever extent we can. We could look to other, non-blaming emotions such as compassion, hope, or grief as powerful forms of communication. Civilizing blame can also whitewash it, by making the alternatives seem to disappear. The project of “civilizing blame”, then, may not offer an effective way to avoid whitewash.

A second approach to avoiding whitewashing blame is to simply give up on the project of offering a general conception of blame, and focus instead on particularly important or interesting *kinds* of blame, such as angry blame or epistemic blame. But this, too, seems unlikely to succeed. Nothing I have said depends on the level of generality of the concept or reaction under discussion. When Reis-Dennis (2019) describes angry blame as showing “a willingness to *fight*” that is effective largely because “anger is scary”(457), he does not ask whether there are other, non-blaming forms of anger that contrast with angry blame. Adapting Scanlon’s discussion to epistemic blame, Boulton (2021, 524) writes that “epistemic blame responses can be understood as consisting in modifications to certain intentions and expectations one has towards that person, in a way made fitting by the judgment of epistemic blameworthiness.” Boulton’s Scanlonian view treats epistemic blame as essentially “fitting,” despite his narrower focus on epistemic blame. Whitewashing occurs in discussions of many phenomena, from general kinds, such as love, to particular people or events, such as the murder of Cindy Gladue. Particular kinds of blame have no special protection from whitewashing.¹⁵

¹⁵ These quotations may also help address a concern that the most recent discussions of blame have already learned the lessons I draw from influential earlier discussions. In my view, other recent examples of whitewashing blame include Sliwa (2019, 215), who infers from one good feature—facilitating shared knowledge—that blame “is a practice that it is overall good for us to have”; and Shoemaker and Vargas (2021), who characterize blame in terms of the fairly broad and appealing notion of signaling commitment

I think we can find a more promising approach to avoiding whitewash if we draw on our descriptions of the mechanisms of whitewashing. In offering what I called ‘procedural’ arguments that identify whitewashing mechanisms or procedures, and in focusing on three influential discussions, I have tried to bring out the variety of whitewash. Discussions of blame do not whitewash only in their stated definition or paradigm. They also whitewash by departing from their own stated definition, by ignoring or de-emphasizing troubling cases of blame, by ignoring harms and alternatives, by making it too easy to conclude that blame is a good practice overall, and by too quickly drawing that conclusion themselves. Moreover, although whitewashing can be greedy or cynical, we have seen that it need not be. Identifying a variety of ways in which blame is whitewashed is one part of an approach to resisting whitewash.

The descriptions of whitewashing mechanisms also suggest three conditions that a non-whitewashing conception of blame (or of some particular kind of blame) should meet. First, a non-whitewashing characterization of blame must give significant attention to blame’s harms, such as its role in war, abuse, lynching, and scapegoating, and the damage blame does to relationships, productivity, and self-esteem. As with revenge, the harms include both intended and unintended harms, such as further escalating “spirals” of hostility. Consideration of these harms should also ask whether they belong essentially to misuses or marginal cases, or to central features of blame, and should offer some way to assess answers to this question. And we should ask whether blame’s valuable functions or features are enough to vindicate blame in the face of the severity of those harms.

to norms, without contrasting blame with alternative, non-blaming ways of signaling commitment to norms.

I leave these views as exercises for the reader.

Second, a non-whitewashing conception of blame must take care not to defend only a much broader range of reactions that includes blame as a subcategory. As we saw, Sher defends primarily the desire that others not act badly or have a bad character; Scanlon defends appropriate attitude adjustment in response to relationship impairment; McGeer defends emotional blame on the grounds that emotions are uniquely powerful; Reis-Dennis defends angry blame on the grounds that anger is scary. But we can have the desire, make the adjustment, feel emotion and perhaps even be angry without blame. To avoid defending only the broader category, we must ask what distinguishes blame from other members of that category. This question is especially pressing in cases of conceptual broadening, in which blame itself is identified with a broader category such as ‘appropriate attitude adjustment’ or ‘holding responsible’.

Third, and relatedly, 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 threatening or killing her. Other alternatives may be preferable to blame: a nonjudgmental conversation, a family intervention, or a nonviolent protest can be more respectful, more clearly appropriate, a better expression of commitment to morality, and a more effective way of reaching alignment in moral understanding. The desirability of various reactions varies 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.

These conditions place constraints on a conception of blame. But they do not assume a particular conception, any more than my earlier procedural arguments did. Indeed, they could not

assume any conception of blame in particular, since they apply more generally to many areas in which there is a real need to avoid whitewashing. What is distinctive of discussions of blame, I think, is not the applicability of reminders to seriously consider harms, avoid defending only a much broader category, and include comparison with alternatives. It is the pressing need for those reminders, given the central role of whitewashing in influential discussions of blame. These reminders will be useful to defenders of blame, as well as those who are generally resistant to blame or undecided about its nature or value. Everyone has reason to want an accurate conception of blame, and to understand the normative risks in even such apparently innocuous activities as saying what blame is.

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