

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A Christian ethics of blame: or, God says, ‘vengeance is mine’

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Abstract

There is an ethics of blaming the person who deserves blame. The Christian scriptures imply the following no-vengeance condition: a person should not vengefully overtly blame a wrongdoer even if she gives the wrongdoer the exact negative treatment that he deserves. I explicate and defend this novel condition and argue that it demands a revolution in our blaming practices. First, I explain the no-vengeance condition. Second, I argue that the no-vengeance condition is often violated. The most common species of blame involves anger; anger conceptually includes a desire for vengeance; and there are many pleasures in payback. Third, I clarify that it is possible to blame non-vengefully in anger and highlight three good uses for anger in non-vengeful blame. Fourth, I offer two reasons that justify the divine command prohibiting vengeance, and I note that the Christian God is merely sufficient to make non-vengeance morally obligatory. Fifth, I defend the no-vengeance condition against four biblical objections.

Keywords: blame; vengeance; anger; Christianity; love

Suppose that Jack wrongs Jill by saying something nasty to her. He was not ignorant about its potential to harm, and he could have easily avoided saying it. Jack is blameworthy for the insult. But that Jack deserves blame for it does not itself suffice to make it morally permissible for Jill and others to blame him. Various conditions must be satisfied by Jill and others for it to be permissible to give Jack the blame that he deserves (e.g. Todd 2019). Consider, for example, two conditions from moral philosophy. First, Jill should not blame Jack for saying something nasty to her if Jill also says nasty things to Jack or others. This is the *no-hypocrisy condition* on permissible blame (Wallace 2010; Fritz and Miller 2018). Second, James should not blame Jack if James has merely overheard Jill venting about Jack’s nasty comment in a coffee shop and James is a stranger to them both. It is none of James’s business. This is the *my-business condition* on permissible blame (Radzik 2011).

While moral philosophers have explored to a significant extent the ethics of blaming the blameworthy person, philosophers of religion and philosophical theologians have not.¹ I highlight a passage in the Christian scriptures that implies a novel condition on

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the ethics of blame with respect to prohibiting vengeance in interpersonal relationships: ‘Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord”’ (Romans 12:19; see also Hebrews 10:30; Deuteronomy 32:35; Leviticus 19:18).² According to this passage, a person should not overtly blame a wrongdoer in a way that delivers the payback that the wrongdoer deserves. So, the *no-vengeance condition* is that a person should not vengefully overtly blame the wrongdoer even if she gives the wrongdoer the exact negative treatment that he deserves; vengeance should be left to God. The no-vengeance condition is only part of a full Christian ethics of blame, but it is complicated enough to merit its own essay.³

In this article, I explicate and defend this novel condition assuming the truth of the Christian religion. To highlight its importance, I argue also that the no-vengeance condition requires a revolution in our blaming practices since people often overtly blame vengefully.

I proceed as follows. First, I explicate the no-vengeance condition by clarifying its parts: deserved blame, blame, overt blame, and vengeful blame. I provide examples of vengeful overt blame and non-vengeful overt blame. Second, I argue that vengeful overt blame is common. My argument is drawn primarily from three moral psychological claims: the most common species of blame involves anger, anger conceptually (or, at least typically) involves a desire for payback, and there are many pleasures in paying back the wrongdoer. Third, I clarify the relationship between anger and vengeance. Being angry is not itself bad, and a person can overtly blame in anger without blaming vengefully; to do so, she must omit acting on her vengeful desire. I highlight three good uses for anger in non-vengeful blame and offer Martin Luther King Jr. as a virtuous example of non-vengeful blame in anger. Fourth, I defend the no-vengeance condition. I offer two axiological reasons that justify the divine command against vengeance: it protects human beings against their propensity to exact vengeance beyond what is deserved, and it requires non-vengeful accountability practices that develop habits to love one’s neighbour. Additionally, I note that the Christian God is sufficient but not necessary to generate the normativity of the no-vengeance condition. Fifth, I respond to four biblical objections to the no-vengeance condition to provide a preliminary case that this condition is overall supported by the Christian scriptures.

The no-vengeance condition

The no-vengeance condition is that a person should not give the wrongdoer the vengeful overt blame that she deserves; vengeance should be left to God. This definition is packed with at least four philosophical terms of art. I clarify the following concepts: deserved blame, blame, overt and private blame, and vengeful and non-vengeful blame. Subsequently, I offer examples of the kinds of blame that violate and fulfil the no-vengeance condition.

First, the kind of *deserved blame* or *blameworthiness* at stake in this article, as well as the broader free will debate, is what Derk Pereboom (2014, 1) identifies as ‘basic desert’: ‘[T]he agent would deserve to be blamed or praised just because she has performed the action, given an understanding of its moral status, and not, for example, merely by virtue of consequentialist or contractualist considerations.’ Jack’s being blameworthy is a backward-looking property. It appeals only to Jack’s past behaviour – namely, his wronging Jill without excuse.

If people do not deserve vengeful overt blame, no-one should vengefully overtly blame them. But Romans 12:19 does not imply that people do not deserve vengeful overt blame. Rather, the idea in that passage is that human beings do deserve vengeful overt blame for

their wrongdoing – after all, it can be apt for God to pay back – but in the context of interpersonal relationships, human beings should refrain from taking vengeance.

Second, in its most general sense, to *blame* someone is to ‘hold a wrong against’ that person (Nelkin 2016, 605). The ‘holding against’ is an action, disposition, or feeling that goes beyond a mere cognitive judgement that they have done wrong. For example, Jen wrongs Biff. Biff knows that Jen has wronged him, but he is infatuated with her. Biff holds none of Jen’s wrongdoing against her: Biff is not angry with her, feels no pity for her, and does not modify his relationship to her, etc. If the ‘holding against’ analysis of blame is correct, Biff does not blame Jen, which seems like the right result; so, this case favours the ‘holding against’ analysis of blame. But then, something more than a mere cognitive judgement of wrongdoing is required to blame.⁴ Prominent examples of that ‘something more’ include feeling angry, feeling disappointed, and modifying the relationship with a wrongdoer.

Third, blame can be private or overt. *Private* blame holds a wrong against the wrongdoer in a way that is limited to her interior mental life. *Overt* blame, in contrast, is the behavioural manifestation of those private attitudes; it is constituted by bodily actions.

Fourth, blame can be vengeful or non-vengeful. *Vengeful* blame holds against by aiming to make the wrongdoer suffer at least in part as payback for the wrongdoing. *Non-vengeful* blame holds against in some way other than to make the wrongdoer suffer at least in part as payback.

Vengeful overt blame holds the wrong against the wrongdoer in behaviour to make the wrongdoer suffer at least in part as payback for the wrongdoing.⁵ Vengeful overt blame can be manifested in yelling, berating, shaming, down-ranking, humiliating, guilt-tripping, mocking, insulting, scolding, and sarcasm. It can also be manifested in non-confrontational behaviours that aim to hurt the wrongdoer as payback: the cold shoulder, black-balling, withdrawal, exclusion, or passive-aggressive remarks. The no-vengeance condition implies that these vengeful blaming behaviours are not to be done even when the wrongdoer deserves such treatment.

Non-vengeful overt blame holds the wrong against the wrongdoer in her behaviour to produce future goods such as reforming the wrongdoer, reconciling with the wrongdoer, or protecting people from the wrongdoer (see Pereboom 2014, 134). If Jill aims at the future good of self-protection, Jill can blame Jack non-vengefully by *modifying her relationship* with him (see Scanlon 2008, 132–152). She might stop hanging out with him or get together with him less frequently. Jack may suffer from this new relational distance, but Jack’s suffering does not amount to Jill’s acting vengefully. One cannot act vengefully without an intention to hurt as payback. If Jill blames Jack solely to secure her own future protection, Jill’s overt blame complies with the no-vengeance condition. Alternatively, if Jill’s goal is Jack’s moral reformation or reconciliation with him, other kinds of non-vengeful blame may be best. Jill might express disappointment about his behaviour or character, and she might express hope for a better Jack and a restored relationship (see Pereboom 2014, 146–152). These blaming actions can help Jack see himself as having wronged her, being bad in character to some extent, and needing to repair their relationship. If Jill blames Jack solely to reform him or to reconcile with him, Jill’s blame complies with the no-vengeance condition. As before, Jack might suffer from these confrontations, but that does not amount to Jill’s acting vengefully against Jack, even if Jack’s suffering is a foreseeable by-product of the non-vengeful blame.

Suppose instead that Jill has multiple ultimate goals in her blame. For example, Jill puts relational distance between herself and Jack ultimately to hurt Jack for his offence and to protect herself. Or, she might humiliate or embarrass Jack as a verbal abuser ultimately to make him suffer and to spur repentance. If Jill’s blame has this twin ultimate aim to deliver payback and promote her own protection or Jack’s moral reformation, it is

condemned by the no-vengeance condition. The overt blame is vengeful even if it also aims to produce good.

What about a case in which Jill blames Jack to make him suffer just as a *means* to the ultimate goal of his moral reformation? Suppose that Jill blames Jack intending him to suffer negative feelings such as guilt, shame, or remorse as a means for his moral reformation. Is that vengeful overt blame? If the imposition of suffering from overt blame is correctly viewed as necessary for moral reformation, it is not vengeful. But guilt-tripping and shaming, for example, are often unnecessary and counterproductive. People tend to take a defensive posture towards people who act in ways to make them feel negative emotions; Jack would have to be a person of very good character for being shamed, for example, to catalyse moral improvement in him (Olberding 2020, 155). If, however, Jill chooses one blaming action over others because she wants the wrongdoer to suffer more than is necessary for his moral reformation in return for his wrongdoing, the overt blame is vengeful and ought not to be done. With this brief explication of the no-vengeance condition in place, let us consider why people often fail to satisfy it.

Vengeful overt blame is common

The no-vengeance condition requires a revolution in blaming practices because vengeful overt blame is common. My main argument about its being common appeals to features of our moral psychology summarized in the following three claims: the most common species of blame involves anger, anger conceptually involves a desire for payback, and there are many pleasures in payback.

First, *the most common species of blame involves anger*. Recall that blame involves something more than a mere cognitive judgement about wrongdoing. Blame holds the wrongdoer against the wrongdoer in some way. The most common way to ‘hold against’ is to be *angry* with the wrongdoer. It is a truism that anger is a fitting emotional response to a wrongdoer’s injustice, just as fear is a fitting emotional response to something dangerous and sadness is a fitting emotional response to loss. So then, when a person blames a wrongdoer, it is common for her to feel anger at the wrongdoer for the wrongdoing.

Second, *anger conceptually involves a desire for payback*. This idea has a notable pedigree in classical and contemporary philosophical sources:

- Aristotle (2001b, 1380; 1378b): ‘Anger may be defined as the impulse, accompanied by pain, to a conspicuous revenge for a conspicuous slight directed without justification toward what concerns one’s self or what concerns one’s friends.’
- Aquinas makes the following claims about anger: ‘the angry man desires the evil of another, not for its own sake but for the sake of revenge, towards which the appetite turns to as a mutable good’ (Aquinas 1948, 1834; II–II q158 a2), and ‘for anger desires the evil of punishment for some person, under the aspect of the good of vengeance’ (Aquinas 1948, 1835; II–II q158 a4).
- Martha Nussbaum (2016, 23) ‘ultimately accepts’ the idea that ‘anger involves, conceptually, a wish for things to go badly, somehow, for the offender, in a way that is envisioned, somehow, however vaguely, as payback for the offense. They get what they deserve.’
- Susan Wolf (2011, 338): ‘angry emotions and attitudes do seem to me to be conceptually tied to a disposition to punish, and therefore with a willingness to make the object of blame suffer’.
- Robert Roberts (2003, 204) defines the conceptual core of anger in this way: ‘S has culpably offended in some important [to me] matter of X (action or omission) and

is bad (is to some extent an enemy of what is good); I am in a moral position to condemn; S deserves (ought) to be hurt for X; may S be hurt for X' (italics removed).

Psychologists make claims that lend some support to this philosophical tradition. For example, Carroll Izard (1977, 335) highlights that the most common feelings and thoughts correlated with experiencing anger are wanting revenge and thinking about revenge.⁶ There is, then, a broad tradition describing anger at a conceptual level as generating a desire for payback.⁷

The idea that anger is conceptually tied to a desire for payback also has explanatory power over typical experiences and platitudes in the free will debate. First, it explains typical human experiences. People are uneasy when others are angry with them. They know, at least tacitly, that at least part of the angry person desires that they be harmed. People are also reluctant to admit when they are angry. The admission implies something 'socially nasty' about themselves – namely, that they want the wrongdoer to suffer for their wrongdoing (Roberts 2003, 219).⁸ Second, it also explains a platitude in the free will debate: a person should not be vengefully overtly blamed unless she deserves it. After all, vengeful overt blame from anger aims to harm the wrongdoer, and it is typically successful in doing so. For an intentional imposition of harm to be morally permissible, justification is required. The justification is that the wrongdoer deserves the harm. But if blame from anger did not conceptually, or even typically,⁹ aim at payback, such blame would have a greatly decreased tendency to cause harm intentionally and thus basic desert would not be required for such blame to be apt.

But one might object to the scope of vengeance in this characterization of anger. That is, one might agree that anger *often* generates a desire for vengeance against the wrongdoer but nevertheless reject the claim that anger *must* generate a vengeful desire. I consider and respond to three cases from Roberts (2003) in which it appears that individuals are angry without desiring vengeance.

First, a man gets angry due to a long wait in line at the grocery store, which appears to be a case of anger without a desire for revenge.

As Roberts (2003, 205) highlights, however, the shopper might see his wait in starkly moral terms and look for someone to blame; perhaps he views the clerk as too slow or the manager as obtuse. The angry shopper may make a passive-aggressive remark to a neighbour in line for the clerk to hear; he may scold the clerk; he may even try to get the manager fired. In these further specifications, the angry shopper vengefully overtly blames, and so it is not a counterexample.

But if we stipulate that the shopper is entirely clear of a vengeful desire and these kinds of behaviours, it is better to classify his emotional experience as feeling frustration or annoyance rather than anger. Roberts (2003, 217–218) characterizes the conceptual core of frustration and annoyance in the following way:

- Frustration: 'I strongly desire X and am meeting high resistance if not insuperable obstacles to achieving or acquiring X; if only I could achieve or acquire X!'
- Annoyance: 'X impinges unpleasantly on some concern of mine, either by contravening the standards implicit in that concern, or by distracting me from the activity that the concern moves me to, or by appealing to some other concern that is in competition with it, thus creating a motivational conflict; may such impingement cease.'

Frustration and annoyance lack a retributive aim. Failure to make a distinction between anger and these other emotions may partially explain why a person might think that anger does not necessarily aim at payback. Sometimes people think they are angry

when they are merely frustrated or annoyed, which may lead them to think that anger does not aim at payback because frustration and annoyance have no such action tendency.

Second, consider a case in which a woman angrily kicks the wheel of her motorcycle when it fails to start. This appears to be a better case of anger without a desire for vengeance; after all, there is no wrongdoer in this case.

But as Roberts (2003, 205) notes, the motorcyclist's behaviour is punitive. She aims to hurt the motorcycle for the inconvenience and treats it as if it has wronged her. Her behaviour is irrational, but there is nothing strange about that. Anger and blame are often irrational (Pickard 2013).¹⁰

Third, consider a case in which a person is angry with a loved one. The objector contends that, surely, the angry person does not want her loved one to suffer!

But I contend that the angry person does have such a desire. I offer two explanations for why some may not recognize this fact.

First, human beings often do not understand their own desires, and this general opaqueness of desire is compounded by the ephemeral nature of anger, which is unlike grief since grief has a long natural life in the psyche. A person who is angry with a loved one may rapidly move past her anger and so quickly lose the desire for revenge; this is especially common in cases in which a person's anger with a loved one quickly downgrades into frustration or annoyance. Thus, she may fail to recognize a correlation between being angry and wanting payback.

Second, a person's having a desire for vengeance against a loved one does not imply that she all-things-considered wants vengeance against a loved one (Roberts 2003, 220–221). People are often disposed towards others in incompatible ways. According to their loving dispositions, they want what is good for their beloved, but, according to their angry dispositions, they want what is bad for their beloved. Sometimes their desires for the good of the beloved win out because they are the strongest, and sometimes people choose to act for the good of the beloved even if those desires are weaker due to their commitments. In those cases, the person angry with a loved one has a desire for payback but does not act on it. When an angry person blames solely to uplift or restore, she does not act on anger's vengeful desire; she is acting on another kind of desire or reason. So, in the case of a wrongdoer who is loved by the blamer, the blamer often does not all-things-considered want the beloved to be paid back. By attending instead to her all-things-considered desire, the blamer does not attend to her vengeful desire, which can explain why a person may fail to see the correlation between anger and desire for vengeance.

Third, *there are many pleasures in paying back the wrongdoer*. As Aristotle (2001b, 1381; 1378b5–9) notices,

Hence it has been well said of wrath, 'Sweeter it is by far than the honeycomb dripping with sweetness, and spreads through the hearts of men.' It is also attended by a certain pleasure because the thought dwells upon an act of vengeance, and the images called up cause pleasure, like the images called up in dreams . . .

The fact that there is pleasure in payback explains why there are so many books and movies centred on revenge. In these stories, we experience something of what it is like to humble the wrongdoer and bring them low, which is pleasant. I articulate seven concomitant sources of pleasure in Jill's vengefully overtly blaming Jack.

- Jill feels as though she is acting on the side of justice, and there is pleasure in feeling like one of the good ones.
- Jill stands up for herself in a way that directly promotes her self-esteem.

- Jill takes control of the situation in a way that makes her feel powerful.
- Jill restores balance to the relationship; she brings Jack low and comparatively elevates her own status.
- Jill feels safer because she teaches Jack the costs of wronging her.
- Jill feels relief from expressing a harboured negative emotion.
- Jill experiences closure after taking vengeance.

This list is not exhaustive, but it is indicative of the pleasures of revenge and its penumbra.¹¹

So then, people are often angry when they blame, anger comes with a desire for payback, and payback has concomitant multi-faceted pleasures. These claims provide plausible moral psychological mechanisms to support my claim that people often violate the no-vengeance condition when they blame others.

Consider two further supporting reasons. First, it is common for blame to aim ultimately for payback *and* future good. After all, the angry person wants revenge for the past wrongdoing, but she also wants to avoid being wronged by the wrongdoer in the future either by obstructing the wrongdoing or by reforming the wrongdoer. Overt blame that aims to satisfy all those desires is more attractive than overt blame that aims to satisfy only some of them. Furthermore, in the spirit of Nietzsche, people can blame in a way that appears to promote a future good to mask their more fundamental aim to get revenge.¹² There are pleasures in payback, and it is human nature to pursue pleasure in a way that appears honourable. Masking vengeful blame as non-vengeful protects a person's righteous self-image and signals her virtue to others. These goals flow easily from pride and vainglory, which are capital vices in the Christian tradition. These cases of overt blame all violate the no-vengeance condition.

Second, although the no-vengeance condition is about prohibiting vengeful *overt* blame, it also forbids vengeful *private* blaming *actions* due to the interior dimension of Christian ethics. According to Jesus, it is not only overtly murderous and adulterous behaviours that are morally wrong but also the angry or lustful mental actions that can give rise to them (Matthew 5:21–28); thus, vengeful mental actions can also violate the no-vengeance condition. Consider a revenge fantasy in which Jill arouses her imagination to deliver payback to Jack. She utters a string of sentences that finally crushes Jack and his excuses, which forces him to agree in humiliation that he is in the wrong and that she is in the right; this series of mental actions would be pleasant, as Aristotle observed. But this private vengeful blame fantasy is prohibited by the no-vengeance condition and the interior dimension of Christian ethics.¹³

I have argued that vengeful blame is common to underscore the importance of this article. But my being exactly right about how often the no-vengeance condition is violated is not essential to explicating and defending the no-vengeance condition. The reader may, for example, reject my claim that anger conceptually includes a desire for vengeance, and accept something weaker such as David Shoemaker's (2017, 74–75) view that anger is 'very often' vengeful.¹⁴ In that case, the no-vengeance condition would require only a more modest revolution in Christian blaming practices, but that is still an important upshot. In the next section, I clarify the relationship between anger and vengeance.

Anger and the no-vengeance condition

It is not wrong to experience fitting anger at a wrongdoer. The no-vengeance condition is not violated by emotions themselves. It is only violated by actions.

Additionally, consider a theological argument from Ephesians 4:26 'Be angry but do not sin.' In the original Greek, the verb 'be angry' is in the imperatival mood. If the principle

ought implies can, or at least a principle in its vicinity, is correct, it must be possible to be angry without being in a wrong state. How is that possible? While an angry person has a desire for payback, it is up to them whether they act on that desire. Thus, a person can decide not to blame from her vengeful desire or choose not to indulge in private vengeance fantasies.

Prolonged anger, however, is morally hazardous. Paul recognizes this danger and offers the following command: ‘do not let the sun go down on your anger’ (Ephesians 4:27; cf. 2 Corinthians 2:10–11). When a person is angry, she is tempted to exact vengeance because she has a desire for vengeance. Other things being equal, the longer a person is tempted to vengeance, the more likely she is to act vengefully eventually, especially when she is tired, hungry, or stressed. So, it is prudent for the angry person to let go of her anger before too long.

One might object that fitting anger cannot be morally hazardous precisely because fitting emotions cannot be morally dangerous. But this objection commits the ‘moralistic fallacy’ (D’Arms and Jacobson 2000). It conflates whether the emotion correctly represents its object and whether feeling that emotion is morally good without qualification, but these are different evaluations. For example, a person tells a hurtful joke. Possibly, it is amusing. The joke displays creativity, reveals an incongruity, is delivered with showmanship, and has a surprising punchline; the reader may add other paradigmatically funny properties. Feeling amused is fitting. But it might be morally bad to feel amused. To claim, however, that the joke cannot be funny because it is hurtful commits the moralistic fallacy; it can be funny and morally bad simultaneously. In a similar way, to say that fitting anger cannot be morally hazardous commits the moralistic fallacy.

Even though prolonged anger is morally hazardous, it can also be a force for great good. Consider an insight from the poet and essayist Audre Lorde (1984, 127): ‘Focused with precision it [anger] can be a powerful source of energy serving progress and change.’ Anger can fuel non-vengeful blame to improve wrongdoers, relationships, protection of innocents, substandard social expectations, and unjust laws. Anger is not necessary to promote progress and change, but it can help do so in at least three ways.

First, anger is a source of *moral insight* into the world. Anger includes an appraisal that injustice has occurred. In this way, feeling anger can perceive a moral gap between what is and what ought to be.

Second, anger makes a person *eager* to produce change; anger moves toward its object, whereas fear moves away from its object (Cherry 2021, 67; see also Cogley 2014, 208; Shoemaker 2017, 73–75). Studies in psychology corroborate these claims. The part of the brain related to approach, the left frontal region, becomes more active when subjects are angry (Hewig et al. 2004; as cited in Cherry 2021, 67–68). Consider also that the anger of a coward can enable her to overcome her excessive fear and confront a wrongdoer. That is, anger’s approach tendency can offset fear’s avoidance tendency – which is a strong tendency due to her cowardice – in a way that makes confrontation a live option when it was not an option before she felt anger.

Third, anger makes a person *optimistic* about confrontation; it makes her feel more ‘powerful and capable’ by increasing her feelings of ‘control and certainty’ (Cherry 2021, 69). Anger increases a person’s estimation of how likely she is to effect change. Such optimism can remove interior obstacles to confrontation because as Aristotle (2001a, 968; 1111b20–30) notes, we aim to achieve in action only what we take to be possible. If, for example, a person’s estimate indicates that she cannot change a wrongdoer, a broken relationship, social norm, or law, she will not attempt it. But if anger increases her estimation of her ability to make change, she can non-vengefully overtly blame when it would have been unthinkable if she were not angry.

Consider a virtuous portrait of non-vengeful blame in anger. When Martin Luther King Jr. was in jail in Birmingham, Alabama, Clarence Jones, King's lawyer, brought King an article from a Birmingham newspaper written by several white clergymen. The article questioned King's presence in Birmingham, the timing of the protests, and the illegal protesting actions. King got angry in response (Blake 2013; as cited in Cherry 2021, 88). This anger fuelled his writing the letter from Birmingham jail. But he resisted acting on his desire for payback. He carefully and patiently answered their objections by explaining his non-violent tactics and by distinguishing just laws from unjust laws. Subsequently, he transitioned to blame the white moderate and the white church. He aimed to reform morally these wrongdoers and eventually to reconcile with them. Just as my account predicts of someone committed to forgoing vengeance, King blamed them by using non-angry emotions. He expresses disappointment about their wrongdoing:

I must make two honest confessions to you . . . First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been *gravely disappointed* with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action'; who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom . . .

I have been *disappointed* with the white church and its leadership. . . . In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churches stand on the sidelines and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard so many ministers say, 'Those are social issues which the gospel has nothing to do with' . . . (King 1963, italics mine).

King's anger gave him moral insight, made him eager to confront, and generated optimism about the outcome, but he left vengeance to God. King's letter is a paradigm example of virtuous non-vengeful blame in anger.

A philosophical defence

The no-vengeance condition requires defence because it is puzzling. It is intrinsically good for the wrongdoer to be paid back proportionally for her wrongdoing. But the no-vengeance condition requires human beings to omit bringing about that intrinsic good. So, why would God require us to forgo bringing about that good?

The answer cannot be that it is intrinsically wrong to give a wrongdoer the payback that he deserves. After all, the no-vengeance condition presupposes that is permissible for God to take vengeance.¹⁵

The right answer acknowledges that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with giving a wrongdoer the vengeful overt blame that she deserves, but actions that are not intrinsically morally wrong can become morally wrong in certain circumstances. For example, it is not intrinsically morally wrong to pick up a stone. But it can become morally wrong to do so if an armed person says that she will kill a bystander if a stone is picked up. Or, supposing that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with eating chicken, it can become morally wrong to do so if the meat comes from a factory farm in which the chicken's life was a grotesque nightmare (see Norcross 2004; cf. Spelman 2020). The idea, then, is that there is nothing intrinsically morally wrong with giving the wrongdoer the payback that she

deserves, but it *becomes* morally wrong to take vengeance in the circumstance in which God commands non-vengeance.

My point does not depend on a sophomoric divine command meta-ethic, according to which all moral properties are grounded arbitrarily in the divine will; it just presupposes that divine commands in some way can create at least some moral obligations. Consider, for example, Richard Swinburne's (2008) approach to morality.¹⁶ In his view, there is a broad range of deontic and axiological necessary truths not grounded in God's will. One of those necessary truths is that we owe gratitude to our benefactors. God is our great benefactor, for example, in view of creation, sustenance, incarnation, atonement, and resurrection (cf. Hartman [forthcoming](#)). As an obligation of gratitude, then, we should comply with God's prohibitions (such as 'do not avenge yourselves'). But such divine commands and prohibitions are themselves guided by axiological facts that are independent of the divine will. I identify two moral goods that justify (but do not require) the divine prohibition not to avenge ourselves or others. Those two moral goods must be good for human beings but not for God to justify the divine-human asymmetry in the no-vengeance condition.

First, the no-vengeance condition safeguards human beings against exacting vengeance beyond what the wrongdoer deserves. A person's degree of blameworthiness is determined by a broad range of facts inaccessible to our epistemic vantage point including personal history, interior mental life, and circumstantial factors. So, human persons are often ignorant about how much blame wrongdoers deserve. This ignorance feeds into the propensity to overestimate the fault of others documented by social psychologists. Human beings are disposed to find situational excuses in their history, circumstances, or mental life for their own wrongdoing; but when it comes to others, they attribute the wrongful behaviour entirely to their bad character. Psychologists call this asymmetry the 'fundamental attribution error' (Harman 1999, 316). Anger exacerbates this problem (Clarke et al. 2014). Furthermore, even if a person has a clear idea of the payback a wrongdoer deserves, her anger often tempts her to bring about greater vengeance than is deserved by the wrongdoer. By prohibiting interpersonal vengeance, human beings are protected from this propensity. But this moral good for human beings does not apply to God. God knows exactly what people deserve, never commits the fundamental attribution error, and never pays back in excess of what is deserved.¹⁷

Second, the no-vengeance condition guides human beings to hold wrongdoers accountable in ways that train them to love their neighbour; growing in love is good for human beings because being in excellent loving relationships is central to human flourishing.¹⁸ The desires of love are aimed at the good of the beloved and union with the beloved (Stump 2010, 91). Non-vengeful blame for moral reformation, reconciliation, or protection aims to promote either the good of wrongdoers or union with them, or both. Consider each kind of non-vengeful blame and goal in turn. First, blaming from disappointment and hope can morally reform wrongdoers by helping them to see their own wrongdoing as wrongdoing and to turn away from it; such moral reformation is good for them and can also fit them for a richer relational union. Why think that? As Dante illustrates in *The Divine Comedy*, wrongdoing is bad for the wrongdoer. It warps their character and distorts their relationship to what is true, good, and beautiful, and that distortion prevents them from wanting what is truly good for themselves; instead, vicious persons want what they do not want. So, even when they get what they want, they suffer (see Stump 2010, 129–150). Thus, by encouraging moral improvement, non-vengeful blame accords with both desires of love. Second, non-vengeful blame can aim directly at reconciliation, and so aim simultaneously at union with the wrongdoer and the wrongdoer's good, which follows from the plausible claim that relational union is part of the good for human beings. Third,

even putting distance between yourself and the wrongdoer for protection can promote the good of the wrongdoer by removing an opportunity for future abuse. That protects the wrongdoer from herself by preventing her future moral deterioration at least as far as it depends on that potential victim. Thus, all three goals and their varieties of non-vengeful blame train people to love their neighbours by promoting their good, union, or both by exemplifying love for them. But unlike human beings, God does not need help to grow in love because 'God is love' (1 John 4:16).

In summary, God has axiological reasons that justify prohibiting human beings from taking vengeance: the prohibition protects human beings against their propensity to exact excessive vengeance and the prohibition helps human beings to grow in love. These axiological reasons justify God's commandment not to take vengeance, but it is God's commandment – and not merely the justifying reasons – that generates the duty not to take vengeance in virtue of the fact that God is our supreme benefactor, according to Swinburne's account of morality. So, for all I argue here, if the God of Christianity does not exist, it may be permissible to give wrongdoers the vengeful overt blame that they deserve; it all depends on the true normative landscape. Thus, the God of Christianity is sufficient to make non-vengeance obligatory in view of the divine commands that are justified by, and not also required by, the two moral goods that apply to human beings but not to God.¹⁹

Importantly, the two moral goods need not even outweigh the intrinsic good of the wrongdoer getting their just deserts to justify the divine prohibition. After all, God is permitted to mete out retribution, and thus the intrinsic good of the wrongdoer getting their just deserts can still be realized if God exacts retribution.

Furthermore, people are not worse off by complying with the no-vengeance condition. I defend this claim in response to two objections.

First, people may use the no-vengeance condition to control others in a way that shields them from the retribution that they deserve for their wrongdoing.

In reply, that a victim has an obligation to leave vengeance to God does not imply that a wrongdoer has a right to the victim's doing so; obligations and rights are not correlative. Thus, a wrongdoer is not entitled to her victim's foreswearing vengeance. Besides, other norms condemn the proud, greedy, or self-serving application of the no-vengeance condition.

Second, one might think that the no-vengeance condition is bad for human self-respect. Engaging in vengeful overt blame enables the blamer to stand up for themselves in a way that correctly weighs their dignity and entitlements.

In response, there are other ways for people to know their value and insist on better treatment. They might know their value by reflecting on their dignity and value as persons (see Kant 1996b, 556–557; 4:434–435; Rasmussen and Bailey 2021) or as image-bearers of God (Genesis 1:28); or they may even feel the weight of their dignity and entitlements in anger as a source of moral insight. Furthermore, they can insist on better treatment via the non-vengeful varieties of blame. It was *from* self-respect in part that Martin Luther King Jr. resisted adaptive preferences to be satisfied and insisted on better treatment for himself and others. Thus, compliance with the no-vengeance condition is no real threat to self-respect.

A biblical defence

There are scriptures that appear to be counterexamples to the no-vengeance condition. I respond to four potential counterexamples to provide a preliminary case that the no-vengeance condition is overall supported by the Christian scriptures. Along the way, we also gain more ethical insight into compliance with the no-vengeance condition.

Objection 1: Jesus angrily blames the Pharisees in a way that down-ranks, shames, and scolds them (Matthew 23). We should be like Jesus. Therefore, it is exemplary – and not morally wrong or bad – to blame vengefully exactly as the wrongdoer deserves.

Reply: But we should not be like Jesus in every way. We should be like Jesus only in the ways fitting for creatures. Jesus is God. It is permissible for God to take vengeance. Thus, Jesus's actions are not a counterexample to the no-vengeance condition.

Objection 2: God deputizes human persons to punish wrongdoers just because they deserve it: 'it [the governing authority] is God's agent for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the agent of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer' (Romans 13:3–4; see also 1 Peter 2:14). Aquinas (1948, 1833; II–II q158, a1, r3) comments: '[W]hen revenge is taken in accordance with the order of judgement, it is God's work, since he who has the power to punish is God's minister, as stated in Rom. xiii. 4.' Aquinas's claim might inspire the following idea: when a person vengefully overtly blames the wrongdoer as she deserves, the blamer is doing God's work. Thus, vengeance is God's in the relevant sense, and the no-vengeance condition is trivially fulfilled whenever a person pays back the wrongdoer exactly as she deserves.

Reply: But this passage clearly deputizes only governing authorities as God's avenger; it provides no reason to think that private citizens in their interpersonal relationships are also deputized as God's avenger. Thus, the no-vengeance condition is not trivially satisfied in this way. Furthermore, other passages that appear to support vengeful practices also turn out to be circumstances in which God deputizes human beings as God's avenger. For example, consider Revelation 6:9–10: 'When he broke the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God . . . they cried out with a loud voice, "Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?"' Breaking the seven seals is part of God's judgement, and so this passage provides no counterexample to the vengeance prohibition in our interpersonal relationships.

Objection 3: Immediately after Romans 12:19, Paul appears to validate vengeance: 'Instead, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink, for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads"' (Romans 12:20).

Reply: But Romans 12:20 cannot charitably be interpreted as recommending vengeance immediately following Romans 12:19. How else might it be interpreted? Plausibly, it is a descriptive claim that doing good to an enemy can generate fitting shame in the enemy (Moo 1996, 788–789), which can feel like burning coals on the head or the heat of embarrassment in the face. The fitting shame comes from the enemy's attention being drawn to the way in which she is morally outmatched by someone upon whom she looks down. So, the enemy feels fitting shame when those good deeds provide an occasion to attend to her own substandard behaviour and character.

Objection 4: The psalmists vengefully overtly blame in prayer: 'O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!' (Psalms 137:8–9; see also Psalms 58:10, 69:27–28). We should pray as the psalmists do. Thus, it is exemplary to blame vengefully in this way.

Reply: The Babylonians visited horrors on the Israelites and that revenge prayer is a natural angry response to such horrors. But praying curses is not exemplary (Kant 1996a, 142; 6:110n.); Jesus points to a deeper morality in which love replaces revenge (Matthew 5:38–44), and so people should love their enemies instead of taking an eye for an eye as the Psalmist fantasizes about doing.

One might press the objection that the revenge prayer complies with the no-vengeance condition because it is leaving vengeance to God (Firth 2015).

But the angry prayer aims to partner in revenge with God from the prayer's own initiative; and God rebukes Jonah for doing just this. Here is the story: God commands Jonah, an Israelite, to preach impending judgement to the people of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. The Assyrians had laid waste to the northern Israelite kingdom taking captive many Israelites. Jonah ran away to avoid helping his oppressor to receive mercy. After being coerced by God, Jonah eventually goes to Nineveh, preaches to them, and they repent; in response, God relents. Jonah is angry that the Ninevites were not destroyed:

He [Jonah] prayed to the LORD and said, 'O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning, for I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment. And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.' And the LORD said, 'Is it right for you to be angry?' (Jonah 4:1–4)

So, by initially choosing not to preach to the Ninevites, Jonah angrily aimed to partner by omission in Nineveh's destruction; and Jonah persists in holding the grudge when God relents. God's actions and rhetorical question highlight that Jonah acts wrongly or badly in vengefully overtly blaming them in these ways. The psalmist's prayer for revenge similarly aims to partner in revenge by the psalmist's own initiative, and so it is likewise not to be done.²⁰

One caveat is important for my response to Psalm 137. There is a non-ideal ethics for people who have undergone such trauma and horror that compliance with the no-vengeance condition is not psychologically possible; the psalmist is a good candidate for being in this position. In such cases, a prayer for revenge might be the best option accessible to their psyche in view of their character and circumstances; so, if a person must seek revenge, the best place to do it is in prayer. Thus, the imprecatory psalm can be prescriptive from a non-ideal ethical perspective in devastating circumstances, but it cannot be prescriptive from an ideal ethical perspective.

Conclusion

I have identified, explicated, and defended a new condition on the ethics of blaming the blameworthy person. According to the no-vengeance condition, people should not vengefully overtly blame others even when they deserve it; vengeance should be left to God. I argued that the no-vengeance condition requires a revolution in our blaming practices since vengeful overt blame is common.

The no-vengeance condition also renders moot a prominent reason to inquire whether human beings have free will. People want to know if they have free will in part because they want to know if people deserve vengeful overt blame; and, ultimately, they want to know if it is permissible to blame others in the vengeful overt way (Clarke et al. 2014, 503–504). But even if people do have free will and so people do deserve vengeful overt blame for their wrongdoing, the no-vengeance condition implies that it is nevertheless impermissible to give them the vengeful overt blame that they deserve.

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Notes

1. Philosophers of religion do discuss whether God has standing to blame human persons (e.g. Todd 2018).
2. All biblical passages are from the NRSV translation.
3. The non-hypocrisy condition can easily be found in Matthew 7:1–5. A my-business condition is found in Paul's different blaming practices for those who are in and outside the church in 1 Corinthians 5:9–13. There is also a procedure for blame in Matthew 18:15–17 and many other relevant passages that I do not explore.
4. As Pamela Hieronymi (2004, 115) puts it, blame has a 'special force' beyond mere cognitive grading or evaluation of wrongdoing.
5. I treat vengeance and retribution synonymously in this article because the Christian scriptures appear to do so. Retributivists about punishment often make subtle distinctions between these concepts (e.g. Nozick 1981, 366–370). For scepticism about the distinction, see Kaufman (2013, 93–112).
6. Paul Bloom (2020, 31–32), a social psychologist, asserts that the view that anger is vengeful is the 'received view in evolutionary approaches to the mind. . . . Any social creature that wasn't inclined to strike back at threats or acts of harm would be, in a word, a chump – open to exploitation and cruelty, a loser at survival and reproduction.'
7. Why not think instead that anger aims at promoting justice? There is certainly a connection between anger and justice, but promoting justice is the wrong way to characterize the action tendency. Anger's action tendency to pay back is retributively just only when the payback is proportional. So, with respect to the action tendency of anger, the genus is payback and one of its species is retributive justice (when the payback is proportional).
8. Another explanation is that being openly angry reveals a vulnerability, which in turn makes the angry person liable to future abuse. Probably, both explanations are true.
9. The 'even typically' is relevant to a later caveat that my argument does not depend on the conceptual connection between anger and a desire for vengeance; a typical connection between them suffices.
10. Perhaps the shopper and motorcyclist (and hungry babies too) are aptly characterized as angry without a desire for vengeance. Perhaps a pluralist theory of anger is correct that distinguishes between two main species – anger at a frustrated goal and anger at wrongdoing (Shoemaker 2017, 72–73). If the pluralist account is correct, nothing substantive follows for my purposes. I am concerned just with the species of anger that targets wrongdoing.
11. For a summary of considerable psychological evidence on the pleasures of revenge, see Chester and Martelli (2020).
12. As a prophet writes, 'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?' (Jeremiah 17:9).
13. What about when Jill's non-voluntary mental life conjures the scenario for her? She is not directly blame-worthy for it unless she has a free choice to discontinue the anger fantasy.
14. Or as the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2003, 856) puts it: 'anger generally involves a motivation to attack, humiliate, or otherwise get back at the person who is perceived as acting unfairly or immorally'.
15. God may take vengeance by giving people over to the natural consequences of their wrongdoing and vice (e.g. Hartman 2022) or by intervening in the natural order to impose a special punishment.
16. Another option is Robert Adams's (1999) approach to morality. On that view, divine commands constitute obligations as social requirements, but the commands are guided by facts about goodness independent of the divine will. So, God's command that people not avenge themselves is likewise explained by facts about the good.
17. One might wonder whether the no-vengeance condition is stronger than is required to secure this moral good. Maybe, as Jada Twedt Strabbing and an anonymous referee from this journal suggest to me, something like a less-vengeance condition is all that is required. I offer two responses. First, wrath is a capital vice in the Christian tradition (DeYoung 2020), and so it is fitting to take serious countermeasures. Second, this first moral good need not itself rationalize the no-vengeance condition. The two moral goods work together to do so.
18. I could have put this point in terms of the greatest commandments to love God and to love my neighbour (Matthew 22:37–40) or the command to love enemies (Luke 6:27–35). But that would merely push back the enquiry. We would still have to ask what moral goods stand behind those commandments. I cut straight to identifying that good: being in excellent loving relationships is a central part of human flourishing.
19. This dependence of the no-vengeance condition on the Christian God – and its exception for the Christian God – makes the no-vengeance condition different from the no-hypocrisy and my-business conditions on the ethics of blaming the blameworthy.

20. The Jonah story highlights that God spares people at least sometimes from the full vengeful treatment that they deserve. So, compliance with the no-vengeance condition ultimately involves submission to the divine will about whether vengeance on the wrongdoer is to be fully executed or partially forgone by God.

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