

Scanlon's Theories of Blame

Eugene Chislenko

(forthcoming in *The Journal of Value Inquiry*)

Abstract: T.M. Scanlon has recently offered an influential treatment of blame as a response to the impairment of a relationship. I argue, first, that Scanlon's remarks about the nature of blame suggest several sharply diverging views, so different that they can reasonably be considered different theories: a *judgment-centered theory*, on which blame is the reaction the blamer judges appropriate; an *appropriateness-centered theory*, on which blame is any reaction that is actually appropriate; and a *substantive list theory*, on which blame is any of a list of reactions, such as anger or loss of trust. Once distinguished, each theory faces a series of formidable challenges that neither Scanlon nor his commentators have addressed. I argue that the notion of directed attention, central in Scanlon's earlier work, can be used to address these challenges, while preserving the spirit of Scanlon's discussion of blame.

In his now classic 2008 book *Moral Dimensions*, T.M. Scanlon offered a rich and influential treatment of the nature and ethics of blame. Against many views that treat blame either merely as an evaluative belief, or as a kind of punishment, Scanlon holds that “blame normally involves more than an evaluation but is not a kind of sanction.”¹ On his view, a satisfactory understanding of blame should fit these facts, and should help us understand “the ethics of blame: . . . who can be blamed, who has standing to blame, and why we should blame—why blame is not an attitude we would do better to avoid.”² In particular, Scanlon aims to explain why we should not think that “blame presupposes a strong kind of freedom” that we do not actually have.³

Scanlon’s view departs from his earlier discussions of responsibility, which talked of “a judgment of moral blame,” and emphasized that “blame . . . claims that an agent has governed herself in a way that would not be allowed by any principles that no one could reasonably reject.”⁴ As he later put it: “One of my main reasons for undertaking the investigation reported in the chapter on blame in *Moral Dimensions* was the belief that the account of moral responsibility that I offered in *What We Owe to Each Other* relied on an account of blame that was too close to a purely evaluative interpretation, thereby making it too easy to set aside incompatibilist challenges.”⁵ On his later view, that interpretation “did not do justice to the weight of blame and failed to explain why it should seem to many that blame is appropriate only for things under a person’s control.”⁶

Scanlon’s account in *Moral Dimensions* centers on a view of blame as a response to the impairment of a relationship. His systematic attention to the ways in which relationships can be impaired, and to our reactions to these impairments, yields an original and comprehensive

discussion of blame. On the other hand, many philosophers have resisted central aspects of Scanlon's view. These writers have questioned, most centrally, the applicability of the notion of a "relationship" in blame of strangers or of the dead, and Scanlon's reluctance to treat emotions such as anger or resentment as necessary for blame. Scanlon's discussion continues to be both influential and controversial.⁷

What sort of reaction is blame? Scanlon's remarks on this topic raise an exegetical question, whose importance has not been investigated in detail. "To claim that a person is *blameworthy* for an action," Scanlon writes, "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."⁸ Blame "reflects this impairment."⁹ This 'reflecting' is, as Scanlon puts it, more than evaluation, but not a kind of sanction. But when we ask *how* blame reflects the impairment of a relationship, his answer varies. I will argue that Scanlon's remarks in *Moral Dimensions* diverge sharply, in ways that suggest multiple, fundamentally different theories of blame. These theories have not been clearly distinguished, either by Scanlon or by his commentators. Once distinguished, they face a series of challenges that is different from, and in some ways more formidable than, the standard objections raised in the recent literature. I want to consider these challenges, with a view toward developing a defensible Scanlonian theory of blame. I conclude by suggesting that Scanlon's earlier discussion of directed attention in *What We Owe to Each Other* offers a way to address many of the challenges. On the most compelling version of a Scanlonian view, blame involves a particular kind of directed attention: blame reactions modify a relationship in ways that focus on, or attend to, the blamed person's role in impairing the relationships she can have.

1. The Judgment-Centered Theory

On Scanlon's most oft-repeated characterization,

[JCT] 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.¹⁰

In his Introduction and in a later précis of *Moral Dimensions*, Scanlon expresses this view in summarizing his account of blame, writing in both places that "To blame someone, in my view, is to understand one's relations with that person as modified in the way that such a judgment holds to be appropriate."¹¹ In the context of reaffirming negative conclusions we have already reached, he writes that "to blame is just to reaffirm the attitudes that this judgment holds to be appropriate."¹² And in a reply to critics, Scanlon continues to talk of reactions "of the kind judged appropriate."¹³ Here, to blame someone is to make a judgment of blameworthiness, and, furthermore, to take one's relationship to be modified in a certain way. If we ask: "Modified in what way?", the answer is: *in a way your judgment holds to be appropriate*. In Scanlon's lead example, his close friend Joe betrays him by taking part in cruel jokes about him at a party. He responds to Joe's betrayal by judging Joe blameworthy. Scanlon might then "revise my attitude toward Joe in the way that this judgment holds to be appropriate."¹⁴ He 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."¹⁵ These reactions reflect the impairment in the friendship, in ways Scanlon judges appropriate.

This characterization of blame is initially puzzling. It describes blame as a reaction the blamer's judgment of blameworthiness holds to be appropriate. But as we saw, "to claim that a person is *blameworthy* for an action," is, for Scanlon, "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."¹⁶ This claim makes no mention of any particular reaction by the blamer. If it does not even mention any particular reaction, how can it hold the blamer's reaction to be appropriate?

This question has more than one possible answer. First, Scanlon may intend the judgment-centered theory to add to his conception of judgments of blameworthiness. On this reading, in cases of blame, the judgment of blameworthiness, or "judgment of impaired relations," also specifies that the blamer's reaction is appropriate. The judgment claims *both* that an action shows something about the agent's attitudes toward others that impairs the relations that others can have with him or her, and that some reaction or range of reactions to this impairment would be appropriate. Second, Scanlon may, instead, not mean that the judgment refers to any particular reaction by the blamer. On this more minimal reading, the judgment claims only an impairment. But the impairment makes one or more reactions appropriate. To blame is to make the judgment, and also react in one of these ways. Admittedly, this is not a very plausible, or perhaps even possible, reading of "a way that this judgment of impaired relations holds to be appropriate," since, on this reading, the blamer's judgment does not hold anything of any way of modifying a relationship. But as we will see, the reading is motivated in other ways. We can take each reading in turn.

The first reading can be called a *judgment-centered theory* of blame. Although it treats the judgment of blameworthiness as one component of blame, this theory does not see blame as consisting in a judgment. Blame can include anger, mistrust, or avoidance, rather than merely leading to these as further consequences, in the way a judgment might. Nevertheless, the theory

is judgment-centered, in the sense that it looks to the blamer's judgment to determine which reactions can be properly called "blame." Blaming reactions are, as Scanlon puts it, reactions of the kind *judged* appropriate. On this view, the blamer's judgment predicates appropriateness of a "way" of modifying a relationship. To blame someone is to judge her blameworthy, and to take one's relationship with her to be modified in such a way—in a way the blamer's own judgment specifies to be appropriate.

Can this be Scanlon's considered view? Many have raised objections to his treatment of emotion and of relationships. I want instead to raise a series of interrelated challenges that I think are, in some ways, more formidable. These challenges take seriously Scanlon's remark that blame takes a relationship to be modified in a way that is *judged* appropriate. They are challenges to the judgment-centeredness of the theory.

First, it seems that we sometimes blame akratically, or in ways we ourselves hold to be inappropriate. As bystanders, we might judge Joe's cruel jokes blameworthy, but also judge that it is not our place to blame him. And yet we might find ourselves blaming him nevertheless. A judgment-centered theory, on which blame is essentially the reaction we *do* judge appropriate, must struggle to accommodate cases of akratic blame.

Second, the theory is troublingly broad. Here, the problem is not only that it allows for blame without anger or resentment. The problem is not even that it allows blame to be entirely affectless. On the judgment-centered theory, *any* modification of a relationship can count as blame, as long as the judgment of blameworthiness holds it to be appropriate. Reacting to Joe with love, emotional support, or curiosity may not, on this view, be alternatives to blame. They could *be* blame. This seems to stretch our conception of blame beyond borderline cases, and, indeed, beyond recognition.

This concern is helpfully raised by Angela Smith, who writes: "It is clearly going too far

to suggest that showing extra love and affection toward someone can count as a way of blaming him!”¹⁷ Smith goes on:

In response Scanlon might well protest that I am not taking seriously his claim that to blame a person is to judge him or her to be blameworthy (i.e., to have relationship-impairing attitudes) and to modify your attitudes, intentions, and expectations toward him or her *in a way that this judgment of impaired relations holds to be appropriate*. That is to say, what is crucial here is that the modification in question be an “appropriate” response to the relationship-impairing attitudes of the other. The problem, however, is that the standard of “appropriateness” at issue here is too indeterminate. There’s certainly a *sense* in which the mother’s loving modification of her attitudes toward her blameworthy son is an “appropriate” response, given her desire to compensate for the hatred of others or to encourage him toward self-improvement. Indeed, there are indefinitely many modifications that may count as “appropriate” responses to a judgment of impaired relations in any given case, only some of which seem, intuitively, to qualify as instances of blame. What we need, then, is a way of distinguishing those attitudinal modifications that properly manifest blame from those that manifest some other stance toward the blameworthy agent, such as love, pity, or disappointment.¹⁸

Smith is right to point to love and affection as troubling examples of “blaming” reactions. But the trouble with the judgment-centered theory is not only about appropriateness, but also and especially about judgment-centeredness. In any sense of ‘appropriateness’, no matter how determinate, the judgment-centered theory faces counterexamples in which reactions such as

love and affection are judged to be appropriate in that particular, determinate sense of “appropriate.”

Third, the theory can seem to over-intellectualize blame, treating it as more cognitively sophisticated than it is. One might think that a blamer’s judgment need not specify *any* particular reactions as appropriate. Even when we do not blame akratically, must we always judge our particular reaction to be appropriate?

This third challenge might be addressed by insisting that blame must fall into some *range* of reactions that we judge appropriate, without the need to specify a particular reaction. Alternatively, it might be thought that blaming reactions, such as resentment, essentially hold themselves to be appropriate. Scanlon does not make these replies, and I am not sure he would be sympathetic to them. Moreover, granting such a reply does not remove the second challenge, since love, support, or curiosity can also be held to be appropriate. It also raises an additional, fourth challenge.

The fourth challenge is that the judgment-centered theory gives rise to a regress. Blaming reactions are the ones the judgment of blameworthiness holds to be appropriate. But now we can ask: *which* reactions must the judgment hold appropriate, if the reactions are to count as blame? To rule out vastly different reactions such as love, support, or curiosity, some answer to this question seems needed. It then seems we must look beyond Scanlon’s judgment-centered theory as stated. What else could Scanlon have in mind?

2. The Appropriateness-Centered Theory

Scanlon also writes:

[ACT] To blame...is to hold the attitude...that this impairment makes appropriate.¹⁹

Or as Scanlon also puts it: “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.”²⁰

Here, there is no mention of judgment. Our earlier question was: which modifications of a relationship constitute blame? Taken at face value, these remarks tell us: *the ones the impairment makes appropriate*. We can call this Scanlon’s *appropriateness-centered theory*. It, too, can be found often in *Moral Dimensions*. Scanlon writes of “an impairment that makes it appropriate for others to have attitudes toward them different from those that constitute the default moral relationship. To blame someone is actually to hold modified attitudes of this kind toward him or her.”²¹ 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.”²² On this view, when our friend Joe betrays us by making cruel jokes about us at a party, we can react—as before—by ceasing to value spending time with him, withdrawing trust, and so on. In blaming him, we judge him blameworthy, and react in these further ways—ways made appropriate by the way Joe’s attitudes impair the relationships he can have, and especially his relationship with us.

Blaming Joe can sound, on this description, much like Scanlon described it in illustrating the judgment-centered theory. One might now begin to wonder whether the appropriateness-centered theory is what Scanlon had in mind even then. On the judgment-centered theory, “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.” The phrase “this judgment...holds” can be read literally, as insisting that the blamer’s judgment specifies that her blaming reaction is appropriate. But the same phrase can also be read more

loosely. Perhaps what Scanlon has in mind is that the blamer's judgment holds that a certain *condition* is in place—a relationship impairment brought about by someone's attitudes—that makes typical blaming reactions appropriate. Blaming reactions are then reactions that the impairment makes appropriate. This is the appropriateness-centered theory. It is not the most obvious reading of “a way...this judgment...holds to be appropriate.” But as we saw, that reading is inconsistent with some of Scanlon's other remarks, which suggest the appropriateness-centered theory. And on that more literal reading, Scanlon's view faces formidable additional challenges: akratic blame, extreme breadth, excessive sophistication, and regress. Might it not be more accurate, or at least more charitable, to see the appropriateness-centered theory as Scanlon's considered view?

It is certainly a different view. We can judge that mistrusting and avoiding Joe are the appropriate reactions, even when, considering our history with him, the terrible month he has had, and the ways he has been misled about us, we should really forgive him, and blame someone else. Since the reactions an impairment makes appropriate may not be judged appropriate, and vice versa, the appropriateness-centered theory is distinct from, and conflicts with, the judgment-centered theory. We can now ask: Does it do better as a descriptive theory of blame?

Like the judgment-centered theory, the appropriateness-centered theory can be initially puzzling. It can seem odd to see the notion of appropriateness made so central in a book on *Moral Dimensions*, focused on permissibility and blameworthiness as dimensions of moral evaluation and response. We can ask whether appropriateness is meant to be a distinct ‘dimension’, and if so, what sort of dimension it is. It is here that we might find, with Smith, that the notion of appropriateness is so far too indeterminate. But this difficulty can be addressed by a

more general investigation of the notion of appropriateness, and can help motivate that investigation.²³ It is puzzling, but far from fatal.

Moreover, the appropriateness-centered theory avoids most of the difficulties for the judgment-centered theory. It does not struggle to accommodate akratic blame; a reaction can be blame, on this view, while being judged inappropriate. Nor is there any need, on the appropriateness-centered theory, for a blamer's judgment to specify which reactions are appropriate. There is then no corresponding regress. The appropriateness-centered theory has an evaluative component; in ascribing blame, we must apply our views about which reactions are appropriate. But there is no need to specify which reactions a blamer must judge appropriate in order for them to count as blame. These are all significant advantages of the appropriateness-centered theory over the judgment-centered one. They avoid the first, third, and fourth problems for the judgment-centered theory.

On the other hand, the appropriateness-centered theory is again troublingly broad. If the appropriate reaction to a blameworthy action is love, or support, or curiosity, the appropriateness-centered theory would consider that reaction an example of blame. On this theory, *all* appropriate reactions to actions we judge blameworthy are blame reactions. This again seems to stretch the concept of blame beyond recognition.

Conversely, on the appropriateness-centered theory, *only* appropriate reactions are blame reactions. On this view, whenever a judgment of blameworthiness is correct, there can be *no inappropriate blame*. This is the theory's analogue of our earlier problem about akratic blame, ruling out, not blame that is not judged appropriate, but blame that is not actually appropriate. It is, I think, an even bigger bullet to bite.

Apart from being implausible in these ways, the theory threatens to trivialize many of Scanlon's other conclusions. As Scanlon puts it: "One advantage of a relationship-based account

of blame is that it can offer a good explanation of what might be called the ethics of blame—that is to say, of reasons why one can be open to moral criticism for blaming someone or for failing to blame them.”²⁴ In this context, Scanlon “explains...why blame is not an attitude we would do better to avoid.”²⁵ Such a view about *appropriate* reactions is hardly worth defending. Nor would it take Scanlon’s long discussion of freedom to show “that blame can be appropriate for characteristics that a person could not avoid having.”²⁶ Since it is always true that appropriate reactions can be appropriate, the appropriateness-centered theory would make such arguments trivial. Like Scanlon, we may rightly want a conception of blame that leaves room for substantive debate about these issues.

In response to these challenges, one might look for a more plausible version of the appropriateness-centered theory. To blame someone, one might suggest, is to judge her blameworthy, and to react in a way that *would* be appropriate if this judgment were correct. Since we can be mistaken about the presence, degree, and kind of impairment, this variant would at least leave some room for inappropriate blame. Might this be Scanlon’s view?

The textual grounds for attributing this view to Scanlon are not as clear. It is not obviously supported by his suggestions of an appropriateness-centered theory: the phrases “the attitude...that this impairment makes appropriate,” “made appropriate by the way in which that person’s faults impair one’s relation with him or her,” and “the *response* (blame) that is appropriate” all tie blame directly to impairment and to actual appropriateness.²⁷ Nor is the view clearly supported by Scanlon’s suggestions of a judgment-centered theory, since there is still no particular “way [of reacting] that this judgment of impaired relations holds to be appropriate.” Still, this variant both looks to appropriateness, and ties blame fairly closely to the blamer’s judgment, as Scanlon seems inclined to do. And since it does not obviously face all the same

challenges, it is worth asking whether it may be a more charitable reading, and a more defensible theory.

Unfortunately, the challenges are again formidable. First, this variant is still troublingly broad; if love, support, or curiosity *would* be appropriate, this view counts them as instances of blame. Second, the variant allows inappropriate blame only in cases of incorrect judgments of blameworthiness. If the judgment is correct, no inappropriate response will count as blame. Third, it still comes close to trivializing explanations of “why blame is not an attitude we would do better to avoid,” or “why one can be open to moral criticism for blaming someone or for failing to blame them,” or why “blame can be appropriate for characteristics that a person could not avoid having.”²⁸ Whenever it is correct to judge that someone’s action shows something about her attitudes that impairs the relations others can have with her, the appropriate response will, in fact, be appropriate. More generally, it is hard to see how any theory that ties blame reactions closely to actual appropriateness can offer a recognizable picture of blame. A wide variety of inappropriate reactions are instances of blame, and a wide variety of appropriate reactions are not.

The appropriateness-centered theory raises its own set of formidable substantive and interpretive difficulties, which make it unlikely to be either what Scanlon consistently has in mind, or a charitable reading of him, or the best version of his relationship-centered conception of blame. On the other hand, Scanlon’s expressions of the appropriateness-centered theory also make it less obvious that the *judgment*-centered theory is his considered view. Conflicting textual evidence suggests that Scanlon is to some extent ambivalent, and does not always clearly distinguish these theories. Once distinguished, both theories are beset by very significant difficulties. Considering these difficulties, it may be worth trying another approach. Is there a different theory to attribute to Scanlon?

3. The Substantive List Theory

At times, Scanlon characterizes blame in terms of a range of particular reactions. As he puts it:

[SLT] Blame...can involve different things in different cases, including such things as withholding or modifying trust and reliance, seeing the person as not eligible, or less eligible, to be a friend or a participant in cooperative relations, changing the meaning one assigns to the person's actions and to one's interactions with him or her, or even ceasing to be disposed to be pleased when things go well for the person, and ceasing to hope that they go well.²⁹

This is a fairly plausible, if rather broad, list of reactions we might count as blame. It is an open-ended list, "including such things as" the responses Scanlon mentions. But it is a list nevertheless. Scanlon does not put it forward as, in itself, a general theory. Yet when other, more general descriptions falter, this list can be taken as an indication of the sorts of reactions Scanlon has in mind. If we do take it as a characterization of blame, we might call it a broadly Scanlonian *substantive list theory* of blame. Could this list represent Scanlon's considered view, and is it defensible?

Such a theory would contrast with the judgment-centered and appropriateness-centered theories. Although the list is open-ended, it gives no indication of extending to all reactions that are, or are judged, appropriate to a blameworthy action. Nor does it require either apparent or actual appropriateness. It thus avoids the earlier challenges about akratic and inappropriate

blame; about treating reactions of love, support, or curiosity as instances of blame; and about the trivialization of substantive views about the ethics of blame. And if this list suggests too broad a conception of blame, perhaps Scanlon, or someone otherwise sympathetic to his views, could be convinced to make the list a bit more restrictive.

A substantive list also begins to answer the regress challenge for the judgment-centered theory. The list tells us which attitudes are the ones that count. Nevertheless, a descendant of the regress lingers. If we are simply given a list, we can rightly raise a question about the underlying rationale for the list. Which reactions should be included? And why these, and not others? By itself, the list does not offer any answer to the question of what motivates that particular list. Nor does it draw a central link either to judgment, or to relationships, or tell us what that link might be. This is not a fatal challenge, but it can leave us wondering. Scanlon aims to “offer an account of blame,” characterized in general terms; any list of blame reactions then seems meant as illustration and defense of the account, rather than as the account itself.³⁰ The substantive list theory seems to be yet another unlikely candidate to be Scanlon’s considered view of blame. And without an underlying rationale to make this theory compelling, the theory does not seem to be a particularly charitable reading of Scanlon, either. If we resist the judgment-centered and appropriateness-centered theories, how are we to assess Scanlon’s list?

4. The Focus-Centered Theory

Distinguishing these theories is, I think, already an advance. It brings out more clearly the nature of the difficulties for Scanlon’s discussion of blame. And it raises more sharply the question of what version of Scanlon’s view, if any, might be defensible.

Helpful as this might be, I do not want to leave it at that. I believe that Scanlon's list of typical blame reactions can be given a rationale, though one that is not explicit in *Moral Dimensions*. To articulate this rationale, I want to draw on a notion central to Scanlon's first book, *What We Owe to Each Other*: the notion of directed attention.

For Scanlon,

Having a desire to do something (such as to drink a glass of water) is not just a matter of seeing something good about it. I might see something good about drinking a glass of foul-tasting medicine, but would not therefore be said to have a desire to do so, and I can even see that something would be pleasant without, in the normal sense, feeling a desire to do it. Reflection on the differences between these cases leads me to what I will call the idea of desire in the directed-attention sense. A person has a desire in the directed-attention sense that P if the thought of P keeps occurring to him or her in a favorable light, that is to say, if the person's attention is directed insistently toward considerations that present themselves as counting in favor of P.³¹

This is how, for Scanlon, our desires are responsive to our apparent reasons, while also going beyond our judgments about them. A similar appeal to attention might be made by a Scanlonian conception of blame. "To claim that a person is *blameworthy* for an action," we can say with Scanlon, "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."³² We can then add:

[FCT] To *blame* someone is to judge her blameworthy and to take one's relationship with her to be modified in a way that focuses on the relationship-impairing character of her attitudes.

We can call this the *focus-centered theory of blame*. On this view, when our friend Joe makes cruel jokes about us, we might, as before, “cease to value spending time with him in the way one does with a friend,” or “revise...intentions to confide in him,” or form “intentions to complain...and to demand an explanation, justification, or apology.”³³ These changes to our values and intentions focus on, or attend to, Joe's friendship-impairing betrayal, treating it as important for our understanding of our relationship with him. A focus on the way those attitudes impair our relationship is distinctive of reactions of blame.

This focus-centered theory is not Scanlon's stated theory. But it is, I want to suggest, a well-motivated and distinctively Scanlonian theory, which offers a way to unify many of his remarks while avoiding the most formidable objections to his views.

The theory is Scanlonian, in treating blame as responding to someone's relationship-impairing attitudes in a way that is “more than an evaluation but...not a kind of sanction.”³⁴ It is also Scanlonian in understanding a central practical attitude in terms of a kind of evaluative attention, just as Scanlon does with desire. Finally, it is Scanlonian in emphasizing an action's “meaning—the significance, for the agent and others, of the agent's willingness to perform that action for the reasons he or she does.”³⁵ For Scanlon, blame responds to what an action shows about a person's attitudes: in this case, to what an action shows about the way a person's attitudes impair the relationships others can have with her. On the focus-centered theory, blame treats the impairment as central to the action's significance, and treats that significance as central to one's relationship with the blamed.

On the other hand, as I have described it, blame's attention differs from that of desire both in target and in kind. Desire, as Scanlon describes it, attends to apparent reasons. Blame, on the focus-centered theory, attends to relationship impairment. It is focused on, for example, the way the attitudes expressed by Joe's cruel jokes damage our friendship with him. If these impairments are reasons, they are reasons of a particular kind; and they may or may not be attended to *as* reasons for a particular reaction. Moreover, desire, as Scanlon describes it, is naturally thought of as directing our *thoughts* toward certain considerations. But attention is characteristic of many kinds of states and reactions. Sebastian Watzl writes: "Attention is not another element of the mind—like perception, cognition, emotion, motivation, or intention....Attentional structure is organizing the mind into parts that are central or prioritized and those that are peripheral."³⁶ I use the term "focus" to mean, and to emphasize, directed attention in this sense: the prioritizing, foregrounding, or treating as central of, in this case, the relationship-impairing character of someone's attitudes. When we blame Joe, on this view, our intentions, expectations, and other attitudes toward him change in ways that attend primarily to the relationship-impairing character of Joe's attitudes. Here, as in the judgment-centered theory, relationships are doubly central. On the focus-centered theory, blame takes a relationship to be modified, in ways that focus on the relationship-impairing character of someone's attitudes. This focus shows itself, not in insistent thoughts, but in what we foreground in our relationship with someone.

The focus-centered theory helps explain the appeal of the other three theories I described. It treats blame as focused on precisely the relationship impairment that the judgment of blameworthiness attributes. Someone who makes such a judgment will typically (though not always) hold such further attention to be appropriate; and when the judgment is correct, the attention will often (though not always) be in fact appropriate. Moreover, we can see how the

focus-centered theory would result in at least much of Scanlon's list. What sorts of relationship modifications focus on the relationship-impairing character of a person's attitudes? Presumably, these can include such things as withholding trust or reliance, or seeing someone as less eligible for friendship or cooperation. These reactions attend to a person's impaired eligibility for central elements of ongoing interpersonal relationships, treating the impairment as central in one's conception of and responses to her. Scanlon also adds omissive or privative examples, such as ceasing to hope that things go well for someone. But these can easily be accommodated. Focus does not only 'add' attention; it can lead our attention away from whatever led us to hope that things go well for someone. When we blame someone, on the focus-centered theory, we focus especially on her attitudes as impairing the relations people can have with her. We should expect to be less pleased for her, less hopeful on her behalf, and more likely to complain or demand an explanation, justification, or apology.³⁷

Though I will have to leave the details aside, I think we can also see, in broad strokes, why the focus-centered theory might lead to some of Scanlon's other conclusions. Not everyone will have 'standing' to blame someone they can rightly judge blameworthy; revising one's relationship with someone in a way that focuses on her relationship-impairing attitudes can be inappropriate if one holds the same attitudes, or was the main source of a relationship's impairment, or if her attitudes are none of one's business.³⁸ At the same time, it seems unlikely that, to be appropriate, such revision would require adequate opportunity to avoid, or any metaphysically robust form of freedom. Joe's cruel jokes call for a reaction that emphasizes their cruelty, whatever our broader metaphysical views may be. And the connection between blame and emotion is, as in Scanlon's other remarks, common but not essential; in some cases, one can change a relationship in this way without anger or resentment, and even without any emotion at all. On the other hand, the focus-centered theory also offers a way to say why emotion can seem,

and be, so central to blame. Blame's directed attention is naturally seen as characteristic of a range of emotions, and especially of anger and resentment. When we focus on the way someone's attitudes impair a relationship with us, anger and resentment are rarely far away.

The focus-centered theory is a descriptive theory of blame that fits much of the spirit of Scanlon's discussion. It also avoids most, if not all, of the problems for the other three theories.

Unlike the judgment-centered theory, the focus-centered theory can accommodate akratic blame; since judgment governs attention imperfectly, we might focus on Joe's betrayal in ways we think are inappropriate. There is also no need for our judgment to specify which responses are appropriate, and no corresponding regress about which reactions the judgment must specify.

Unlike the appropriateness-centered theory, the focus-centered theory has no trouble allowing inappropriate blame; we can easily go wrong, or too far, or not far enough, in focusing on a friend's betrayal. Nor does the focus-centered theory limit inappropriate blame to cases in which a judgment of blameworthiness is incorrect; it leaves open the possibility that, even when we are right about someone's blameworthiness, it is inappropriate for *us* to focus on the relationship-impairing character of her attitudes, or to focus on them in particular ways. And as we saw, though I do not claim that it will support every one of Scanlon's other conclusions, the focus-centered theory does not render them trivial.

The substantive list theory, I just argued, describes a range of reactions that focus on the relationship-impairing character of someone's attitudes. Scanlon's open-ended list of reactions can illustrate and help defend the focus-centered theory. But instead of lacking an underlying rationale, the focus-centered theory itself provides an underlying rationale for Scanlon's list. It offers a way to say what these reactions have in common. If it is clear that Scanlon aims to offer a descriptive theory of blame in general terms, this aim does not cast doubt on the focus-centered

theory. The focus-centered theory shares Scanlon's ambition to offer a general descriptive theory of blame, while fitting naturally with his substantive list.

At this point, one might object: is this theory not far too broad? Even love, support, or curiosity can include a focus on the relationship-impairing character of someone's attitudes. We then again face a problem of extreme breadth, threatening to stretch the concept of blame beyond recognition. If this is right, the focus-centered theory inherits a central problem for the judgment- and appropriateness-centered theories, and fails to fit Scanlon's substantive list.

The focus-centered theory offers a way to address this problem. It is true that love, support, and curiosity are *compatible* with a focus on the relationship-impairing character of someone's attitudes. But love, support, and curiosity are compatible with blame. The question is whether love, support, and curiosity can *be* relationship modifications that focus on the relationship-impairing character of someone's attitudes. This seems unlikely. To be such modifications, our reactions, whatever they are, must respond to someone's attitudes primarily as impairing the relationships the person can have, rather than as calling for affection or help, or as objects of interest or study. Even a focus on someone's attitudes as amenable to learning or repair differs substantially from a focus on them as impairing relationships. There can be room for disagreement about some particular reactions. But the focus-centered theory does not open the floodgates for an extremely wide range of reactions to count as blame, in the way the judgment-centered and appropriateness-centered theories do.

The focus-centered theory might still be too broad in less extreme ways, by including a wide range of emotional, emotionless, and even merely untrusting reactions. This problem arises for any characterization that fits Scanlon's fairly broad list. As a reconstruction of Scanlon's views, then, the problem is an advantage; a successful exegesis should lead to it. The focus-centered theory also offers a range of options for addressing the difficulty. A more insistent

strategy is to stick to the theory. A more concessive strategy would be to think about what *sort* of focus is characteristic of blame, and be open to the possibility of a more restrictive theory. I am inclined to the more concessive strategy, which, for Scanlon, may be somewhat revisionary. The focus-centered theory suggests some terms for such a debate; it also suggests that restricting Scanlon's view in some such way could be a relatively innocuous further addition, leaving the rest of his theory intact.

Scanlon is right, I think, to emphasize the wide variety of our blaming reactions. These reactions involve a range of emotions, intentions, and other attitudes that profoundly change our relationships with those we blame, typically in response to ways in which the blamed have already damaged the relations we can have with them. The reactions have something important in common. They are not always appropriate, and they are not always judged appropriate. But they are not a haphazard collection, either, and they do not include love, support, or curiosity. On Scanlon's view, they all react to someone whom we see as impairing the relations we can have with them. They react in a way that, as Scanlon says, "reflects this impairment"(2008, 123). If I am right, this amounts to treating the impairment as central—that is, modifying one's relationship in ways that focus on the relationship-impairing character of a person's attitudes. That focus can be angry, mistrustful, or in some cases, cold and dispassionate. But in one form or another, I think the reactions Scanlon emphasizes have this focus in common. The attention is not itself an evaluation or a sanction, but it certainly has force. The blamed can painfully say: "So this is how you see me."

If I am right, Scanlon offers not one, but several theories of blame. These theories differ in crucial ways, and face difficulties that have not been appreciated. But Scanlon also has the resources to address these difficulties, though the resulting conception of blame is not one he endorses explicitly. His readers are right, both to have misgivings, and to find his view worth

considering. With some work, we can see how a Scanlonian theory of blame can capture a wide range of blaming reactions, and respond effectively to a range of criticisms. Here, the focus-centered theory offers a plausible and friendly amendment to Scanlon's other remarks, and helps address formidable difficulties, some of them so far unappreciated, for his view. I do not claim that it resolves every difficulty. Most centrally, I have not tried to defend Scanlon's view that blame is a response to an impairment of a *relationship*. But if he is right about this, he can also say what sort of response blame is. Blame includes a range of responses that focus on, or attend to, the way someone's attitudes impair the relationships she can have.

Acknowledgments: My thanks to Craig Agule, Colin Chamberlain, Charles Goldhaber, August Gorman, Niko Kolodny, Arthur Krieger, Nathan Stout, R. Jay Wallace, an anonymous referee, and my audience at the American Philosophical Association (Central Division) 2018 meeting for helpful discussion of earlier versions of this paper.

Notes

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1. T. M. Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, Blame* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 122.
 2. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
 3. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
 4. T. M. Scanlon, "The Significance of Choice," In S. M. McMurrin (ed.), *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, Vol. 8 (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988), p. 170; and T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 268.
 5. T. M. Scanlon, "Reply to Hill, Mason and Wedgwood," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 83 (2011): 490-505, p. 496.
 6. *Ibid.*, p. 500. For discussion of difficulties for evaluative views of blame, see George Sher, *In Praise of Blame* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 75-78; Hanna Pickard, "Irrational Blame," *Analysis* 73 (2013): 613-26; and Neal Tognazzini and Justin Coates, "Blame," in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2018 Edition), §1.1, available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/blame/>.
 7. See Thomas Hill, "Scanlon on Moral Dimensions," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 83 (2011): 482-9; Michele Mason, "Blame: Taking It Seriously," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 83 (2011): 473-81; George Sher, "Wrongdoing and Relationships: The Problem of the Stranger," in David Coates and Neal Tognazzini (eds.), *Blame: Its Nature and Norms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 49-65; Angela Smith, "Moral Blame and Moral Protest," in David Coates and Neal Tognazzini (eds.), *Blame: Its Nature and Norms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 27-48; R. Jay

Wallace, “Dispassionate Opprobrium: On Blame and the Reactive Sentiments,” in R. Jay Wallace, Rahul Kumar, and Samuel Freeman (eds.), *Reasons and Recognition: Essays on the Philosophy of T. M. Scanlon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 348-72; Gary Watson, “The Trouble with Psychopaths,” in R. Jay Wallace, Rahul Kumar, and Samuel Freeman (eds.), *Reasons and Recognition: Essays on the Philosophy of T. M. Scanlon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 307-31; and Susan Wolf, “Blame, Italian Style in R. Jay Wallace, Rahul Kumar, and Samuel Freeman (eds.), *Reasons and Recognition: Essays on the Philosophy of T. M. Scanlon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 332-47. Among these, Hill, Sher, and Wallace emphasize doubts about Scanlon’s treatment of the notion of a relationship, and Mason, Wallace, and Wolf insist on the centrality of emotion in blame. For replies to these and other related criticisms, see Scanlon, “Reply to Hill, Mason and Wedgwood,” *op. cit.*, and T. M. Scanlon, “Interpreting Blame,” in David Coates and Neal Tognazzini (eds.), *Blame: Its Nature and Norms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 84-99.

8. Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions*, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 128-9. For citations of this passage as Scanlon’s view, see Coates and Tognazzini, *op. cit.*, p. 11; Mason, *op. cit.*, p. 474; Michael McKenna, *Conversation and Responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 104; David Owens, *Shaping the Normative Landscape* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 36; Derk Pereboom, “Free Will Skepticism, Blame, and Obligation,” in David Coates and Neal Tognazzini (eds.), *Blame: Its Nature and Norms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 189-206, p. 191; Sher, “Wrongdoing and Relationships,” *op. cit.*, p. 50; David Shoemaker, “Blame and

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- Punishment,” in David Coates and Neal Tognazzini (eds.), *Blame: Its Nature and Norms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 100-118, p. 101; Smith, op. cit., pp. 37-8; Matthew Talbert, *Moral Responsibility* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2016), pp. 58-9; Tognazzini and Coates, op. cit., §1.3.2; Wallace, op. cit., p. 349; and Wolf, op. cit., p. 332.
11. Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions*, op. cit., p. 6, and T. M. Scanlon, “Précis of *Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, Blame*,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 83 (2011): 459-63, p. 462.
 12. Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions*, op. cit., p. 131.
 13. Scanlon, “Reply,” op. cit., p. 497.
 14. Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions*, op. cit., p. 129.
 15. Ibid., pp. 129-30.
 16. Ibid., p. 128.
 17. Smith, op. cit., p.38.
 18. Ibid., p. 38.
 19. Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions*, op. cit., p. 131.
 20. Ibid., pp.186-7.
 21. Ibid., p. 141.
 22. Ibid., p. 138. For passages that are more ambiguous between [JCT] and [ACT], see pp. 131 and 155, and Scanlon, “Interpreting Blame,” op. cit., pp. 88-9.
 23. See T. M. Scanlon, “Giving Desert its Due,” *Philosophical Explorations* 16 (2013): 101-16.
 24. Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions*, op. cit., pp. 166-7.
 25. Ibid., p. 123.
 26. Ibid., p. 198; cf. pp. 179-206.

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27. Ibid., pp. 131, 186-7, and 138.
28. Ibid., pp. 123, 166-7, and 198.
29. Ibid., pp. 186-7. For other uses of lists in characterizing Scanlon's view, see pp. 131 and 186-7; T. M. Scanlon, "Giving Desert its Due," op. cit., pp. 105-6; and T. M. Scanlon, "Forms and Conditions of Responsibility," in Randolph Clarke, Michael McKenna, and Angela M. Smith (eds.), *The Nature of Responsibility: New Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 89-111, p. 92.
30. Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions*, op. cit., p. 122.
31. Scanlon, *What We Owe*, op. cit., p. 39. For critical discussion of this view of desire, see David Copp and David Sobel, "Desires, Motives, and Reasons: Scanlon's Rationalistic Moral Psychology," *Social Theory and Practice* 28 (2002): 243-76; and Michael Smith, "Scanlon on Desire and the Explanation of Action," in R. Jay Wallace, Rahul Kumar, and Samuel Freeman (eds.), *Reasons and Recognition: Essays on the Philosophy of T. M. Scanlon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 79-97.
32. Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions*, op. cit., p. 128.
33. Ibid., pp. 129-31.
34. Ibid., p. 122.
35. Ibid., p. 4.
36. Sebastian Watzl, *Structuring Mind: The Nature of Attention and how it Shapes Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 2.
37. For useful recent discussions of attention and its role in emotion, see Lucy Allais, "Elective Forgiveness," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 21 (2013): 637-653; Elisa Hurley and Coleen Macnamara, "Beyond Belief: Toward a Theory of the Reactive

Attitudes,” *Philosophical Papers* 39 (2010): 373–399; Leonhard Menges, “The Emotion Account of Blame,” *Philosophical Studies* 174 (2017): 257-73; David Zimmerman, “Thinking With Your Hypothalamus: Reflections on a Cognitive Role for the Reactive Emotions,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 63 (2001): 521–541; and especially Watzl, *op. cit.*

38. For the details of Scanlon’s views about standing, see Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions*, *op. cit.*, pp. 175-9 and 206-10. For further discussion, see G. A., Cohen, “Casting the First Stone: Who Can, and Who Can't, Condemn the Terrorists?” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 58 (2006): 113-36; G. A. Cohen, “Ways of Silencing Critics,” in G.A. Cohen, *Finding Oneself in the Other* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 134-42; R. Jay Wallace, “Hypocrisy, Moral Address, and the Equal Standing of Persons,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 38 (2010): 307-41; Linda Radzik, “On Minding Your Own Business: Differentiating Accountability Relations within the Moral Community,” *Social Theory and Practice* 37 (2011): 574-98; Macalester Bell, “The Standing to Blame: A Critique,” in David Coates and Neal Tognazzini (eds.), *Blame: Its Nature and Norms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 263-81; and Marilyn Friedman, “How to Blame People Responsibly,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 47 (2013): 271-84.