

## WHAT DOES BLAME DO TO RELATIONSHIPS?

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### Abstract

To be blameworthy, according to T. M. Scanlon's recent account, is to hold attitudes which violate the standards of a particular relationship, and to blame another is to alter one's relationship appropriately with the blameworthy party in light of those attitudes. I make three objections. First, relationship-types do not determine the standards relative to which Scanlon defines impairment. Second, the notion of an 'ideal' relationship used by Scanlon is of no use when providing normative guidance to participants in non-ideal relationships—which is to say, that it's no use to anybody. Third, that we cannot know how to alter relationships with someone at fault without knowing whether they are to blame; hence one cannot simply *equate* blaming someone with altering a relationship. I conclude with a discussion of the role that philosophy might play in understanding our relationships with other people.

Peter Strawson (2008) first pointed out the pivotal role of blame in relationships. In some of our relationships the possibility of blame is ruled out in advance, but these are the exception. The clearest example is in our interaction with the very young, or the mentally unwell. Our response to wrongdoing or ill will on the part of such people is not the ordinary bubbling up of resentment. The response is tactical: how can such a person 'be managed or handled or cured or trained'? (Strawson 2008 p.9) But that is not the right reaction in the course of ordinary human relationships. In fact it precludes an ordinary human relationship: it involves seeing the other as a kind of object, rather than a person. That is sometimes acceptable, but not always, and certainly not to everyone.

To say that blame is an integral part of relationships is not as unpleasant as it sounds. One need not think that even the best of relationships are mud-slinging battlegrounds, with each party perched to blame the other at the slightest misdemeanor, to think that it is true. It is merely to say that ordinary human relationships, if fully fledged, open us up to the possibility of blame if we go wrong.

T. M. Scanlon's recent account of blame in *Moral Dimensions* (Scanlon 2008) ties blame and relationships particularly closely together, by analysing the former in terms of the latter. To be blameworthy, according to Scanlon, is to hold attitudes which violate the standards of a particular relationship, and to blame another is to alter one's relationship appropriately with the blameworthy party in light of those attitudes. In this paper I present three objections, outlined at the end of the next section. All three concern, in different ways, what justifies an alteration of a relationship in light of impairment (which, according to Scanlon, is equivalent to the question of what justifies blame). Scanlon's theory does not capture the complexity of human relationships, and neither does it give an accurate account of the source of the standards that govern our relations. The role of blame is also misunderstood. Reflecting on whether our relationships are impaired by another is not *equivalent* to wondering whether they are blameworthy. Rather, blameworthiness is part of the *justification* for a change in relationship. I end this paper by asking whether philosophical analysis, by telling us what blame is, ought to help us decide when blame is justified. If so, and if blameworthiness does mean we ought to alter our relationships, then philosophy could help us how to live with others, and thereby how to live full stop.

### *Scanlon's Theory*

According to Scanlon, the main *desiderata* for a theory of blame are that it explain:

1. The kinds of things we say which make it look as if blame and wrongness come apart: "What she did was wrong, but you shouldn't blame her: she was under great stress", or "It was wrong, but he's only seven" or "It was the right thing to do, but I blame him for doing it for that awful reason".
2. 'Objective stigma', something akin to blame. Being a central cause of a freak accident sometimes prompts a feeling of reproach even when blame is not appropriate.
3. The natural relationship between blame and assessment of character, and the importance for blame on the reasons for which an action was done.
4. Either why blame can vary according to luck, or why it appears to do so even

though it ought not. An example comes from Nagel (Nagel 1979 pp.28-29). Two drivers are equally careless. Through sheer bad luck, a child runs out in front of one of them, and is killed. To many, blame is appropriate towards both drivers, but ought to be far stronger towards the driver who killed the child. But if blame is merely assessment of character or attitudes, this doesn't seem to make any sense, since *ex hypothesi* both drivers have the same attitudes.

5. The relativity of blame: why it seems silly (to some) to blame those very distant from us in time or space—why blaming King Arthur for his anti-liberalism has a whiff of absurdity.

Scanlon's proposal is this:

to claim that a person is *blameworthy* for an action is to claim that that 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.<sup>1</sup>

Suppose we discover that Joe, a close friend, has publicised and had a deprecating chuckle at a confidence I have offered him. Three separate questions arise about how to respond. (1) Should I still consider Joe a friend? Even if his revealed attitudes do not warrant striking out the friendship altogether, ought our relationship suffer some adjustment? Deciding that Joe's attitudes impair our relationship is a judgement of blameworthiness. (2) Should I revise my attitudes toward Joe in a way that this makes appropriate? I may cease to trust or confide in him, or value spending time with him. If I do revise my relationship with Joe by altering my attitudes and intentions appropriately, this amounts to blaming him. (3) Should I express this to Joe, perhaps by complaining to him about his conduct? This is a natural response to blame, although it is not the same thing. Unlike utilitarian accounts, the primary purpose of expressions of blame need not be to sanction or enforce conduct, but to register the fact that a relationship has changed, or to stand up for our own dignity.

How does this account fulfil the *desiderata*? Firstly, the account ought to explain how blame and wrongness can come apart. Someone can do the wrong thing, but due to some mitigating circumstance (say stress) the action might not be an expression of attitudes

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<sup>1</sup> p.128. References to Scanlon are, unless otherwise stated, to T. M. Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, Blame* Harvard University Press 2008

damaging to the relationship, rendering blame inappropriate. Someone may also hold attitudes which violate the standard of some relationship, and thus deserve blame, but not act immorally. Second, objective stigma. It might be very hard to live with someone who has caused a freak accident, or for that person to live with themselves, even if his or her attitudes violate no standards. If the accident caused by another involved the death of one's child, then the event will prompt relational adjustments with that person responsible akin to blame without amounting to the same thing. Third, the attitudes relevant to relationships are those that partly compose an agent's character, and these attitudes are expressed in the reason-judgments which lead to choice. The link between character, reasons and blame is thus maintained. Our fourth *desideratum* was to explain the phenomenon of moral luck. How can it be that luck alone warrants a lesser attribution of blame? The answer, according to Scanlon, is that luck makes a difference to how we form our relationships. A careless but lucky driver will prompt some adjustment of relations—but for the one who unluckily kills a child through his recklessness the adjustment will be naturally far greater. Finally, judgments of blameworthiness are objective, and can be made by anyone. But blame itself involves adjusting a relationship that we actually have with a person, and is therefore essentially perspectival and relative.

The account is complex, since we sit at the core of a web of hundreds or even thousands of different relationship types that we can have with others. An alteration of any of these as a reaction to impropriety amounts to blame, but blame comes in as many different stripes as there are relationships. *Moral* blame in particular is a violation of the moral relationship, which we have with everyone in the world (and perhaps those yet to come in it), and which requires the kind of general concern we ought to have towards other people. The appropriate response in cases where someone reveals themselves to have little or no regard for our interests is not to end the relationship, making them fair game for any kind of punishment (as some retributivists think). Rather, the appropriate response is to make changes in our readiness to interact with him in certain ways (e.g as friends), withdrawing our help, and withdrawing the hope that things go well for them (which is not the same thing as thinking it objectively better that things go badly for them).

To summarise, Scanlon highlights five central elements to the account: (1) The ground relationship, which provides the standards relative to which an agent's attitudes constitute an impairment. (2) Impairment of this by inappropriate attitudes. (3) The position of the blamer relative to the blamed. (4) The significance of the impairment for the responder (a function of the impairment, and the relationship to impairment, agent and action), and (5) the response (blame) that is appropriate.

I shall group my objections under three headings. My first claims that relationship-concepts are too minimal to tell us when relationships are impaired, and what responses are appropriate in light of that impairment. The second is that, in any case, idealised relationships are not good guides for those of us in non-ideal relationships. Finally, I claim that Scanlon's account is circular. On Scanlon's theory one party is blameworthy if their attitudes impair the relationship. But we need already to know whether the other party is blameworthy, I argue, to determine whether the relationship is impaired in the relevant way.

### ***1. Constitutive Norms and Normative Guidance***

To blame is to adopt the attitudes appropriate to those of the person at fault. Scanlon takes his theory to be a 'desert-based' theory of blame, which he takes to mean the following:

I take blame to consist of attitudes toward a person that are justified simply by attitudes of that person that make them appropriate, and I hold that there is no need to appeal to other justifications such as the beneficial consequences of blaming or the fact that the person could have avoided being subject to blame. Like refusals of friendship, blame is justified simply by what a person is like.  
(p.188).

Scanlon considers the worry that by appealing to brute judgments of appropriateness the account becomes too intuitionist, and thereby runs the risk of lacking 'serious normative force' (p.189). He responds: 'The view I am offering gives this idea [of appropriateness] more structure (thereby mitigating this objection, if not, to be sure, avoiding it altogether) by locating the idea of appropriateness within a conception of particular relationships.' (*ibid.*) Scanlon finds it clear that there is no demand to enter into relations of trust, cooperation and friendship with someone who callously disregards our own interests, and that 'an appeal to what is appropriate is an adequate explanation for the suspension of these attitudes' (p.190). By contrast, Scanlon finds desert theories of punishment which appeal only to the appropriateness of punishment implausible; here '[t]he idea of appropriateness by itself seems too weak to bear this justificatory weight.' (*ibid.*). In this section I argue that the conception of particular relationships cannot usefully guide us in deciding which attitudes are appropriate to another.

What is it that separates relationships into relevantly different normative types? Scanlon says that:

[t]he normative ideal of a particular kind of relationship specifies what must be true in order for individuals to have a relationship of this kind, and specifies how individuals should, ideally, behave toward one another, and the attitudes that they should have. It thus sets the standards relative to which particular relationships of this kind exist and the (higher) standards relative to which such relationships can be better or worse, and can be seen as impaired. (pp.133-4)

There are therefore two levels of norms.<sup>2</sup> The first, lower set appears to be ‘constitutive’ ideals, akin to the rules of a game. Unless you abide by these minimal norms, you are not in the relationship just as, were you to deviate enough from the rules of chess, you would no longer be playing chess. But the ideal of a relationship also operates at a higher level. The constitutive norms of chess do not specify how, ideally, chess should be played—they do not tell one how to play an astute game. By contrast, the ideal of a relationship not only specifies the constitutive norms, but also the norms that specify whether the relationship is going well or badly. I shall call the lower, ‘constitutive’ norms the ‘minimal’ norms, and the higher ideals the ‘full-blooded’ norms.

Take friendship as an example. The constitutive norms tell us that, unless people have some minimal levels of affection for one another, enjoy each other’s company, and have a certain amount of trust, they are not friends. But, according to Scanlon, the ideal of a relationship goes further: friendships may fulfil the constitutive norms but fall short of the full-blooded ones, displaying, say, an unacceptably low level of trust or affection within the friendship. The relationship, by fulfilling the minimal norms but falling short of the full-blooded ideals, exists in impaired form. The friend with the attitudes that fall short of the full-blooded ideal will be blameworthy. If the other friend responds appropriately, he or she will be blaming.

Scanlon structures intuition by ‘locating the idea of appropriateness within a conception of particular relationships’. The language here (‘a conception of particular relationships’) is suggestive of locating the idea of appropriateness at the lower, constitutive level. But that would undermine his appeal to relationship-conceptions to structure intuitions about appropriate reactions. The constitutive norms of chess are silent on which of the available moves is the best. Likewise, the minimal norms that constitute relationship-types are unable to tell us which attitudes are appropriate. The minimal norms tell us, for example,

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<sup>2</sup> I owe this way of describing Scanlon’s theory to Edward Harcourt.

that in order to be a friend one must have some affection for the other. But if one's friend does something that appears to reveal a lack of affection the constitutive norms do not tell us what the appropriate reaction is. At best, the constitutive norms merely inform us that we are no longer friends. 'That's just not what friends do!' the constitutive norms say; they are silent on where to take matters from there.

It is true that there are some minimal demands which, if two people did not meet them, they would not be friends. But beyond that there are many different kinds of friendships, which demand very different sets of attitudes. To give a slightly different example, take romantic relationships. In some romantic relationships jealousy is an inappropriate attitude—it shows a lack of trust. But some couples have violently stormy relationships, marked by rows and powerful feelings of possessiveness. Some couples are extremely happy this way (or at least would be miserable any other way). Perhaps to their minds a lack of jealousy shows a lack of passion or care. To them, jealousy is a natural concomitant to strong feeling, and thereby appropriate in some situations. The constitutive norms of being in a 'romantic relationship' do not tell us whether the jealousy is appropriate or not—they do not tell us whether the stormy couple or the calm couple have the more admirable relationship. Those minimal norms cannot, therefore, give any structure to our intuitions as to whether jealousy is sometimes appropriate.<sup>3</sup>

It is therefore false to say, as Scanlon does (p.133-4, quoted above), that there is a single 'ideal' of a relationship that specifies both the constitutive norms of a relationship but also, at a higher level, the norms that specify whether a relationship is going well or badly. For any single constitutive ideal there will then be a wide variety of 'higher' norms that specify the multitude of ways in which a relationship could be going well. How many ways a romantic relationship could be going well or badly is a substantive ethical question, and an answer to it depends upon how liberal we are with how couples can treat each other—how many different attitude-sets could be seen as different but nevertheless admirable relationships. An answer is not dictated by the constitutive ideal of the romantic relationship.

Blame, Scanlon says, is only justified by 'what a person is like' (p.188), and nothing else, including the beneficial consequences of blaming. This claim masks the fact that, when deciding whether our relationships are impaired, and how to react to that impairment, we have already had to make substantive judgments about the value of our relationship, and

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<sup>3</sup> I'm grateful to an anonymous referee in this journal that prompted me to put this point in this way.

about how the patterns of reactions, intentions, attitudes and expectations that it involves compare with alternative relationships of the kind we are in—whether the relationship would be more valuable if it were one that occasionally incorporated jealousy, for example. It is ultimately the value of the relationship that justifies one attitudinal reaction over another—not ‘appropriateness’ flowing from constitutive norms of relationship-types.

## **2: Problems with the notion of an ‘ideal’ relationship**

In the last section I argued that relationship-types do not determine which attitudes are appropriate to another’s impairment. That is by no means a knock-down objection. Even if the concept of a relationship-type is very minimal, it is still consistent to hold that a person is blameworthy if they hold attitudes that violate the full-blooded relationships norms, specified by the ideal of certain kinds of relationships. Perhaps the minimal norms that make up relationship-type concepts are like virtue-concepts – they can still guide action at a high level of abstraction, even if they do not tell us algorithmically what to do or feel.<sup>4</sup> In this section I argue, however, that reflecting on ideal relationships is not the right place to start when looking for the full-blooded standards that define impairment. The objection here has shades of an old and familiar one made by Bernard Williams (Williams 1995 p.190) to an Aristotelian theory of reasons: I cannot have reason to do what the *phronimos* has reason to do, because of the myriad ways in which I am not a *phronimos*. Likewise, appealing to ideal relationships to decide upon the appropriate attitudinal response to another sometimes gives no normative guidance, and sometimes gives the wrong normative guidance.

Let’s return to an earlier quotation: ‘The normative ideal of a particular kind of relationship specifies what must be true in order for individuals to have a relationship of this kind, and specifies how individuals should, ideally, behave toward one another, and the attitudes that they should have’ (2008 pp.133-4). Impairment occurs 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 inappropriate for the other party to have attitudes other than those that the relationship normally involves’ (p.135). I have argued that the constitutive norms of a relationship could not specify how individuals ought to behave toward one another, since many different normative ideals of friendship (say) all fulfil the constitutive norms. They do not, therefore, specify what constitutes an

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<sup>4</sup> I owe this response to Edward Harcourt.

impaired relationship. But the full-blooded norms, if determined by ideal friendships, do not specify the right standards either. Do we really reflect about how ideal friends would treat one another when deciding how to behave? Of course there is a sense in which we do. When reflecting on what to do, especially if we feel the pangs of self-reproach, we think about what we would do if we were less flawed. But in another, more substantial sense of 'ideal,' I do not believe that ideal relationships specify how to treat one another. That is the sense in which the instantiators of ideal relationships are themselves ideal people.

The first thing to notice is that even if I could embody the attitudes of one half of an ideal relationship, that may not constitute the best response to another real-life person. Often when deciding how to view another person we are reaching the best compromise we can manage given their foibles. Thinking of ideal relationships here will not necessarily help broker the best possible relationship given the non-ideal circumstances. If at least one partner has non-ideal attitudes, adopting the attitudes constitutive of the best possible relationship with someone (the attitudes that one ideal person has to another) does not always result in the best possible relationship in the circumstances. It might be a necessary condition of X and Y having the best possible relationship that X have attitude set A—but it doesn't follow that whatever attitudes Y happens to hold, the best thing for X to do for the relationship is adopt A. If Y has attitude set B and there's nothing X can do about it, it may be best for the relationship if X adopts attitude set C. An example might be attempts to live with close family members. Jarring personalities make it impossible to get on like good friends, but enduring family bonds mean that one has reason to have the best relationship possible in the circumstances. This may mean that one cannot treat them like a friend—perhaps one, say, has to put up with being patronised from time to time, which would be demeaning with anyone else.

Often the problems that arise in relationships are from propensities that are conspicuously non-ideal. Sometimes our less than ideal elements rightly attract blame, and sometimes that is just how we are. Take friendship again. Scanlon says that

[t]he people who have drifted apart may thereby cease to be friends, but physical injury does not, or should not, bring friendship to an end. This difference between the cases follows from the standards governing attitudes that friendship involves. These standards must allow for friendships to end blamelessly. (p.135)

Ending a friendship does not necessarily involve attitudes that impair the relationship, but abandoning a friend when they become injured does. Suppose I find myself drifting

away from a friend. I no longer have the level of affection that friendship really requires. Am I blameworthy? According to Scanlon, the difference between blameworthy and non-blameworthy attitudes is whether the ideal friends could allow their attitudes to drift in the way that I have. But on a plausible reading of ‘ideal’, I don’t see how an ideal friendship could legislate for cases of ‘drifting apart’. In ideal friendships—the friendships made in heaven—no one would drift apart. This is not because they felt obligated to stay together, but because the friendship is ideal. If I notice my feelings for a friend slipping away, and I want to determine whether I can get away with this blamelessly, reflecting on the standards that govern an ideal friendship will not help. Ideal friends never feel how I feel, so the reactions of the ideal friend cannot guide me. For the ideal friendship, the question never arises, so how can the ideal offer standards for the flawed?

One might object<sup>5</sup> that, when looking to ideal agents we do not imagine what they would do in an ideal context. We merely transpose them into ours, and then imagine what they would allow. That may sometimes be true. But in the envisaged scenario we are not transposing the ideal agents into our external context, moving them from heaven into the real world and imagining what they would do and how they would feel. The context includes not only the external situation but internal emotions and attitudes. By making the transposition you are asking what someone who is ideal in some respects but not ideal in others would feel in your situation (in other words, how someone who is better than you in some respects but not others would feel). It leaves a vital normative question unanswered: *how* many of the ideal relator’s traits may I jettison when considering my own situation? The normative results are quite different, depending upon how many you allow. Allow too many of my dispositions to be taken on and the normative standards drop. Allow too few, and we return to the situation whereby the ideal, by being a denizen of another planet, fails to offer me any guidance. There is probably a right answer to the question, but it is not given by the conception of the ideal relationship.

Even if that question could be answered, we are left with quite an artificial picture of the kind of reflection usually involved. It is one where, in order to decide what attitudes are appropriate, I try to imagine what I would do were I better (in some unspecified respects) than I am. In one sense, that’s a true description of the exercise. But it skips the interesting questions. In order to decide what to do I don’t imagine what I would do were I a little

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5 As indeed an anonymous referee for this journal did.

better—rather, I just try to think a little better about the issues directly. Scanlon says that ‘Friendship would be an oppressive relationship if it had to last forever, no matter what’ (p.135). I think that’s right, but I arrive at the principle by reflecting more generally on what people close to me can reasonably demand, on the reasonable expectations that others form when I offer friendship, and on the conditions under which anyone at all can oppress me. I conclude that friends cannot demand unconditional affection. Reflecting on ideal friendships confuses the matter.

Moreover, the ideal of a relationship often specifies quite implausible substantive standards, and would define some relational adjustments as blame when they are really not. Take the marriage relation. The ideal marriage lasts forever, ‘til death does the couple part. The standards prescribe enduring affection: that’s why the couple *vow* to love each other (that is, voluntarily place themselves under a binding bond of affection). If this is right, it follows from Scanlon’s account of blame that it’s impossible for a marriage to end loveless without one or the other partner being blameworthy. Falling out of love is ruled out by the standards of the (ideal) relationship. If one partner in a marriage no longer loves the other partner, and they are still married, they hold inappropriate attitudes, and it is natural to think that it becomes ‘inappropriate’ for the other partner to love them back. If the jilted partner reacts by trying to ‘get over’ the other by adjusting his or her attitudes, this amounts to blame on Scanlon’s account.

I think the theory is wrong on three counts here. First, it is possible for a marriage to end without at least one of the spouses being blameworthy, *contra* this interpretation of Scanlon’s theory. Second, whether or not someone is to blame sometimes depends on the history of the attitudes in a way that Scanlon’s account does not allow for. Suppose one spouse spends too much time at work, and fails to make time for the activities necessary for a functioning relationship. In that case, I would say that he or she is to blame for those attitudes. If, on the other hand, he or she were to arrive at those same attitudes through a gentle, unforeseeable drift, I would say they could avoid being blameworthy. Scanlon’s account, as far as I can tell, does not allow for the difference. Finally, on Scanlon’s account all relational adjustments in response to impairing attitudes amount to blame, and this example shows why that is not right. If A doesn’t love B the relationship is impaired. It’s inappropriate for B to love A back. On Scanlon’s account, that means B’s adjustment would amount to blame. But whether A’s attitudes make A blameworthy for impairing the relationship is a separate issue from what it’s appropriate for B to feel in light of A. B

might, for example, blame himself for A's lack of love—perhaps B thinks that he just isn't good enough for A (this thought is, I think, fairly common). Nevertheless, an adjustment on B's part is appropriate: asymmetrical devotion is demeaning, and B should probably get on with things. That does not amount to B's blaming A, even though it is A's attitudes that impair the relationship, and it is B that has to make adjust his attitudes in light of that impairment.

**3. *Philosophical Quietism: Can we think of whether a relationship is impaired without already having an idea of blame?***

Scanlon's fruitful work often displays a kind of pessimism regarding traditional philosophical techniques and targets. Don't ask what a reason is, he says in *What We Owe to Each Other* (Scanlon 1998): it will not tell you what reasons there are.<sup>6</sup> The metaphysics does not matter, nor does the state of mind one is in when one accepts a reason.<sup>7</sup> Taking reasons as basic, analysing what value is does not tell you what's valuable—if it's valuable that just means that there is reason to value it.<sup>8</sup> Reflecting directly on the concept of well-being will not tell you what the best life is: think instead about the reasons you have.<sup>9</sup> Reflecting on blame will not tell you how to live with others: rather, deciding how to live with others *amounts* to blaming if one is reacting to attitudes deemed inappropriate.

It is hard to doubt the power of Scanlon's work, and the progress that has been made by such a 'quietist' line of thought. Often relocation provides illumination. But, at least for the case of blame, I'm not convinced. On Scanlon's account, we rely on standards internal to relationships to determine what kind of attitudes we should hold towards others; and taking these attitudes up amounts to blaming. But can we really do so without having an idea of whether they are to blame, and of what blame does, or ought to do, to relationships?

Scanlon illustrates the practical reflection that follows from his account by considering Pettit's example of a ferry disaster (Pettit 2007). A ferry sinks and many people die. On Scanlon's account asking whether the ferry company is blameworthy is roughly equivalent to asking whether 'we have grounds to suspend our trust of the ferry company (say by

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6 See Chapter 1

7 *Ibid.*

8 See Chapter 2

9 See Chapter 3

revoking its license to operate ferries), because it is insufficiently responsive to relevant considerations (of safety)' (p.163). This is surprising, since one would expect the account to be the other way around. For Scanlon, we know if the company is blameworthy if we decide we ought to suspend our trust; but surely one decides whether to suspend one's trust by, first of all, thinking about whether the ferry company is blameworthy. I doubt whether one can really determine whether someone is being 'sufficiently responsive to relevant considerations' in isolation from wondering whether they are to blame. Sufficient responsiveness is not a guarantee of safety: a motorist who pays 'sufficient' attention to the roads does not insulate himself entirely from the possibility of accident. Indeed, a driver can be blameless even if, were he to have been more responsive, the accident could have been avoided, because it may be unreasonable to demand that he pay more attention than he in fact did. In these cases, 'sufficient' is normatively loaded. It doesn't mean 'sufficient to avoid an accident', it just means sufficient to make the driving responsible. And it seems to me that when we reflect on whether a piece of driving is responsible, at least part of the process is imagining whether there exist possible accidents in which we would judge the driver blameworthy, or entertaining counterfactuals about what we should feel in the case of a particular accident. The process of reflection I find natural in determining whether someone is 'sufficiently responsive', therefore, presupposes that I have some grip on when I would decide that someone is blameworthy.<sup>10</sup> Scanlon assumes that we can answer questions like those about trustworthiness or 'sufficient responsiveness to reasons' without recourse to thinking about blame directly, and I think it's reasonable to doubt whether that is possible.

The point here is that blameworthiness is a concept prior to the kinds of impairment that prompt blame. People's attitudes commonly impair relationships because they fall short of what, ideally, we would like them to be. Sometimes the appropriate reaction is to just get around those unfortunate attitudes as best you can, building the best compromise out of the possible options. Sometimes the appropriate reaction is more akin to the range

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10 An anonymous referee for this journal suggested that 'sufficiently responsive' could be normatively loaded in a way that did not presuppose blame. Instead, one could simply say that a motorist failed to pay sufficient attention when the expected disutility of an accident (the disutility of an accident multiplied by the probability of having an accident) outweighed the disutility of paying more attention. This consequentialist account would be unavailable to Scanlon, since it is incompatible with his contractualism. In any case, it strikes me as implausible. It amounts to the following proposition: one is justified in altering one's relationship with someone if their attitudes fail to generate the highest possible expected utility. I find that an implausible picture of human relationships. It does not answer the circularity worry either, since the question is still open whether the driver is blameworthy for the non-utility maximising attitudes.

of attitudes that Scanlon takes to be blame: like withdrawing trust or affection or good will. But only *culpable* attitudes should prompt those latter kinds of adjustments. Cases of corporate responsibility are interesting precisely because blame is so hard to place. Industrial accidents prompt an urge to place blame *somewhere*, but it is hard to know where in particular to stick our pin of blame within the overall corporate structure. Merely falling short of the ideal company does not justify adjusting one's attitudes in the relevant way. Take the marriage example again. A's lack of love impairs the relationship. If A arrived at this situation through a gradual, unforeseeable drift, then A is not blameworthy. If, on the other hand, A fell out of love by failing to put in the emotional investment necessary for a functional relationship, then A is blameworthy. A's lack of love is the same in either case, but B should only blame A (whatever that amounts to) in the latter situation, because only then is A culpable.<sup>11</sup>

According to Scanlon, blame is justified if the other person's attitudes impair our relationship. But to my mind, relationships are only impaired in the relevant way if the other person is blameworthy for the attitudes. The mere existence of the impairing attitudes is not enough to justify an adjustment akin to blame. Scanlon's account is therefore circular. It is right, as I pointed out at the beginning of this paper, to say that blame and relationships are closely related. But that is because when reflecting on whether we are justified in altering our relationships in certain ways, we begin by wondering whether the other person is blameworthy for the impairment.

### **Conclusion**

I have conspicuously failed to provide an answer to the question of what blame does to relationships. If I am right, then blameworthiness justifies certain alterations in relationships. Philosophers ask themselves what blame and blameworthiness are. Ought an answer to the philosophical questions explain why blame sometimes justifies alterations in relationships, and when and which alterations are justified?

To my mind it should. Moral philosophy, if it is to help one how to live, ought not only illuminate a concept but also offer guidance as to its application. There are philosophical accounts of blame that attempt to do this. A consequentialist account, for example, might

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<sup>11</sup> Of course, whether or not A is blameworthy B should stop loving A. Part of the objection of the last section was that merely ceasing to love A does not amount to blame. Blame probably amounts to something over and above this: greater feelings of resentment and reductions in trust, for example.

say that blame is a proleptic mechanism to enforce better conduct in the future, or is a way of placing a mark on an offender's moral record. By telling us what blame is, a consequentialist tells us what the aims of blaming are, and thereby explains when it is justified. While such theories do try to offer such directives, they fail because the directives they give aren't what they ought to be—they recommend blame in scenarios where, substantively, we ought not to blame. An evaluative attitude account may offer directives too.<sup>12</sup> The normativity of the mental offers some scope for extracting normative guidance from an account of the nature of a mental state. No account of a belief, for example, can tell us what a belief is without telling us that beliefs are correct if they represent the facts. Since attitude-types determine their own correctness conditions, a philosophical account of the attitude-types involved in blame might also help to tell us when holding that attitude is appropriate, and what the best expression of that attitude is.

On Scanlon's theory, blaming someone merely equates to an altering our relationship in light of impairment. Blameworthiness just means that a relationship is impaired. The normative question, 'what ought blame do to relationships?', is analysed out of existence, replaced by questions of what reactions the impairing attitudes of one party justify. The analysis of *blame itself* is therefore silent on what constitutes impaired relations with others, and on what range of reactions are justified in light of that impairment. Given how pivotal blame is to relationships, that is incredibly surprising. The answer to questions of how we justifiably react to others, on Scanlon's theory, come instead purely from our conceptions of relationships, but I have argued in all three sections that that is not correct. Most of all, as I have argued in the last section, our ideas about when relationships are impaired are already partly dependent upon whether the other party is culpable for their attitudes. If that view is right, and blameworthiness itself justifies alterations of relationships, it opens up the possibility that a better philosophical understanding of blame and blameworthiness helps us better understand when our relationships are impaired, and why.

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<sup>12</sup> See, e.g. Karen Jones' theory of trust in Jones (1996). A theory which says that trust is an affective attitude, she says, will think it correct to trust in different circumstances from someone who thinks that to trust is to have some belief about the reliability of another.

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