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Blame and Complicity in International Relations: Making Non-intervention Morally Bearable

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Abstract

On various occasions, states have condemned other nations or groups for mass atrocities they commit; but this rarely leads to any step to redress the untoward situation. This article therefore asks: What functions does blame serve when the blamers lack – or are reluctant to use – the power or authority to punish transgressors? Unlike approaches that focus on the effects of blaming on the wrongdoer, we argue that openly attributing responsibility for wrongdoings to another state or non-state actor has become a normative strategy to shape the way a government is perceived domestically and abroad. Specifically, international blame serves two main objectives: an immediate, communicative function, that is, to express moral protest, and a future-oriented purpose, that is, to dispel future indictment of complicity. We suggest that a corollary of this normative strategy is to make non-intervention morally acceptable. Thus, while in principle the blamer might stand up for the violated norm and value the victims, the strategic use of blame tends to legitimate inaction, by diverting attention away from blaming's deontic commitments. The article therefore warns against the instrumental use of blame as an act of supererogation (that is, an act that is not compulsory but whose performance is praiseworthy), and as a form of moral clearance (whereby the blamer acknowledges the issue but leaves responsibility for finding solution to the international society). Rather, while blaming ascribes responsibility for the act to an agent, we argue, it also puts the blamer in a specific moral situation: the necessity to take measures that interrupt the unfolding action. Our analysis leads us to put forward a plausible norm that broadens the scope of complicity in international politics: states become complicit in the wrongdoing of other actors (states or non-states) whenever they violate moral obligations that blaming demands. In other words, to blame is to commit oneself to act, though the exact nature of this action varies.

¹ The authors would like to thank participants to the 2018 ISA Workshop "Just and Unjust Norms of Warfare: A View from the Social Sciences" held in San Francisco, for their astute comments and questions. Our discussant, Chris Brown, was generous with his time and provided many suggestions. The two guest editors, Richard Beardsworth and Ariel Colonomos, read previous iterations and offered detailed suggestions. ERIS' two anonymous reviewers forced us to clarify numerous points. Hopefully, the result – which owes a lot to their generous input – is better than what they had to review. Of course, the usual disclaimer applies.

Keywords: Blame, complicity, intervention, protest, commitments

Introduction

Confronted with human rights violations abroad, political leaders often express their disapproval through official speeches, communiqués, or on social media. In general, these types of communication explicitly single out an agent held responsible for the abuses: the foreign state that is unable to maintain peaceful domestic order or, even, persecutes its own citizens. Blaming means: “to say or think that someone or something did something wrong or is responsible for something bad happening” (Cambridge English Dictionary). Pointing fingers and castigating someone for a specific wrongdoing is a widespread human behaviour. According to Elizabeth Beardsley, “blame, in all its forms, has a power and poignancy for human life unparalleled by other moral concepts.”² However, the field of international relations (IR) has been relatively silent on the issue. An interesting if dated exception is the work of Helge Hveem.³ For him, blame is akin to a form of nonviolent conflict behaviour that either precedes or follows an armed conflict, or that is chosen by small powers due to their inability to muster other means for action.

However, Hveem’s study does not factor in cases where international blame is not followed by military intervention, even when the blamer has the capability to intervene, and cases where states refuse to take sides, blaming both parties for the incipient atrocities; the blame is therefore laid evenly on the actors involved. In our view, what passes for state inaction or neutrality may instead be construed as complicity. Such claims of complicity are powerful in their “everyday usage, evoking participation in and degrees of responsibility for an act even if direct and criminal culpability is difficult to attribute”. To be complicit, continues Paul Reynold, “is to be ‘tarred with the brush’ of blame”.⁴ Charging a government with complicity implies treating it as a moral agent. As Vetlesen observes, “to be an agent and to be attributed responsibility are but two sides of the same coin”.⁵ In this sense,

any meaningful assertion of moral responsibility requires that those who are called on to uphold duties, and those who are held to account for evading them, must be moral agents – entities that, by definition, possess capacities to contemplate, recognize the significance of, and ultimately execute different courses of action in the first place.⁶

In order to avoid such indictment for complicity, parties knowledgeable about the unfolding crimes and human rights abuses often express outrage at what occurs or intervene when possible. Yet, although they may forcefully condemn the wrongdoers, political leaders hardly devote the same energy to promoting intervention. Therefore, this paper asks the following questions: If the ability to blame is a distinctive feature of morally responsible agents, what is the function of blame when blamers lack or resent using the authority and means to halt the unfolding action? And, relatedly, what plausible norm of conduct can we develop, so that the rhetorical use of blame does not justify inaction?

By articulating IR research with insights from political theory, this article argues that states use blame as a normative strategy to respond to the moral exigencies that unite the society to which they purport to belong. In doing so, we distance ourselves from works by Nicholas

² Beardsley, ‘Moral Disapproval’ (1970), p. 176.

³ Hveem, ‘Blame’, (1970).

⁴ Reynolds, ‘Complicity as Political Rhetoric’, (2017) p. 35.

⁵ Vetlesen, *Evil and Human Agency*, (2005), p. 238.

⁶ Erskine, ‘Blood on the UN’s Hands?’, (2004), p. 22.

Wheeler, Ian Manners, or James Pattison which confine blaming to an effective form of intervention in itself, as an action changing the untoward situation.⁷ Specifically, we suggest that international blame usually serves two main objectives: an immediate, communicative function, that is, to express moral protest, and a future-oriented purpose, that is, to dispel a future indictment of complicity. On this account, changing the untoward situation abroad is not the primary objective of blame. The immediate, communicative function of blame is the idea that by openly blaming someone, an actor is stating something about the wrongdoer, the wrongdoing, about himself, and the moral community. Some scholars have started to investigate this expressive dimension of blame, seeing it either as a statement, a speech-act, or a moral protest.⁸

Building on Angela Smith's view on moral protest, we suggest that the communicative function of blame is often accompanied by another, future-oriented goal that is relatively new and has received little attention in the literature: avoiding future accusations of complicity. To some extent, this is one of the consequences of the moralisation of world politics in the post-Cold War era.⁹ Indeed, governments, companies, and international organisations are now routinely held accountable for their deeds. When this demand for accountability meets the idea of collective responsibility, i.e., the "intense belief that we share responsibility for the society in which we live and that we are more than simply bystanders in our world",¹⁰ an indictment of complicity may occur when a political actor fails to meet the moral expectations of the group.

However, we warn against a corollary of the political use of moral blame: if blame is used as an act of supererogation (that is, an act that is not compulsory but whose performance is praiseworthy), or as a form of moral clearance, it makes non-intervention morally acceptable. We suggest therefore that political leaders live up to the *deontic commitments* included in blaming and undertake some kind of action addressing the untoward situation. Unlike the concept of duties, which is not always of a voluntary nature and usually depends on one's role in a society, deontic commitment is both voluntary and obligatory. Choosing to blame an actor is a free choice, but this decision entails, we argue, a promise to execute, or at least to try to observe, the moral commitments entailed by the blame: standing up for moral values, valuing the victims, and distancing oneself from the perpetrators.

This article is in three parts. Section I discusses available explanations as to why one state would blame another. As it stands, when scholars refer to blame in world politics, they put stress on either of the following approaches: blame as assessment, blame as punishment, and blame as emotional reaction. Without belittling the importance of such accounts, we argue that none is able to specify what makes blame a distinctive moral attitude. Following Angela Smith, we argue in Section II that moral protest offers a more robust understanding of what blame stands for and what it entails. However, unlike Smith, we go a step further, by showing that the significance of moral protest depends upon the moral complexion of the society to which the blamers and the target of blame belong. The upshot of this argument is that the demands and expectations of a given society shape evaluations of blameworthiness and responses of members of a society to the misconduct of others. In addition, by discussing the elements that a moral account requires, we will be in a position to show how blame and complicity interact. Specifically, we argue in Section III that a moral account of blame brings deontic commitments in its wake. In other words, moral protest foregrounds the commitment "to do something" from the blamer. This constitutes the basis of our plausible norm, namely, that blaming without living up to blame's deontic commitments undermines the blamer's moral standing.

⁷ Wheeler, *Saving Strangers* (2002); Manners, 'Normative Power Europe', (2002); Pattison, 'The ethics', (2015).

⁸ See respectively : Bennet, 'The Expressive Function of Blame', (2013); Macnamara, 'Taking Demands' (2013)

⁹ See Colonomos, *La morale* (2005).

¹⁰ Kissell, 'Complicity in Thought', (1999), p. 50.

Traces of Blame in International Relations

Blame is not a central concept of IR, but actors routinely deploy blaming practices in world politics. In fact, the forms that blame may take appear orthogonally in IR. Put crisply, an inquiry into the literature returns three broad uses of blame in IR that do not lead to further actions. We categorise these approaches as instances of the blame game; we label blame as moral assessment, blame as punishment, and blame as emotional response. The idea underlying this categorisation is to emphasise different pressure points in the IR discussion of practices that resemble what is known as blame in political theory.

The first group of scholars treats blame as a negative moral judgment that targets the failure of states to comply with the standards of the international society. Reminiscent of cognitive theories of blame in philosophy, this approach considers blame primarily as a grading practice. The underlying idea here is that blame tells us something important about the moral worth of the target of blame. In other words, blame aims to weight the moral record of an actor. A good illustration of this kind of blame is the development of performance indicators that set a balance sheet for actors' behaviors and policies in a given domain.¹¹ According to the OECD definition, "an indicator is a quantitative or qualitative measure derived from a series of observed facts that can reveal relative positions (e.g., of a country) in a given area".¹² Performance indicators often serve to praise or blame states, as indicators leave a mark on actors' "moral ledger".¹³ Seen thus, blame is "dispassionate": "it is just a grading plus an ascription of responsibility".¹⁴ In Gary Watson's technical words, this is an "aretaic judgment" where blaming someone is tantamount to saying that this agent has failed to respect some standards of excellence.¹⁵ Examples include the practice of blacklisting, such as the Non-Cooperative Countries and Territories (NCCT) of the Financial Action Task Force on Money Laundering, or the practice of poor performances reported by benchmarking efforts.¹⁶

The assessment account is one of many ways to blame moral agents for their misconduct. For Watson, actors may also "treat moral accountability as a legal-like practice, an informal institution serving the ends of social regulation and/or of retributive and compensatory justice".¹⁷ In other words, Watson's work allows us to move to an understanding of blame as social punishment, which constitutes the second strand of research we want to discuss. According to this account, a state may be blamed for failing to comply with an international agreement or with the rules governing an international regime. For example, the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme monitoring the international rough diamond trade does not have any enforcement mechanism, but a working group of the Kimberley Process may blame states that fail to live up to the norm of the scheme¹⁸. In theory, this and the recommendations formulated by the group is supposed to lead to change in practice. In this sense, blame becomes a negative incentive to comply with international norms.

This view echoes utilitarian contributions to blame in philosophy, as the perspective of being socially punished should prevent an agent from committing reprehensible actions. To some extent, naming and shaming campaigns follow this type of logic: by tarnishing or

¹¹ Kelley and Simmons, 'Politics by Number' (2015); Baele, Balzacq, and Bourbeau, 'Numbers' (2018).

¹² OECD, Handbook, (2013), p. 13.

¹³ Feinberg, *Doing and Deserving*, (1970).

¹⁴ Smart, 'Free-Will', (1961), p. 305.

¹⁵ Although many contemporary philosophers have rejected this vision of blame as a mere judgment, they still retain the idea that blame is a form of evaluative practice. See, for instance, Hieronymi, 'The Force and Fairness of Blame', (2004).

¹⁶ See Nance, 'Naming and Shaming', (2015); Clegg, 'Benchmarking and Blame Games', (2015).

¹⁷ Watson, 'Two Faces of Responsibility', (2004), p. 280.

¹⁸ Rousseau, 'Le Processus de Kimberley et le commerce des "diamants de sang"', (2017).

threatening to tarnish the reputation of an actor, they intend to alter his/her rational calculus and influence the way s/he acts. Moral responsibility, according to this view, refers to the question of deciding who is to be punished or rewarded. By the same token, then, blame “is concerned only with the institution of causes, of *motives* of conduct”, it aims to “prevent the wrongdoer from repeating the act” and to “prevent others from committing a similar act”.¹⁹ In this context, the blamer’s bet is that blaming has the power to shape an actor’s future conduct.

These two approaches to blame games in IR – assessment and punishment views – have a common trait: they both imply an asymmetric relationship between the blamer and the blameworthy state. Consider David Shoemaker’s interpretation. For him,

legitimate sanctioning as the primary function of a practice sensibly occurs only within the context of an asymmetrical authority relation, a relation that obtains in the criminal realm but not in ordinary interpersonal morality.²⁰

It is therefore not surprising that the examples listed above refer to blaming practices in the context of international organisations or international law because they both hold a form of legitimate authority over the blameworthy states. And when such practices are adopted by NGOs, one could see them as grounded in their symbolic moral authority over norm-violating states. However, these approaches to blame are incapable of explaining situations where the blame occurs between moral equals, such as states.

The third group of scholars attends to this problem. Here, blame is understood as the common trait between various emotional responses arising in troubled interstate relationships. On this account, blaming practices are “attitudes and reactions of offended parties” in the framework of these relationships.²¹ Because of the link between blame and moral responsibility, it is not surprising that these reactions take the form of “agentive emotions” – i.e., emotions focusing on an agent. For example, according to Strawson’s philosophical account, an emotion like resentment is a reaction to the perceived ill will from the other towards the self.²² A noteworthy example is the disagreements between Greece and Germany during the 2008 sovereign debt crisis. In this perspective, Germany was indeed “singled out as ultimately responsible for the austerity and indignity suffered by the Greek people”.²³

However, Christopher Kutz argues that the interpersonal relationship that gives rise to reactive attitudes in the Strawsonian model is *participatory* in nature: “The agent to whom we respond must be someone with whom we will or could cooperate in social life.”²⁴ Translated into inter-state relations, this means that a reactive attitude, such as resentment, only occurs between states that have a particularly entangled, long-lasting relationship. Our example confirms this observation. The special bond between European nations and the particular status of Greece in the history of Europe is put forward by the Greek leaders when blaming Germany:

German policies in the debt crisis have led to a situation where Greece is no longer an equal and respected member of the family of European nations.... This humiliating... demotion in status not only contradicts basic principles of European politics but is also incompatible with Greece’s specific place in

¹⁹ Schlick, ‘When is a Man Responsible?’, (1966), pp. 60-61.

²⁰ Shoemaker, ‘Blame and Punishment’, (2013), p. 113.

²¹ Strawson, ‘Freedom and Resentment’, (2008), p. 5.

²² Ibid.

²³ Wolf, ‘Political Emotions’, (2018), p. 241.

²⁴ Kutz, *Complicity: Ethics and Law*, (2000), p. 29.

European history as the most important national culture in Europe...and the 'birthplace of democracy'.²⁵

This feeling of injustice is reinforced by the fact that Germany is failing to pay war reparations and to refund war loans lent by Greece. In this respect, the resentful party believes that the blameworthy state has failed to live up to the exigencies of the situation. From the perspective of the resentful party, this failure can be framed either as a material injustice (Germany imposing unjust monetary policies on Greece) or as a lack of recognition (Germany failing to recognise the particular status of Greece in Europe).²⁶

The main strength of the emotional account is to shed light on behavioural and attitudinal responses to actors considered morally responsible for untoward events. However, despite its advances, the emotional view fails to provide a good answer to the question of why blame is employed in the absence of a direct connection between the blamer and the blameworthy state.

To summarise, these approaches offer three accounts of blame that do not lead to further action. Taken together, however, they tend to see the blameworthy state as the primary receiver of the blame. Instead, we suggest that states employ blame in ways that do not always follow these parameters. There are, for instance, cases in which the blameworthy state is not even aware of the blame that is raised against it. A Tweet or a press communiqué from the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs denouncing the Rohingya persecution in Myanmar is not a means to dispassionately grade Myanmar's behaviour with respect to a scale of performance nor does it aim to punish Myanmar's government. For that matter, it is also not an emotional response to the perceived ill will on the part of Myanmar towards Belgium. In such context, the primary receiver of blame is either the domestic audience of a government or its international allies, and not the blameworthy state.

Furthermore, each approach tends to take blame in a distinctive direction, sometimes with little acknowledgement of other strands of the literature. Yet, many discourses and behaviours can be interpreted as instances of blame in world politics. In this light, we need to approach blame by using an account that is flexible enough to accommodate the variety of reactions that are often treated as instances of blame in world politics. The moral protest view of blame, which was adumbrated most clearly by Angela Smith offers a framework within such a flexible treatment of blame can be undertaken. Below, we argue that a theory of moral protest enables us to overcome the shortcoming of the three views discussed above and opens the way towards a better articulation between blame and responsibility, which grounds our plausible (that is, context sensitive) norm on complicity in Section III.

Blame, Community, and Moral Protest

Starting from the observation that the three traditional philosophical approaches to blame (the assessment view, the punishment view, and the reactive attitude view) fail to grasp the complexity of the phenomenon, a new generation of scholars suggests that blame should be understood as a moral protest. They argue, indeed, that protest is at the heart of all blaming practices: all instances of moral blame are a "disposition to protest conduct that we regard as wrongful or disrespectful to ourselves or others".²⁷ In this section, we suggest that Moral Protest probes further into the ways in which blame orients blamers to the wrongdoers. We lay out the

²⁵ Wolf, 'Political Emotions', *op. cit.*, p. 241.

²⁶ These two types of failure are outlined by Elisabetta Brighi to study the different forms of resentment mobilized in terrorist acts. Brighi, 'The Globalization of Resentment', (2016). On the dual dimension of resentment, see Fassin, 'On Resentment and Ressentiment', (2013).

²⁷ Smith, 'Moral Blame and Moral Protest,' (2013), p. 36.

contours of moral protest and identify its implications for blaming practices in world politics. To do so, we build upon Angela Smith, the “most direct and sophisticated defender” of the moral protest view.²⁸ We argue that the moral protest approach of blame enables us to attend to our central question: Why do states blame a foreign government for its wrongdoings when they lack the authority or the will to punish the transgressor? We enquire into whether blaming a distant other is possible and what it entails. But, despite our sympathetic reading of Smith’s work, we argue that it fails to specify the implications of blame both for the blamer and the international society.

According to Smith, what lies at the heart of any blaming practice is a disposition to protest against wrongdoings. She takes issue with George Sher’s dispositional account of blame.²⁹ Indeed, in Sher’s view, blame can be identified with a variety of emotions and behaviours – without being exactly equated with them – because they are all sparked by a single desire-belief pair: “first, the familiar belief that the person in question has acted badly or has a bad character, but also, second, a corresponding desire that the person *not* have acted badly or *not* have a bad character”.³⁰ To take an example from international relations, we could resent, denunciate, or sanction the slaughter of a population by its political leaders. Following Sher, these reactions would be explained by our *belief* that the foreign government has acted wrongly, and our *desire* that it had acted otherwise.

However, for Smith, while Sher is right in claiming that there is something motivational at the core of each blaming practices, *desire* might not be the appropriate concept to grasp this phenomenon. According to her, the type of desire in Sher’s account “can take as its object the occurrence of natural disasters or the behavior of nonrational animals no less than the actions of morally responsible agents.”³¹ She argues that moral protest is, on the contrary, distinctively connected with moral blame and moral responsibility:

What distinguishes moral blame of persons from the sort of regret or sadness we might feel over natural disasters, is that the former embodies a disposition to repudiate, to take some kind of stand against, a certain presumption implicit in the wrongdoer’s behavior: the presumption that he or she has a right to treat others in objectionable ways.³²

In short, the condemnation of the action entails standing up for the victims.

This implies that the primary function of blame is communicative. In suggesting this, Smith challenges the view defended by Thomas M. Scanlon.³³ Scanlon agrees with the emotional view (or Strawsonian view) that relationships are a foundational element of blame but he opposes the idea that emotions are necessary for blame. For him, blaming means a change in the expectations, intentions, and attitudes associated with a relationship. For example, one may no longer trust the other, change his or her expectations about the relationship, or feel angry or disappointed. According to him, these changes are a way of displaying the impairment of the relationship.³⁴ In response to this, Smith suggests that “only those modifications of attitudes that are undertaken as a way of *protesting* the relationship-impairing attitudes of others [...] qualify as instances of moral blame”.³⁵ Unlike Scanlon, who considers that blame “is not,

²⁸ Chislenko, ‘Blame and Protest’, (2019), p. 165.

²⁹ See Sher, *In Praise of Blame*, (2006).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³¹ Smith, ‘Moral Blame and Moral Protest’, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ See Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions*, (2008).

³⁴ The word “relationship”, on this account, “does not apply only to people who know of or are acquainted with one another”, it holds “universally, of all rational agents.” Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions*, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

³⁵ Smith, ‘Moral Blame and Moral Protest’, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

even incipiently, a form of communication”,³⁶ Smith believes that communication is paramount to truly understanding blame as relational. By its nature, blame “has an expressive point and a broadly communicative aim: it expresses protest, and, I submit, it implicitly seeks some kind of moral reply”.³⁷

Smith’s definition of blame as moral protest is, therefore, a direct result of her engagement with Sher’s and Scanlon’s work. In this vein,

To *blame* another is to judge that she is blameworthy (i.e., to judge that she has attitudes that impair her relations with others) and to modify one’s own attitudes, intentions, and expectations toward that person as a way of *protesting* (i.e., registering and challenging) the moral claim implicit in her conduct, where such protest implicitly seeks some kind of moral acknowledgment on the part of the blameworthy agent and/or on the part of others in the moral community.³⁸

While blaming practices take different guises, they share basic features of the moral protest account. This means two things. First, that they “*register* the fact that the person wronged did not deserve such treatment by *challenging* the moral claim implicit in the wrongdoer’s action”. Second, that they “prompt moral recognition and acknowledgement of this fact on the part of the wrongdoer and/or others in the moral community”.³⁹ Thus, the moral protest view is distinguished from the three traditional approaches to blame in its embrace of the possibility of blaming distant others. While the first objective of moral protest is challenging the false moral claim in the wrongdoer’s actions, i.e. the victim should be devalued, and, by doing this, implicitly asks the wrongdoer to recognise this fact, the second aim is “moral recognition on the part of the wider moral community”.⁴⁰ In this context, it might not matter if the blame is not communicated to the distant wrongdoer, it can be a continued acknowledgment that we value the victims and that their treatment is not acceptable.

Thus, following Smith, in blaming wrongdoers, political leaders reject the implicit moral claim that the victims do not matter. In addition, we suggest that blame is also a way for the blamer to stand up for the violated values. As pointed by Christopher Franklin, blame, “given the existence of blameworthy agents, is a mode of valuation required by the standards of value, and thus to forswear blame is to fail to value what we ought to value”.⁴¹ Thus, by blaming in the face of human rights violations abroad, a government prevents the devaluation of the victims *and* reinstates its commitment to human rights values. We suggest that blaming practices possess an expressive function that has to do both with valuing the victim by showing everyone that we value her, and with expressing the notion that we consider the violated standards to be valuable by reinstating our commitment to the violated standards. In short, blaming practices contribute to maintaining or consolidating the moral order of a community. That is, blame “is not simply a fitting response but a required one”.⁴²

Smith’s view that blame’s primary function is communication is wholly justified. Yet, it may be that, in the case of blame, an essentially communicative understanding turns blame into a political theatre, wherein blamers transform international public space into a stage. As we will show in the next section, the upshot of this argument is that understanding blame as a moral protest implies a commitment to act from the blamer. This action can take various forms,

³⁶ Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions*, *op. cit.*, pp. 233-234, fn. 54.

³⁷ Smith, ‘Moral Blame and Moral Protest’, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Smith, ‘Moral Blame and Moral Protest’, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

⁴¹ Franklin, ‘Valuing Blame’, (2013) p. 209.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 219.

including (but not limited to) legal challenges, economic pressures, lobbying members of an international organisation, put the item on the agenda, naming and shaming, being included in a transnational advocacy network, and other political and military actions of various kinds and intensities. For the condemnation to be taken seriously, the blamer needs to distance her/himself from the perpetrator of abuses, either materially or symbolically. By contrast, a merely communicative understanding of blame tends to legitimise inaction, by diverting attention away from the blamer's legal duties or moral expectations. The failure to take additional steps, we suggest, carries a message both for the perpetrator and for the victim of abuses: that is, letting things be done. Specifically, inaction expresses a tacit authorisation to proceed. Therefore, in addition to moral protest, we argue that blaming foreign governments for their wrongdoings brings *deontic commitments* in its wake. But such deontic commitments cannot be properly appreciated without reference to context and the blamer's capacity.

For now, however, let us add that the expressive function of blame shows that blame has both an individual and a collective meaning. At the individual level, blame is a testimony to the value that a state accords to the victim. At the more collective level, blame is a re-enactment of a community's moral standards. Thus, in international relations, a state that does not blame a wrongdoer would often be subjected to interpellations and criticisms:

Network activists often point to inconsistencies in Western state behavior, stressing that they had condemned human rights violations in one state, but not another, where violations are just as egregious.⁴³

We argue below that blaming, therefore, almost comes as a requirement, a necessary reaction to remain a member of the moral community.

To sum up, this section has shown that international blame has two distinct but related purposes. First, blame questions the moral claim of the wrongdoers by protesting the treatment that the wrongdoers inflicted on the victim. Second, international blame forces the recognition of this abuse on the blameworthy state and the international society. The primary function of blame is thus communicative: blame contains a message both for the victim and the wrongdoer as well as for the moral community of reference. This conception of blame has therefore both an individual and a collective meaning. When states blame, they express a moral protest, which enables them to highlight, at the individual level, that the relationship with the wrongdoer has been impaired because a common norm or standard of behaviour has been violated. At the collective level, blame draws boundaries between those who follow the norms and those who infringe upon the rules. Blaming is expected by the moral community and becomes almost a requirement to continue to be one of its members.

However, this view is not without troubles, especially in world politics. First, we warn against the emergence of an instrumental use of blame as an act of supererogation, that is, an act that is not compulsory but whose performance is praiseworthy. Blame could, indeed, become a form of ritual to avoid future indictment for complicity. When governments blame, they probably do not do so on a purely altruistic basis, with the sole intent of defending the values of its community of peers. Openly condemning a state for its misconduct is not merely the manifestation of moral outrage but to some extent also serves the self-interest of the state. "In the contemporary world order," argues Beardsworth, "the desire to act morally must be mixed – self-interest and altruistic – if moral behavior on the part of state actors is to be possible in the first place".⁴⁴ Although this attitude might deflect accusations of complicity in the short-term, it is also likely to contribute, in the middle- and long-term, to making non-intervention morally bearable. In this respect, blame can be a companion of the status quo.

⁴³ Risse and Sikkink, 'The Socialization', (1999), p. 23.

⁴⁴ Beardsworth 'From Moral to Political', (2015), p. 75.

Second, we suggest that blame may contribute to the staging of the wrongdoing. To some extent, blame sheds light on an issue, and blaming becomes a call for action directed towards the international society. In other words, this is a form of moral clearance for the blamer: it acknowledges the existence of an issue but leaves the responsibility for finding a solution to the international society. This situation typically occurs in contexts “where many hands approach responsibility (that is, cases where individual agency is hard to trace...)”.⁴⁵ By blaming, a state therefore claims a particular role in the moral community.

However, unlike what some strands of the literature assume, we argue that this is not the end of the story: by blaming, we also commit ourselves to act, to take additional steps to try to redress a situation. Hence, the moral protest view of blame entails a deontic commitment to act. In the next section, we confront our account of blame with the possibility of its instrumental use by governments to circumvent future accusations of complicity.

When Moral Clearance Makes Room for Complicity

In the previous section, we have examined the moral protest view of blame. Our argument was that blame targets the false moral claim inherent in the conduct of a wrongdoer. In this perspective, the ability to uphold such a claim defines the moral responsibility of the perpetrator of abuses. We ended the section by putting our own spin on the moral protest approach to blame. To strengthen, rather than to cut against or undermine Smith’s account, we argued that her moral account lacked a sufficient understanding of the way in which blame inscribes both the blamer and the blamed in a society. Indeed, a moral protest bites within a society of shared moral norms. By incorporating the commitment to the society’s norms, we are able to foreground our plausible norm: blame commits oneself to doing something in order to stop the unfolding wrongdoing, failing what the blamer’s moral claim is flouted. The treatment here is exploratory and selective, as we discuss the main components that sustain our plausible norm. It is plausible in the sense that its prescriptive nature is not absolute. That norm produces its effects in relation to the weightings of international relations. First, we argue that such a plausible norm draws on characteristics of blame avoidance, which generates conditions under which blame leads to complicity. Second, we contend that blaming in order to avoid such indictment for complicity is not enough: the blamer is called upon to take action and alter, at least temporarily, its relationship with the wrongdoer. Failure to do so could lead to further accusation of complicity by association. Finally, we question the moral implications of these practices for the international society.

Blame Avoidance Strategies and Silent Complicity

In the literature on blame avoidance in administration and public policy, scholars have highlighted the tendency of public officials to choose the “least-blame” or “no-blame” policy outcome when facing various policy options. In other words, the selection of the policy will be accompanied by an attempt to minimise the *risk* of being blamed if things go wrong. To some extent, blaming a norm-violating state instead of advocating intervention could be perceived as a “least-blame policy”, as a way to carefully limit any potential accusation of complicity, while not making an enemy of the wrongdoer. From this perspective, blame is taken in its purely communicative function. Indeed, the community demands – implicitly or explicitly – this form

⁴⁵ Hood, *The Blame Game*, (2011), p. 81.

of “symbolic non-acquiescence”.⁴⁶ That is, not speaking out or taking a stance means, in broad strokes, “silent complicity”.⁴⁷

In the literature, the party cognisant of an ongoing violation of human rights is generally referred to as a “bystander”. Of course, some bystanders have the power to halt the events, whereas other bystanders do not. In general terms, the scope of the moral responsibility borne by different bystanders varies proportionally according to their ability to do something to halt or disrupt the unfolding events. As a result, unlike other forms of complicity where the accomplice is described as actively contributing to the wrongdoing, silent complicity means that the accomplice is passive when confronted with violations of norms: “Its moral basis is not commission, but omission”. Furthermore, silence must be understood as having a legitimising and encouraging effect on the perpetrator. Discussing corporate complicity, Wettstein argues that “If silence renders companies complicit, speaking out to help protect the victims is what is required to diffuse such allegations”.⁴⁸ The logic is the same for governments. Thinking in these terms means that blame serves other purposes than the direct incrimination of the perpetrator. Similarly to the logic underlying the punishment account of blame (section I), implementing a blame avoidance strategy is utilitarian and forward-looking; it amounts to a pre-emptive outwardly expressed reaction that aims to block oneself off from the accusation of complicity in the time ahead.

Consider the silence of Pius XII in the face of the atrocities committed by the Third Reich during World War II. Because of the particular status of the Vatican, some argue that it should have acted proactively during the war:

[N]eutrality is one thing; positive diplomacy is another. And as Pius XII found to his cost, diplomacy that is other than immediate responses to specific situations demands a long-term objective that may frequently subordinate the means to the end.⁴⁹

Archives from the Vatican indeed show that the Pope’s ultimate objective was to prevent war and then, once war had begun, to restore peace. He used various means to work towards these ends. The Pope “persistently refused to proclaim any kind of crusade against Nazism or to issue specific condemnations of evil deeds committed by Germany”.⁵⁰ He feared that this condemnation, and the loss of neutrality that would accompany it, would undermine his role in future peace negotiations. In other words, he was reluctant to blame Nazi Germany because that would have weakened the ultimate goal: the restoration of peace. The result was that by not supporting the values that the Vatican was expected to defend, and by disregarding the victims’ value, the behaviour of Pius XII during the war became a *locus classicus* of silent complicity.

To avoid this type of scenario, states might thus resort to blame avoidance strategies. This does not mean, however, that no blame will be formulated to denounce the failure to intervene. The indictment would probably have been stronger had the abuses committed abroad not even been acknowledged. An example of a strategy that may be implemented in this logic is a form of “protocolization” of practices that aims to provide “a procedural armor against blame”.⁵¹ Whereas public policy scholars mention the elaboration of precise rules or the systematic recourse to audit-trial procedures, we could easily imagine the expression of international blame by a government as a form of “procedural ritual” that aims to diminish the

⁴⁶ See Feinberg, *Doing and Deserving*, op. cit.

⁴⁷ Wettstein, ‘Silence as Complicity’, (2012).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p. 40.

⁴⁹ Bull, ‘Review: The Vatican’, (1971), p. 353.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p. 354.

⁵¹ Hood, *The Blame Game*, op. cit., p. 95.

level or to erase future charges of complicity. In this sense, “*what* is said is less important than *that* it is said”.⁵² Further, blame could express the alignment of a government’s behaviour with the behaviour of a wider group of states. The idea behind this “group style of working” is to express unity when deciding on a course of action such that “no individual’s neck is ever on the block when things turn out badly”.⁵³ The simple fact of blaming a wrongdoer, we argue, may thus be perceived as sufficient significantly to reduce the risk of being framed as an accomplice.

The Moral Standing of the Blamer under Stress

By blaming, whether for instrumental or altruistic reasons, the blamer acknowledges the seriousness of the situation and expresses his or her disapproval. However, it is also usual to employ blame to warn the society to which the blamers and the target of blame belong. Blame games include as much as they exclude. In such instances, blame calls for a response, that is, a change of behaviour on the part of the offender. If the offender fails to change the offending behaviour, the blamer’s margins of action shrink. Not building distance from the wrongdoer and acting as if nothing had occurred are no longer viable options; the moral standing of the blamer is threatened by a continuing association with the blameworthy state. Using Anthony Appiah’s concept of “moral taint,” Gregory Mellema contends that the objectionable conduct of the wrongdoer will taint the agents to which s/he is connected, even though these agents may have nothing to do with the reprobated action:

But when another is engaged in wrongdoing, one can normally distance oneself from the wrongdoer or refrain from actions that can be perceived as condoning or encouraging the wrongful behavior. The failure to take such actions as these can render one tainted by the other wrongful behavior and... this is something that affects one’s own moral integrity.⁵⁴

This withdrawal of goodwill is partial and temporary. Blame is not the denial of the moral status of the agent, on the contrary. It

asserts the authority of the violated norms over the offending agents, holds the offender accountable to those norms, and in doing so includes the wrongdoer in the moral community. Therefore, in blaming we include by partially excluding.⁵⁵

It has nothing to do with the annihilation of the wrongdoer, as is the case in revenge;⁵⁶ instead, it addresses finding the appropriate response in a particular situation.

A state that fails to distance itself from such an association might become the target of blame by osmosis.⁵⁷ In this perspective, complicity is reminiscent of “attributing blame to an actor for another’s unlawful actions”.⁵⁸ Take the United Kingdom’s cooperation with the United States during the war on terrorism. Evidence has shown that the British government was aware

⁵² Carter, ‘The Ritual Functions’, (1991), pp. 217-218.

⁵³ Hood, *The Blame Game*, op. cit., p. 97.

⁵⁴ Mellema connects Appiah’s notion of “moral taint” to Paul Ricoeur’s concept of “defilement” (*souillure*). Mellema, *Complicity*, (2016), p. 28.

⁵⁵ Bennett, ‘The Expressive Function of Blame’, (2013) p. 77.

⁵⁶ According to Lang, vengeance “assumes that the agent has committed an evil action is so far outside of our political realm that he cannot ever be reintegrated into it.” Lang, ‘Evil, Agency, and Punishment’ (2008), pp. 89, 90.

⁵⁷ Here, the state becomes the target of blame by association.

⁵⁸ Gaskarth, ‘Entangling Alliances?’, (2011), p. 947.

of American transgression of the anti-torture norm but still continued to provide the US with intelligence on the whereabouts of their enemies.⁵⁹ By not altering its behaviour, the UK might actually have actively contributed to the violation of the anti-torture norm. Thus, similar to silent complicity, complicity by association is understood to have a legitimising and encouraging effect on the perpetrator. Unlike silent complicity, which arises from acts of omission, complicity by association may be based on both omission and commission.

A Plausible Norm for Blame in International Relations: The Commitment to Act?

Complicity hinges on the contribution of a third party to the act performed by another. We have seen above that such a contribution was a necessary and sufficient condition in order to adjudicate complicit accountability. Our proposal is less concerned with direct participation in harm done to another than with omission. Indeed, by blaming a wrongdoer for untoward events, political leaders try to avoid complicity by omission: blame, this article shows, is one way for the blamer to avoid accountability. However, blame does not prevent international crimes from occurring, which leads to serious questions about its ability to alter the outcome of an act. Blame raises awareness; but if those who blame fail to take action to stop the unfolding act or deter the perpetrator, this omission veers toward complicity.

This assertion gives us reason to pause for thought. Complicit omission is derived essentially from the distinct way in which we determine the duty to act. The duty may arise from the tie that binds a third party and the agent who is the subject of the harm (e.g., being part of the human community). The source of the duty could be the possession of the capability to halt or alter decisively another person's suffering. It appears that the former might fail to translate into concrete action because the third party lacks the capability to stop the act or if the third party's intervention makes no difference to the bringing about of the action.

In international politics, matters are thornier, in part because very few states possess the resources to intervene alone, should a massive human right violation occur. Moreover, those who do possess the means cannot step in everywhere at all times; for reasons that might be domestic or international legal provisions, or the sheer impossibility of shouldering the burden alone. States may refer to the United Nations Security Council in a ritualistic fashion, that is, knowing that no action would be initiated against the perpetrator. Alternatively, they might do so with the genuine hope that a Resolution would be taken against a perpetrator. In this light, a moral decision calls on a legal requirement. Either way, many instances of blame discussed in the UNSC end up in collective inaction. In this sense, states do not choose as a group not to act, but the result of the discussion within the UNSC and the negative vote (or veto) make it a collective inaction. The point we wish to make is that members of a group that choose to remain inactive bear more responsibility than those who propose to act, even if this attempt is not successful. However, cases of collective inaction are different from cases of collective omission, that is, "a failure of a group that collectively chooses not to act".⁶⁰

The basic premise that informs this discussion is that while accomplice liability can be individualised within collective inaction, in the latter (i.e., collective omission) accomplice liability cannot be apportioned to one's action for averting the harm.⁶¹ Our plausible norm – blame calls for action – should not be construed as a tacit support for those agents who decide to remain silent. At a moral level, it is better to protest than to say nothing or look elsewhere in face of an unfolding harm. Yet, the inclusion brought by blame should not be an end in itself. Should protest fail to deter the perpetrator, the blamer's deontic commitment is to work toward

⁵⁹ See Finn, 'Grey Areas', (2017).

⁶⁰ May, *Sharing Responsibility*, (1992), p. 107.

⁶¹ Jackson and Pettit, 'Moral Functionalism', (1995), p. 37.

a broader acknowledgement of the sufferer's plights and plead for effective action to alleviate it. In other words, blame is not a self-constituting act. While it signals to ourselves and to others that we are concerned with the fate of those whose dignity is violated, it puts states who blame in the situation to go a step further in showing that such blame was more than a lip service. It is what happens beyond blame that enables us to ascertain how serious the blamer took her/his blame. That is, our plausible norm raises the stakes for those who blame in great part because it requires blamers to live up to blame's moral expectations. It suggests that a blamer who does not execute blame's moral demands compromises her/his standing to blame. It is worth nothing, however, that such a norm targets both silent bystanders and blamers, though it does not grant them equal status. Our proposed plausible norm, which would deserve a deeper articulation, means that there are difficult boundary decisions to be made. That is, not speaking out against abuses undergone by others amounts to a complicity by omission. But speaking out without making any attempt within one's power to halt the abuse undermines one's moral standing. Thus, the blamer becomes subject to blame.

Conclusion

In this article, we have sought to explicate why states resort to blame in world politics. We registered and discussed various reasons that account for instances of blame between international agents, but this article has argued that states blame others primarily in order to express moral protest. We owe the perspective that guides this article to Smith. Our contribution lies in the way we extend its moral horizon. Indeed, we differ from Smith in our identifying and characterising the intimate link between moral protest and complicity. To morally blame another, we argue, is to commit oneself to the deontic demands implicit in blame.

Whenever there is blame in international relations, there are at least three parties: the victim, the tormentor and the blamer. However, blamers may belong to a large category often referred to as third parties, which include an array of actors who know that a group is being oppressed or slaughtered, and situate themselves differently vis-à-vis the unfolding events. True, each stance of a third party (indifference, blame, intervention) influences the outcome in a distinctive way. But blame arouses difficult questions about the normative boundaries of intervention and non-intervention. Blame in the sense intended here implicates third parties to do more than passive witnessing but less than direct intervention. However, we need to remember that the moral significance of blame is considerable. Blame, as this article has shown, does not only register a moral protest, but it also bestows one's own action of blaming with a moral claim that cuts in two ways. On the one hand, blame is a public statement about the blamer's moral standing. Such a stance is likely to attract praise. On the other hand, to blame is to implicitly situate oneself and the target of blame within the society of morally responsible agents.

Blaming is not without consequences for the blamer though. It brings deontic commitments in its wake. In this perspective, blame compels the blamer to take measures intended to alter the untoward situation. We have therefore suggested a plausible norm that broadens the scope of complicity: states become complicit in the misconduct of other actors whenever they violate moral obligations created by the act of blaming. That is, while blame may have, in the first instance, insulated them from the accusation of complicity, failing to live up to the practical expectations of moral blame that is in their capacity, binds them to the moral fate of the blamed state. Bearing in mind that moral responsibility comes in degrees, our aim has therefore been to spell out the contours of this proposal. Of course, this would require further research. However, we think the article shows that practices associated with protest takes on a whole new meaning when complicity comes into play. In contrast, when blame

operates without due regard for the possibility of complicit accountability, it leaves itself vulnerable to accusations of theatrical, that is, non-consequential performance.

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