

Thomas Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, Blame*

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Kevin Vallier

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In *Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, Blame*, Thomas Scanlon challenges moral philosophers with a subtle analysis of how permissibility, meaning and blame are to be understood. Scanlon's challenge is significant not only because he is a moral philosopher of considerable stature but because his analysis proceeds with an unusual degree of care. Scanlon employs a number of novel distinctions that allow him to advance attractive alternatives to standard accounts of permissibility, meaning and blame. While the book is not an elaboration and defense of a moral theory, like Scanlon's well-known *What We Owe to Each Other*, *Moral Dimensions* is still a substantial contribution to moral philosophy.

In Chapter 1, "The Illusory Appeal of Double Effect", Scanlon argues that the Doctrine of Double Effect while intuitive confuses assessing an agent's reasons for action and the permissibility of her action; he also claims that the doctrine runs together the "critical" and "deliberative" use of moral principles, principles used for judging others versus principles used when deciding which actions we should take. The permissibility of an action is roughly determined by the deliberative use of principles, while the critical use determines character. Chapter 2, "The Significance of Intent", focuses on the complex relation between intent and permissibility. Scanlon here draws an important distinction between an agent's reasons for action and the meaning of an action. Meaning "is a matter of what others reasonably take the reasons of an agent to be. The meaning of an action is its significance for the agent and others" (p. 52). Reasons for action determine permissibility but actions may be permitted when motives for action are poor or bad. Chapter 3, "Means and Ends", contains an elucidation of the meaning of Kant's second formulation of the Categorical Imperative. Scanlon argues that the complex notion of treating someone as a means can only be properly understood by means of the permissibility-meaning distinction. He then ties Kant's account of moral worth with his own account of

K. Vallier (✉)
4713 E 10th St, Tucson, AZ 85711, USA
e-mail: kevinvallier@gmail.com

meaning and again argues that permissibility need not depend on the reasons the agent took to count in favor of an action. Instead, whether someone has been treated as a means is determined by the action's meaning. The standard of treating others as means can only be employed as a rough account of right and wrong and should be understood as a claim about the attitudes we should hold towards others, which again affect an action's meaning.

In Chapter 4, "Blame", Scanlon defines blame in terms of relationship impairment and attitude revision. To blame someone for an action is to take "that action to indicate something about the person that impairs one's relationship with him or her and to understand that relationship in a way that reflects this impairment" (pp. 122–123). The practice of blame accounts for the importance of interpersonal relationships because we care about having fulfilling relations with others; blame registers the impairment wrong action imposes on these relationships. Scanlon therefore rejects the sanction account of blame which holds that blame is primarily a form of punishment for wrongdoing. Rather, blame must be understood chiefly in relational terms; we must begin understanding blame "with an analogy between impersonal morality and more personal relationships, such as those that hold between good friends or lovers" (p. 129). This review will focus on Scanlon's relationship-revision account of blame. Scanlon wrongly develops an account of blame from the moral practices involved with closer personal relationships. A general account of blame cannot give a single analysis of blaming strangers and blaming intimates.

To blame someone, for Scanlon, is to take their blameworthy action as indicating that one's relationship with the blamed is impaired and to understand the relationship in those terms. Relationships with others are valuable and certain actions weaken or destroy them; blame registers the damage done. Scanlon distinguishes blame, which is often a private or personal impairment from "objective stigma" that others sometimes identify as blame (p. 125). Objective stigma is tied to the standard sanction account of blame Scanlon wishes to reject. Sanction accounts of blame are often offered as analyses of impersonal blame, but Scanlon argues that impersonal blame must be understood on the model of personal relationships. He claims, strikingly, that third parties cannot blame others; instead, they are merely permitted to disapprove of certain actions (p. 136). On the relationship-revision account of blame, a third party is unable to adjust his attitude in the "relevant way" (pp. 137, 146). Specifically, the ground relationship between persons sets the standards through which impairment is revealed and third parties lack that ground relationship. Impairment of the ground relationship results from attitudes, the position of the responder relative to the agent, the significance or meaning of the impairment for the responder and the appropriate response (p. 138).

Scanlon's conception of blame possesses two elements that must be carefully explained: i. attitude revision and ii. relationship impairment. Attitude revision occurs when someone learns something new about, say, a friend. Following Scanlon's example, if Tim discovers that his friend Joe revealed some embarrassing facts about him that he told Joe in confidence, Tim will appropriately wonder whether Joe is his friend; learning that Joe revealed embarrassing facts about him might lead him to change his attitude on the basis of what Joe's action meant to him.

Judging that someone is blameworthy, then, “marks a change in that relationship and hence is a form of blame” (p. 130). Scanlon understands relationships as “constituted by certain attitudes and dispositions” among which “intentions and expectations about how the parties will act toward one another” are most important (p. 131). For instance, friends might expect aid from one another in times of trouble. A relationship is impaired,

when one party, while standing in the relevant relation to another person, holds attitudes toward that person that are ruled out by the standards of that relationship, thus making it appropriate for the other party to have attitudes other than those that the relationship normally involves (p. 135).

Returning to Tim and Joe, when Tim learns that Joe has revealed intimate facts about him, Tim finds out that Joe holds attitudes ruled out by the standard of friendship. It is now appropriate for Tim to revise his attitude such that their relationship is severed or damaged.

Scanlon argues that our “moral relationship” with all of humanity allows persons to blame those we do not know (p. 138). Morality is a normative ideal for all human relationships and requires that we hold certain attitudes concerning others. For fellow rational beings, this attitude is one of mutual concern. Scanlon is aware that some will find the idea that we have a moral relationship with strangers bizarre and abstract, but he maintains that strangers will manifest this mutual concern under normal conditions (p. 141). When a stranger commits an impermissible act, he wrongs another by impairing her moral relationship with him; in fact, for Scanlon, whenever anyone is wronged by a stranger, the stranger takes on “a distinctive role in our lives” (p. 147). This is because “morality requires that we hold certain attitudes toward one another simply in virtue of the fact that we stand in the relation of ‘fellow rational beings’” (p. 140).

Scanlon recognizes that many will argue that blame is a kind of objective stigma, or a negative evaluation of persons that do wrong. But Scanlon argues that objective stigma, while “similar to blame”, is “not the same thing” (p. 148). Objective stigma occurs when people regard others as at fault for a particular action. This stigma is partly a function “of the gravity of a person’s faults” (p. 150). But blame requires assessing the “significance for the agent’s relations” to the person doing the blaming (p. 150). While objective stigma might lead to sanctioning others and judging them blameworthy, Scanlon maintains that blame is “more personal”, involving a personal connection even between strangers (pp. 146, 175).

Objective stigma is related to the sanction account of blame, where blame is a form “disapproval or character assessment” and is associated with “reactive attitudes such as resentment and indignation” (p. 127). Those taking an impartial point of view, however, can only “blame” others by disapproving of them (p. 146). Blame is simply too serious for detached persons to engage in (p. 186). Scanlon’s account of blame highlights the importance of having good, fulfilling relationships with others and blame is a form of assessment that registers damage to that relationship. Because Scanlon sees blame as a form of response to a loose form of intimacy, a detached person cannot blame third parties. Thus, while the sanction view can account for the importance of expressions of blame, such as for motivating

others to obey moral norms, expressing moral blame is not first and foremost a matter of enforcing moral requirements. The relationship-revision account of blame explains blame's gravity by representing its degree and type according to the degree and type of relationship impairment it causes. Scanlon maintains that advocates of the sanction view cannot explain why blame should be avoided, since sanction alone is not necessarily something one should care about; in contrast, normally functioning human beings have reasons to be concerned about relationship impairment.

Call the morality involved in personal relationships the morality of intimates and the morality involved with strangers or impersonal relationships the morality of strangers. In these terms, Scanlon understands the blame appropriate to the morality of strangers in terms of the blame appropriate to the morality of intimates. For Scanlon, blame is explicitly modeled on the relationship impairment between friends when one wrongs another. The account is then extended to a moral relationship that each person bears to all rational beings. People blame strangers who wrong them because their actions impair this moral relationship.

Yet the peculiarity of the view remains even if we acknowledge that "strangers have a distinctive role in our lives when they wrong us" (p. 148). To see why, consider blaming people with a car horn when we believe that they have broken the rules of the road. Even if we do not honk our horns at other drivers, we often curse at them and occasionally let loose an obscene gesture. In most cases we not only blame people we have never met but those we cannot see—perhaps if they speed by us or have tinted windows. Because of our emotional and social distance from these individuals, it is hard to see how the blame we place upon them is best understood in terms of adjusting our attitudes to reflect impairment of our moral relationship with them. While John has expectations of others on the road, blaming someone for cutting him off hardly necessitates considerations of their relationship in any ordinary sense.

The account also has the seemingly awkward consequence of denying third parties the ability to blame wrongdoers. Third-parties cannot blame because they are not "in the position to adjust [their] attitude[s] in the relevant way" (p. 137). Certainly this is wrong. To take one example, imagine the sense of indignation we feel when we hear that those we do not know have been grievously injured. For instance, young mother and probable sociopath Casey Anthony is widely and with good reason believed to have murdered her daughter Caylee in order to continue her youthful life of drinking and partying. During the height of news coverage, callers on popular television news programs like *Nancy Grace* regularly expressed intense indignation about such an outrageous act. For Scanlon, these third parties were merely making "judgments of blameworthiness" but they were not blaming Casey Anthony for anything. Nonetheless, the reactive attitudes we commonly associate with blame are present in the Casey Anthony case. We are not only enraged—we are indignant; we believe that Casey Anthony has egregiously violated the moral law and blame her accordingly.

Blame is also not primarily a form of attitude revision. To illustrate, suppose that John wrongs Reba by slighting her at a faculty meeting; Reba seethes at John for weeks but cannot bring herself to tell him that she is upset. There is clearly a sense

in which Reba blames John—she holds him responsible for wronging her in front of their co-workers. This is the sense of blame employed when Reba tells another friend that she blames John for slighting her. But there is a form of blame that seems to have its own primacy, the form of blame Reba engages in when she finally musters the course to tell John that he has wronged her. This is blame in its active sense, what Reba does when she engages in the activity of blaming. Scanlon describes such an action as a mere “expression” of blame, but if he is right, the common grammar of statements of blame becomes confusing. Suppose Reba eventually confronts John and later recounts the confrontation to her partner, telling her that she blamed him for slighting her at the faculty meeting. When Reba confronted John, she was not merely expressing blame; rather, she blamed John by holding him responsible for slighting her. Blame as mere attitude revision omits this performative aspect of blame. Two forms of blame are at work in this case, the first that Scanlon seeks to capture, the private sort of blame where I blame him in my heart, so to speak, and the public form, such as when I claim that you should not have treated me that way. To say such a thing in the right context just is to blame someone.

Conceiving of blame as attitude revision also cannot account for cases where attitude revision seems difficult or impossible. For instance, suppose that historians discover that Pol Pot had killed a quarter rather than a fifth of the Cambodian population—from 1975 to 1979, the number would increase from 1.7 million to 2 million. We already blame Pol Pot in Scanlon’s sense by revising our attitudes about him as far downward as possible. Certainly we appropriately blame him for the additional three hundred thousand he killed, but if blame is essentially a form of attitude revision, then we cannot blame Pol Pot any more than we did before. How much more could our relationship with Pol Pot be impaired (if indeed we have one)? To give a less extreme case, imagine that Charlotte, Tom’s colleague, has wronged him on numerous occasions, so much so that future wrongs are not only possible but expected. Suppose that Tom despises Charlotte—his relationship with her is already deeply impaired. If Charlotte continues to wrong Tom, blame and attitude revision come apart. Attitude revision seems to have a diminishing returns aspect that blame lacks. If Charlotte continuously wrongs Tom, say in discrete units of wrongdoing, he can appropriately blame her for each further unit of wrongdoing. But at some point his attitude revision levels off with the opinion that Charlotte is a total jerk. After Charlotte wrongs Tom for the twentieth time, he will already think little of her, yet he will appropriately blame her if she wrongs him the twenty-first time, attitude change or no.

Scanlon’s account of blame gains plausibility when it is applied to the morality of intimates. If you are my dear friend or spouse and you wrong me, our relationship is certainly impaired, my attitude revised, and so on. But when Scanlon generalizes blame appropriate to the morality of intimates to blaming colleagues, strangers, villains and fellow drivers, his account is drained of the plausibility it had. Simply put, Scanlon’s account of blame fails to recognize the significant differences between the morality of intimates and the morality of strangers.