Cancel Culture: An Unproductive Form of Blame

Boochie Post

In this paper I argue that Miranda Fricker's account of blame in "What's the Point of Blame? A Paradigm Based Explanation" can assist in explaining why cancel culture is ultimately unproductive. In particular, the phenomenon of cancel culture possesses pathological forms of blame. There are three specific pathologies outlined by Fricker that can be observed in cancel culture. They are as follows: cancel culture does not leave room for people to learn from their mistakes, it does not express its blame in the proper ethical register, and cancel culture allows for blame to fester and spread. In the first half of my paper, I will lay out the distinct aspects of Fricker's paper that relate to cancel culture and a definition of the term cancel culture. In the second half, I will explore the real-life cancelation of actor Lea Michele so as to validate the presence of cancel culture in our society today. Furthermore, I will expand on three of Fricker's pathologies that are present in cancel culture and refute a counter argument people may pose who are supportive of cancel culture.

In Miranda Fricker's paper, Fricker vindicates the practice of blame. She is cognizant of the diverse utilization of blame and believes that there is a prototypical form—'Communicative Blame'—from which all other forms branch out. To begin our discussion of cancel culture, we must first understand where the phenomenon stems from. Understanding cancel culture's deviation from productive forms of blame helps us recognize cancel culture's fruitlessness in real-life situations, such as the cancelation of Lea Michele. Fricker calls for a paradigm-based approach to blame. The practice is "significantly disunified," which means that certain features of it may not be visible in all instances.[1] Communicative Blame is the form of blame where all other cases derive from. There are three different kinds of blame; the first: "first person reflexive mode ('I blame myself for the failure of the marriage')," the second: "second person interactions ('it's not okay to make fun of me/him/them/others like that')," and the third: "third person cases ('I blame the doctor/the parents/the school/the government for what happened')."[2] Communicative Blame is a "basic second personal interaction of X blaming Y for an action, motive, or attitude (or lack thereof)..."[3] So why is Communicative Blame so productive? Largely, it is due to the two kinds of speech acts involved. Fricker describes them as illocutionary and perlocutionary

1. Miranda Fricker, "What's the point of blame? A paradigm based explanation." *Noûs* 50.1(2016): 166.

2. Fricker, "What's the point of blame?", 173.

3. Fricker, "What's the point of blame?", 167.

speech acts. The distinctive property of illocutionary speech acts is that they require the full attention of the hearer in order to succeed. In Communicative Blame, the illocutionary point is to encourage an "admixture of judgement and...remorse" so that the wrongdoer can acknowledge the moral significance of their action and feel sorry.[4] The perlocutionary speech act is the second step in the process of Communicative Blame. Once an apology is uttered, the perlocutionary act comes into play, and the wrongdoer is spurred to change their behavior for the better. The combination of these speech acts results in more moral understanding and unity, "along with a candidly disciplinary hope."[5] If blame does not exhibit a sequence of both speech acts followed by moral alignment, Fricker believes it is not functioning properly. Blame which fails to include both speech acts has the possibility of further distancing the blaming and blamed party rather than aligning their moral understanding. This misuse of blame does not have a desire to unify both parties, nor does it conclude with a sense of hope.

Cancel culture is an example of blame not operating in a productive manner. In cancel culture, there are no universal principles that people utilize to make appropriate accusations. Individuals make judgements carelessly, insofar as those judgements do not fit under a set of conditions identified by Fricker. There are six conditions where blame is appropriate. Some of these conditions were misused in Lea Michele's cancellation, which we will explore later in the paper. For now, I will describe an unfolding of events among two friends in order to discern all six conditions of appropriate blame. Imagine that a man, John, has failed to take care of the pet fish of his friend, Max. Max went out of town for the weekend and had asked John to watch over his fish. In this instance, John felt too lazy to check on Max's fish, and figured the fish was low maintenance enough that he did not have to take care of it. When Max got back, his fish had flopped onto the floor and died. The first condition Fricker asserts is, "the blamed party must be blameworthy."[6] Max believes John is blameworthy because he did not have a legitimate excuse to not take care of the fish. The second condition is, "blame must...be proportionate to the wrongdoing for it is the degree of wrongdoing that justifies the degree of blame."[7] Max feels justified in his blaming because it was John's lack of effort to check on the fish that resulted in the fish dying. Fricker claims the third condition is, "blame should be appropriately contained in its proper remit, both temporally and in terms of the relationship(s) it affects."[8] Max did not hesitate to blame John because John was the only person he had asked to take care of the fish. The fourth condition is, "blame must be expressed in the proper ethical

4. Fricker, "What's the point of blame?", 173.

5. Fricker, "What's the point of blame?", 174.

6. Fricker, "What's the point of blame?", 168.

7. Fricker, "What's the point of blame?", 168.

8. Fricker, "What's the point of blame?", 169.

register."[9] Max knows that John did not maliciously kill his fish out of spite, but still holds him responsible for its death. The fifth condition is, "blame must be properly geared to people's entitlement to take some risks in learning how to do things for themselves and make their own mistakes."[10] After being confronted by Max, John now knows the importance of pet sitting, and that he made a mistake by being lazy and assuming that fish are low maintenance. The sixth and final condition is, "blame is inappropriate when it is applied in cases that exhibit a certain kind of 'incident' or outcome moral luck."[11] In this example, there is a combination of an incident and genuine fault. It was bad luck that the fish flopped out of its tank, but it could have been saved if John had decided to be there.

Fricker's six conditions establish a framework that, when abided by, reduces the possibility of inappropriate blame. Cancellation, practiced by cancel culture, disregards this framework and thus can been seen as a consequential action of haphazard blaming. Cancel culture as defined in this paper draws from Adrienne Maree Brown's definition from her book, *We Will Not Cancel Us.* Cancel culture is the phenomenon of labelling people and organizations as bad or disposable and subject to one punishment: "a call out, often for some form of instant cancelation."[12] This definition of cancel culture is most commonly practiced on the internet, specifically on social media platforms like Twitter. Its goal is to ostracize the blamed party from ever being involved in any more moral discussions on account of the blamed being accused of immoral behavior. Often the practice utilizes social media platforms in order to reach a large audience and gain quick and momentous support. Social media tends to pressure users to agree with the masses because individuals who receive more likes are often viewed as being correct in their opinions. As a consequence, those with the most 'likes' become popular, and people on social media desire to associate themselves with those likeable individuals. Therefore, the more 'likes' there are for canceling a celebrity, the easier it is for instant cancelation to occur. Additionally, cancel culture adopts terms that are easily recognizable by the majority of society in order to further garner encouragement for instant cancelation. Terms such as racist, homophobic, transphobic, misogynist, and ableist are all used as concise descriptions of immoral behavior of celebrities. Due to the natural leverage that these words hold, people feel comfortable instantly canceling a celebrity accused of immoral behavior.

A preliminary definition of cancel culture allows us to then dive into more detail about the pathologies the phenomenon contains. When examining cancel culture under Fricker's six conditions of blame, it is clear to see that the fifth condition is ignored. This is where the first pathology is observed in the phenomenon. Cancel culture does not leave room for people to learn from their mistakes. The culture is an act of supervision over public figures, like Lea Michele.

---

9. Fricker, "What's the point of blame?", 169.

10. Fricker, "What's the point of blame?", 169.

11. Fricker, "What's the point of blame?", 170.

12. Adrienne Maree Brown, *We Will Not Cancel Us: And Other Dreams of Transformative Justice*. AK Press, (2020): 42.

Fricker states that we set "others up for a fall if we anticipate that their actions may go awry and then blame them when they do, with or without an explicit 'I told you so'."[13] By supervising everything an individual does or says, we are anticipating their behavior. Celebrities are just like any other moral human, but because of their large platforms, we assume that they have better moral judgement and make better decisions than the average Joe, and we hold them to this standard. Furthermore, we perceive celebrities as not entitled to take risks in learning and making mistakes. Fricker states that there are many things that can go wrong in a person's life "('intellectual, practical, emotional, moral')," which she believes are underdetermined as to whether they are an individual's personal fault, or "simply an unfortunate playing out of endemic risk."[14]

A recent real-life cancelation of a celebrity was in 2020 of actor Lea Michele. Her case can stand as an overarching example of the pathologies where blame was utilized in an unproductive way. After the murder of George Floyd, Michele took to Twitter to express her solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. Samantha Marie Ware, one of her former co-stars from the TV show *Glee*, responded to Michele's tweet saying, "I believe you told everyone that if you had the opportunity you would 'sh*t in my wig!'."[15] Ware recalls this as one of many micro-aggressions Michele spewed at her while shooting the show. Some former set workers came forward as well with accusations of Michele exhibiting rude, privileged behavior and making racists comments. While Michele took to Instagram to apologize, thousands of *Glee* fans had already called for cancelation. Michele's apology did not help because of her word choice. She apologized for 'perceived' rude behavior, and this diction added fuel to the fire. Many fans viewed her apology as selfish and shallow. Following her cancelation, Michele's reputation as a credible actor has been demolished, and she has not been able to secure prominent acting roles since.

The very nature of cancel culture's use of blame is instant cancelation. Cancel culture calls for immediate cancelation, thus making it difficult for the accused to have their apology accepted by society. An apology will most likely not save a celebrity from ostracism because cancel culture is anticipating their actions and does not view them as entitled to making mistakes. In Lea Michele's case, an apology for her rude behavior seemed warranted. However, when she did provide her apology, fans felt even more of a reason to cancel her because of her poor word choice in the apology. Cancel culture will assume the celebrity's reason or excuse for wrongdoing will be flawless. When it is not, because of "intellectual, practical, emotional [or] moral" fault, the attempted apology is not accepted.[16] Subsequently, the individual is disbarred from any more moral discussions, resulting in an unproductive and useless practice of blame.

---

13. Fricker, "What's the point of blame?", 169.

14. Fricker, "What's the point of blame?", 169.

15. Pundir, Rima. "Fans 'Cancel' Glee Star Lea Michele After Weak Instagram Apology To Samantha Ware." The Blast, June 5, 2020.

16. Fricker, "What's the point of blame?", 169.

In addition to cancel culture forbidding the blamed party to learn from their mistakes, the phenomenon also does not comply with the fourth condition: it does not express its blame in the proper ethical register. Fleeting mistakes are treated as if they speak to a deeper, evil character trait inherent to the wrongdoer. Fricker believes that if someone blames another for an "off-catty comment" as actually a genuine indication of that person's internal character, the blamer is "thinking excessively ill of another's character."[17] In cancel culture, the target of the blame is often labeled as sexist, racist, or homophobic to their core. These massive titles bear negative connotations—naturally—and when they are utilized by cancel culture, it is difficult for the target to be viewed as anything besides that title. After Lea Michele was accused of being racist due to her microaggressions on set, she has been omitted from the limelight. Even if she is seen in the public eye, the way society now perceives her is unequivocally negative. The permanence of social media posts makes it difficult for momentary instances of immoral behavior to seem just that: momentary. In regard to Lea Michele's apology via Instagram, thousands of people noticed Michele's poor word choice, and all they had to do to immortalize her words was to screenshot her post. Even if Michele attempted to delete the apology and post a new, better formulated one, the public would already have the former saved in their camera roll. The flashy, image-based nature of social media makes it a good place for instances of morally corrupt behavior to be publicized and, consequently, for people to be labeled as inherently immoral individuals when their "off-catty" comments are captured. When cancel culture uses social media as its playground for blame, it is not operating in a proper ethical register. Blame is ultimately unproductive when it occurs in an unsuitable ethical register.

The third and final pathological trait that makes cancel culture unproductive is its negligence towards Fricker's third condition: cancel culture allows for blame to fester and spread. In order for blame to be productive, it must be "contained in its proper remit, both temporally and in terms of the relationship(s) it affects."[18] It is common for cancel culture to dig up a celebrity's past and ridicule them for their morally corrupt decisions without acknowledging that what is morally acceptable in society shifts and develops with time. Michele only remained on the show from the years 2009 to 2015. The accusations against Michele arose in 2020, when there is a possibility that Michele had since changed her ways. In cancel culture, the accused wrongdoer can be called out for poor moral decisions they had made several years in the past. In this pathological practice of blame, time and an individual's moral naïveté are not taken into consideration. Fricker states that if blame festers or spreads, it will have "degenerated into ressentiment."[19] At this point, blame is unproductive because it is unregulated and stemming from a psychological state of pure hatred in the blamer. If the

17. Fricker, "What's the point of blame?", 169.

18. Fricker, "What's the point of blame?", 169.

19. Fricker, "What's the point of blame?", 169.

blaming party is coming from a position of unadulterated hatred, there is no sense of "candidly disciplinary hope" in their accusation.[20]

Supporters of cancel culture may argue that the phenomenon is productive. They may say that it aims to change the moral behavior of the wrongdoer. This is because it contains a key component of what Fricker identifies as Communicative Blame—which she calls the most productive form of blame by bringing the wrongdoer to remorse and transforming their moral attitude for the better. Supporters of cancel culture may believe that their behavior is in line with the objectives of communicative blame. These two steps, remorse and change in behavior, are crucial to expand the convergence of moral understandings between the wronged and wrongdoer. Yes, most of the time the wrongdoer targeted by cancel culture is brought to remorse. Yet, supporters fail to recognize that cancel culture does not care about change in the moral behavior of the blamed party. Cancel culture's aim is not to bring increased alignment of moral understanding between accused and accuser. The very nature of the sub-culture is instant cancelation. This does not allow room for the wrongdoer to make an acceptable change in their behavior, and therefore, there is no increase in moral alignment. Furthermore, demolishing an individual's image to the point where they cannot function in their chosen career path is not identified as a key element of productive blame under communicative blame.

In the case of Lea Michele's downfall, individuals who took to social media to cancel her did not take their positions in hopes of seeing Michele change her behavior for the better. Michele was not given the space to learn and grow from her immoral actions. One of the steps of suitable blame, namely the increase of moral alignment between Michele and the blaming parties on social media, was never utilized. The result of the actor's cancelation has forced her to a confined space in Hollywood of relative nonexistence. Given that cancel culture does not abide by a form of blame that seeks to resolve issues and align moral understandings of the accused and accuser, the outcome of the accusations is ultimately unproductive. Consequently, cancel culture falls into the realm of pathological blame, and only aims to cause more separation and apprehension among individuals.

20. Fricker, "What's the point of blame?", 169.