Grounding Racial Blame: Conceptualizing Blood Money Benefits and White Guilt

Abridged Draft
1) Introduction

In philosophy, while there are obviously variations\(^1\), the “standard picture” of blame has a tight connection between being held responsible for a moral wrong, being being blamed, and feeling guilt. It also operates solely at the interpersonal level with individuals.\(^2\)

Consider for instance, how the standard picture might play out in the following scenario. I eat my spouse’s cheese puffs while they are at work even though my spouse wanted to enjoy them when they returned from work. I am responsible for my wrong action here, in that said action is truly mine and I fail to live up to the moral standards of a good spouse. When my spouse arrives home from work, they discover my transgression and react with emotions of resentment and by expressing their judgment that my actions were wrong - that is, my spouse blames me. Hearing her grievance I come to judge that I did indeed act wrong and feel disappointed in myself - I am guilty.

Like the standard picture, I shall also be assuming a tight connection between responsibility, blame, and guilt. I will however, deny that this picture can only operate at the interpersonal level.

Using this standard picture though, philosophers have historically been skeptical of collective blame being an actual moral phenomena, as opposed to say, a category mistake. Max Weber for instance argues that collective blame is inappropriate as we cannot identify genuine collective actions as distinct from individual actions of multiple agents\(^3\). Welsh theologian and philosopher H.D. Lewis argues that if

\(^1\) For instance, we can look at Gary Watson’s 1996 article “Two Faces of Responsibility” to see the distinction between responsibility as accountability and responsibility as attributability. In responsibility as accountability we might demand certain behavior or conduct from an agent, and blame them when they fail to behave so - we hold them responsible for doing something. In responsibility as attributability however, we are instead saying that the agent is the author of their actions and said action in some sense reflects upon them and their character. Since my paper concerns blame, I do not prefer one form of responsibility here over the other and my account of collective blame is compatible with both.

\(^2\) It does not concern, for instance, causal responsibility or blame which can be attributed to non-agents. We might say that Hurricane Irma is responsible, or is to be blamed, for the devastation in the Caribbean. We are not saying though, that Hurricane Irma is morally blameworthy or responsible. In the standard picture, moral responsibility and blame is reserved for agents.

we face difficulties in understanding individual responsibility, we should sooner abandon all our notions of moral responsibility than to “revert to the barbarous notion of collective or group responsibility.”

To a large extent, this skepticism derives from the assumption that if we are to treat collective blame as a moral phenomena, then an explanation of how collectives come to be blameworthy is in order. I share this assumption with the skeptics. The skeptics also presume though, that such an explanation cannot be given. In this paper, I give such an explanation by arguing that Blood Money Benefits, benefits which come at the expense of others, are one way collectives come to be blameworthy, and this in turn grounds collective blame.

I give said explanation namely by responding to four objections to collective racial blame. They are as follows: I) Racial categories cannot be fleshed out in such a way as to underpin collective blameworthiness II) Collectives cannot have intentions or minds, cannot therefore harm others as a collective, and thus cannot be blameworthy and III) Holding collectives blameworthy violates Rawls’ separateness of persons. In section 3 I handle objections I and II and develop my account of collective blameworthiness around Blood Money Benefits. In section 4 I respond to objection III as well as the additional concern that shame might be more suitable to collective responsibility than blame.

2) Our Practices

Before diving into my responses to objections 1 and 2, I would like to mention that there is something intuitive about the notion of collective blame. This notion, whether we are aware or not, is embedded in many of our cultural and legal practices. Consider the examples Linda Radzik relates to us regarding this topic:

The feeling of "white guilt" is common in the American experience. When a hate crime is committed in a particular place, the whole community is stigmatized by it.... Our seeming attributions of collective responsibility even encompass a notion of inherited responsibility.

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Witness the recent spate of official state apologies for wrongs committed a generation or more ago... President Clinton apologized to the victims of the Tuskegee syphilis experiments with the words, "The American people are sorry ... I apologize and I am sorry." Boris Yeltsin, in his official state apology for the murders of the Romanov family, said, "We are all guilty." And, of course, there is the case of ordinary German citizens of the 1930s-40s and the Holocaust. Even Germans born decades after the war frequently report either feeling a sense of moral taint.

To add to Radzik’s examples, in 2009 the United States formally apologized for slavery by when Congress mentioned that it “apologizes to African-Americans on behalf of the people of the United States, for the wrongs committed against them and their ancestors who suffered under slavery and Jim Crow laws.”

While many of these examples explicitly reference collective responsibility and guilt, recall that the standard picture has a tight connection between responsibility, guilt, and blame. It would seem that, to a very large extent, collective blame is lurking beneath many of our cultural practices. All of these examples allude to what I call “common sense” or folk intuitions about collective blame, namely that it exists and it makes sense to consider these cases to be genuine instances of moral responsibility. Not all laypersons share these intuitions of course, and these intuitions definitely vary by nation. One can make a comparison between the United States’ neighbors for instance. In 2017 Prime Minister Justin Trudeau

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5 Quoted in “All Apologies” All Things Considered, National Public Radio, January 1st, 1999.
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9 One can make a comparison between the United States’ neighbors for instance. In 2017 Prime Minister Justin Trudeau apologized on behalf of Canada to indigenous folk who historically suffered abuse boarding schools and even provided 50 million Canadian dollars in compensation. In 2019 however, President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador demanded that Spain apologize for the Mesoamerican conquest, only to be rebuked by both Spain’s government and his fellow countryfolk. These articles can be found here (Last accessed May 17th, 2019): https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/27/world/americas/mexico-spain-apology.html https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/24/world/canada/trudeau-indigenous-schools-newfoundland-labrador.html
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Still, enough U.S. citizens and folks across the globe do have these intuitions to warrant philosophical analysis. What are we to say of these cultural practices? Ethicists will need to either dismiss them as morally misleading, categorically mistaken, or conclude that these are genuine instances of moral responsibility. As mentioned, I argue for the latter choice.

3) Objections I & II - Conceptualizing Blood Money Benefits

Let us now turn to objections I and II. As a reminder, they are: I) Racial categories cannot be fleshed out in such a way as to underpin collective blameworthiness and II) Collectives cannot have intentions or minds, cannot therefore harm others as a collective, and thus cannot be blameworthy.

In replying to objection I, I do not want to get tangled in the metaphysics of collectives. This piece is not meant to be metaphysical, but ethical. I am, in fact, dubious whether collectives can be said to metaphysically exist in the way that individuals do.

But focusing on metaphysics here misunderstands what collectives need to be in order for us to develop racial categories. Even though racial categories may not have a grounding in a traditional metaphysical ontology, they are nonetheless grounded in a social ontology. Here I take a lead from Charles Mills when he responds to concerns race-talk is nonsensical since race is not biologically or metaphysically real:

… at the level of interpersonal interaction, human beings and human Being are so radically shaped by the “second nature” of social structure that it becomes meaningful to speak of a
metaphysics that is contingent and variable, real but historical, fundamental but nonnecessary: the social ontology of a racial world.  

To put the point less eloquently than Mills, collectives, particularly racial collectives, exist as social constructs. It, unfortunately, is the case that belonging to a racial category has historically carried serious consequences.

So, at this point we have license to theorize about racial categories. But what might these racial categories look like? I suggest we take inspiration from Sally Haslanger’s functional account of:

A group is racialized iff its members are socially positioned as subordinate or privileged along some dimension—economic, political, legal, social, etc., and the group is “marked” as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of ancestral links to a certain geographical region.

Haslanger’s account of race is strong in that it captures the social meaning of race. That is, it captures the social ramifications of belonging to one racial category or another, i.e. being privileged or subordinate along some dimension. Thus, a group of people become the black race when their members are perceived to be black and are subsequently subordinated as black folk. This fits in nicely with the social ontology introduced by Mills.

According to Haslanger’s account of race though, this is only how a group becomes racialized - it is only how a category becomes a racial category. However, this somewhat ignores that the history of race in the West has never existed without a vertical racial system, namely white supremacy. Thus, it is less accurate to say that a group becomes the black race when its members are perceived and treated as black, than it is to say that the black race simply is the collection of individuals which are perceived to be

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11 Haslanger, Sally. “Gender and Race. (What) Are they? (What) Do we want them to be?” Nous. pg 44.
12 For an overview as to how white supremacy has shaped Western history, see Charles Mills’ *The Racial Contract* (1997).
and treated as black. With this in mind, the racial categories I want to work with can be construed as follows:

**Racial category R** is the collection of individuals who are perceived as belonging to R and subsequently subordinated or privileged along some dimension—economic, political, legal, social, etc. and the members of R are a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of ancestral links to a certain geographical region.

From this definition, we not only continue to capture the social meaning of race as Haslanger’s account does, but also come to see that to be, say, white is namely to be perceived and privileged as a white person. The collection of all white individuals subsequently is the white race.

Taking inspiration from Mills and Haslanger we have been able to develop racial categories. However, we have not yet shown how these racial categories can underpin moral blameworthiness. These categories, while formally capturing the social meaning of race, do not yet do any moral work for us.

But I do not think we should despair at this point. Instead, let us turn our attention to Larry May’s parallel work with gender. May argues that men are collectively responsible for rape, and attempts to ground this responsibility by saying:

[1] Insofar as some men, by the way they interact with other (especially younger) men, contribute to a climate in our society where rape is made more prevalent, then they are collaborators in the rape culture and for this reason share in responsibility for rapes committed in that culture. [2] Also, insofar as some men are not unlike the rapist, since they would be rapists if they had the opportunity to be placed into a situation where their inhibitions against rape were removed, then these men share responsibility with actual rapists for the harms of rape. [3] In addition, insofar as many other men could have prevented fellow men from raping, but did not act to prevent these actual rapes, then these men also share responsibility along with the rapists. [4] Finally, insofar as
some men benefit from the existence of rape in our society, these men also share responsibility along with the rapists.\textsuperscript{134}

All of 1-4 are meant to serve as criteria for collective responsibility and, if I am interpreting May correctly, collective blame as well. While I do not want to deny the importance of 1 and 3\textsuperscript{15}, I will be focusing on 2 and 4.

In regards to 2, May argues that some men are “not unlike the rapist” in that they are “like-minded” insofar as they both might be inculcated in what he calls a \textit{culture of rape}, a culture in which rape is normalized or trivialized in our speech, actions, and mannerisms. Of course, May imagines a male reader protesting by saying:

I am adamantly opposed to rape, and though when I was younger I might have tolerated rape-conducive comments from friends of mine, I don't now, so I'm not a collaborator in the rape culture. And I would never be a rapist whatever the situation... So how can I be responsible for the prevalence of rape?\textsuperscript{16}

What this hypothetical male-reader fails to understand however, is how powerful the ideology of rape culture is and how even a seemingly innocuous comment could be rape-conducive.

Nonetheless, I am skeptical about using \textit{like-mindedness} to ground collective responsibility as May does. Using \textit{like-mindedness} as a criteria runs into the problem that we simply do not know how fine-grained it has to be. Is sharing one or two thoughts with other members of a collective sufficiently like-minded to ground responsibility? Or is only whole pattern of thinking and ideology sufficient?

Whatever is decided upon will ultimately feel arbitrary.

\textsuperscript{14} It is unclear whether 1-4 are sufficient or necessary conditions for collective responsibility for rape in May’s account. Nonetheless, he suspects that all men meet at least criterion 2 and 4. Pg 146.
\textsuperscript{15} Both 1 and 3 concern themselves with action or inaction. That is, they concern themselves with some \textit{control condition} of responsibility. I discuss a control condition for responsibility in the following section when discussing the separateness of persons.
\textsuperscript{16} May, pg 147.
Focusing too much on like-mindedness also runs the risk of blinding us to the other three criteria. Take for instance, lynch mobs in the pre-Civil War South. All members who actively participated in a mob or were passive bystanders are responsible for their action or lack of action to some degree. But I highly doubt all of them, even the passive bystanders who might have been sympathetic to the lynch victim, were like-minded. We can, for instance, imagine a bystander who explicitly disavowed racism and lynching but feared for her life if they were to have tried to stop the lynching. This person is still responsible to some degree\(^\text{17}\) - they *should* have done something to stop this lynching but failed. Yet, their mind is very different from the other members of the mob, so it appears that like-mindedness is not necessary in this instance for collective responsibility.

The biggest problem with using *like-mindedness* as a criterion for collective blame however is that it runs into objection II, the problem of collective intentions. Recall how at the beginning of this section I mentioned that I am skeptical collectives can be said to metaphysically exist the way individuals do. This skepticism is due to me suspecting that an account of collective minds and collective intentions can not be given. Unfortunately, once we have *like-mindedness* in the picture as a requirement for collective blame, it will only be natural for the skeptic to demand what a collective mind actually is.\(^\text{18}\)

Instead of attempting to figure out how broad or narrow like-mindedness must be, let’s eschew it in favor of criterion 4, that of benefit. This will this let us circumvent objection II by construing collective blameworthiness in non-mental terms. It will also mesh nicely with our racial categories which center around privilege and subordination, better allowing us to answer objection I.

Let’s turn to some of the benefits men collectively enjoy due to the rape of women, which May highlights for us by telling the following story:

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\(^{17}\) They are of course, responsible to a much lesser degree than those active participants because of the risk she ran. In the following section I expound on how risk can be a mitigating factor when determining how blameworthy an individual is for their collective.

Several years ago, at a social occasion in which male and female professors were present, I asked offhandedly whether people agreed with me that the campus was looking especially pretty at night these days. Many of the men responded positively. But all of the women responded that this was not something that they had even thought about, since they were normally too anxious about being on campus at night.\(^\text{19}\)

The result is not only that women suffer a psychic cost associated with rape culture, but that men enjoy psychic carefreeness. Men are also then able to use whatever finite resources women did not use out of fear, say, by checking out a rare book in the library, meeting up with colleagues to study, and overall freedom of travel.

Of course, receiving a benefit from one’s collective is not necessarily wrong. But as we see with the case in gender, belonging to a collective grants one benefits which come at the expense of another collective. We should at this point ask whether the case is analogous when it comes to race.

When speaking of the United States and other nations deeply affected by race politics, benefits one attains from belonging to the racially dominant group rarely do not come at the expense of another. Even if the benefit was inherited by a previous generation, it is possible that said benefit continues to come at the expense of a current group. In fact, when the United States Congress apologized for slavery, they explicitly mention that “African-Americans continue to suffer from the consequences of slavery and Jim Crow laws—long after both systems were formally abolished—through enormous damage and loss, both tangible and intangible, including the loss of human dignity and liberty.”\(^\text{20}\) It goes without saying that slavery was an economically lucrative business which not only benefited slave owners, but their progeny as well via wills and inheritances.

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\(^{19}\) May, pg 147.

This type of benefit, the one that comes at the expense of another, is what Radzik discusses, when she discusses the *Blood Money Theory of responsibility*. She writes:

Another, importantly different way in which individuals can come to share in the responsibility for the wrongs committed by their groups is by benefitting from those crimes. Suppose that in Adam's town work, education, and other social benefits are routinely passed out in a way that favors his group over the rival ethnic group. As a member of this community, Adam has benefitted from the system of discrimination. This fact in and of itself can confer responsibility on Adam... Oppression can be economically lucrative. It can also lead to more intangible benefits by creating a sense of unity and self-esteem within the oppressive group since the group defines itself as opposed to and better than the other... Let's call this theory that links collective responsibility to the reception of benefits from collective crimes the "Blood Money" theory of responsibility.\(^{21}\)

Moving forward I will refer to this type of benefit, that which comes at the expense of another group, as a *Blood Money Benefit (BMB)*. As we have seen, BMBs come in 2 main flavors, namely material and psychic benefits. Material BMBs include any financial or asset boons (e.g. being eligible for a housing loan, inheriting your parents’ house). Psychic BMBs however, like Radzik mentions, include more intangible boons such as being able to see one’s race celebrated in history books, feelings of belonging, carefreeness etc.\(^ {22}\)

It is my position that BMBs can do the moral work we want so as to make collectives blameworthy. Recall our definition of racial categories. We are now in a position to see that belonging to

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\(^{21}\) Pg 458  
\(^{22}\) Some qualifications regarding regarding BMBs are as follows: It is perfectly possible in this account that one can receive BMBs in one aspect of one’s identity (e.g. race) while having to pay the cost for them in another aspect of one’s identity (e.g. gender). Furthermore, BMBs are not necessarily evenly distributed. For instance, while all white folk might receive material BMBs for their being perceived as white, some white folk may receive gratuitously large amounts of material BMBs while others receive only meager BMBs.
say, the dominant racial category R and subsequently being privileged does not occur in a vacuum. In fact, being privileged bestows one with BMBs, benefits that come at the expense of another. However, receiving BMBs creates moral obligations for one to act both as an individual and in one’s collective. Choosing not to act, and therefore choosing to ignore one’s moral obligations, results in others continuing to pay the cost. This is blameworthy.

In the final section I will make some brief suggestions on how one can act so as to no longer be collectively blameworthy or guilty. For now though we have racial categories which, by reading in BMBs into them, can do the moral work of making some collectives blameworthy insofar as they ignore their obligations to act. Furthermore, by grounding our racial categories purely in terms of benefit-talk, we have avoided any mental-talk of collectives. So much for objections I and II. Let us turn to objections III and IV.

4) The Individual and the Separateness of Persons

With objections I and II being handled, one might move on to objection III here by saying that even if collective responsibility, and thus collective blame, might genuinely operate in the moral realm, I have nonetheless violated Rawls’ separateness of persons. But what does the separateness of persons entail? Rawls originally used the notion to criticize utilitarian theories of justice, and stress the non-fungible value of each individual, but what does this entail for our discussion of collective blame? If it is simply an assertion that group membership should be considered irrelevant, than I am unsympathetic to this point.

However, if the separateness of persons is pointing towards some control condition, then I am sympathetic. Afterall, why should an individual be punished for something they had no control over - over something a member of their collective did which they have no influence over?

Radzik has similar worries about violating Rawls’ separateness of persons:

[Metaphysical guilt] appears to deny the traditional link between responsibility and control, since one's group membership is often beyond one's power of choice, as in the cases of racial, ethnic, and often national identities. It also seems to violate the liberal ethic of the "separateness of persons."\(^{24}\)

In particular, Radzik has concerns that using BMBs the way I do, to ground collective blame, is unjust:

The acceptability of the Blood Money theory will turn on what it means to hold someone responsible in this sense. If this kind of responsibility is linked to guilt, blame, and punishment, it will be unjust.\(^{25}\)

Here I interpret Radzik as implying that guilt, blame, and punishment should ultimately be linked to some control condition. Overall, I agree with this sentiment, but am confident that my account can accommodate it.

Returning to Radzik’s case of Adam from earlier, suppose distant members of Adam’s collective, whom he does not even know, acted on his behalf in such a way that a BMB was bestowed on him. In this case, Adam’s group acting is, to a large part, out of his control and so it would be unfair to guilt or punish Adam. However, Adam still has a choice on what to do with this BMB now that it has been given to him. That is, given that his group has acted in such a way - how will Adam respond? If Adam does nothing or chooses inaction and passivity, then he is essentially perpetuating the status quo, accepting his benefit which comes at the expense of other groups. This is blameworthy and it does not break the connection between responsibility, blame, and control.

Radzik herself concedes this point when she writes:

\(^{24}\) Pg 456.
\(^{25}\) Pg. 458
Another way individuals may come to share the responsibility for collective crimes is through acts of omission...Since choice and control are still relevant to the attribution of responsibility, the separateness of persons principle is respected.\textsuperscript{26}

Nonetheless, even conceding that Adam had control over his actions and is therefore responsible, Radzik still hesitates to blame Adam:

The lack of a causal link does have an effect on our understanding of the sort of responsibility involved, however. Depending on the details of the case, shame and the disapprobation of the community may be a more appropriate response to acts of omission than guilt, blame, and punishment.

We should ask ourselves what is motivating Radzik here to create distance between responsibility and blame - why does she loosen the connection between responsibility and blame here? In a footnote she mentions:

Among the details that will matter to whether guilt or shame is more important will be the degree of effort or risk that acting would entail, the degree of effectiveness acting would have in preventing harm, and whether or not the person who omits to act has any special obligations to act based on her social role.\textsuperscript{27}

I take this to imply that if acting would require a great deal of effort, would not effectively reduce harm, and one has no special obligations based on their social role, then shame instead of guilt is appropriate. I am somewhat inclined to agree with this, but I’d like to make a few cautions regarding these three criteria.

In regards to effort, it should be noted that as DiAngelo notes that due to white fragility, simply talking about race requires a great deal of effort and causes a great deal of anxiety for some white folk. In fact, any sort of racial encounter in which racial differences are confronted can become labours of effort:

\textsuperscript{26} Pg. 458
\textsuperscript{27} Pg 458 n8.
In a white dominant environment, each of these challenges becomes exceptional. In turn, whites are often at a loss for how to respond in constructive ways. Whites have not had to build the cognitive or affective skills or develop the stamina that would allow for constructive engagement across racial divides.²⁸

We can reasonably imagine that explicitly confronting one’s BMBs would require even more effort. A large amount of effort required to act is not an excuse. Accepting it as an excuse would serve to reinforce white fragility and enable low racial stamina. Instead, a good deal of effort, discomfort, and anxiety should be expected as one attempts to develop one’s racial stamina. Foregoing to act on one’s BMBs because it is “too hard” will only make it that much more difficult to act in the future. Moreover, we should reasonably expect engaging in racial justice to be morally onerous- creating a just world is not easy.

In regards to the efficacy of preventing harm, I worry about making evaluations in bad faith. That is, I worry that Adam may judge the efficacy of him stepping in to help his non-white friends to not be very effective not because he has actually rationally weighed out the situation, but because he is implicitly aware that it would require great effort on his part. Adam might judge the efficacy of his actions in bad faith, for instance, if he believes he is already in the Most-He-Can-Do-Sweet-Spot. The idea here is that Adam is already doing as much as he can to combat racism in his life, to do any more in the present encounter would be to demand too much of Adam. In fact, it would make him morally worse in that he might ended up “burning out” and become less effective. Eric Schwitzgebel considers the Most-We-Can-Do-Sweet-Spot when discussing how most people choose to be morally mediocre and attempt to rationalize said mediocrity. He mentions:

This may be the case for some people. If you’re a homeless mother of three who has managed to keep it together through a cold winter and physical abuse, I’m ready to believe that you might

²⁸ DiAngelo pg 58
really have no resources to do better than you’re already doing. But for most of us, it’s probably good policy to be skeptical of any tendency to think that you are already in The-Most-You-Can-Do Sweet Spot.  

I agree with Schwitzgebel and add that instead of being concerned whether we are indeed in the sweet-spot when combatting racism, we should ask ourselves whether we are making our evaluations of efficacy in good faith.

Thus, I have shown that my account of how some collectives come to be blameworthy via BMBs does indeed operate within the moral realm and does not violate the separateness of persons (insofar as the separateness of persons is understood as a control condition). So much for objection III.