IS BLAMEWORTHINESS TERMINABLE?

By Randolph Clarke

*Benjamin Matheson has recently argued that blameworthiness is terminable: in at least some cases, one’s blameworthiness for a given offense can be diminished or even eliminated. Although Matheson presents a forceful challenge to those who deny this view—interminability theorists, he calls them—he misconstrues their position and fails to come to grips with several considerations that favor it. This paper aims to clarify key aspects of the debate and defend the claim that blameworthiness is interminable.*

**Keywords**: blame, blameworthiness, fittingness, forgiveness, redemption

Suppose that you do something for which you are blameworthy. Can things be done subsequently, by you or anyone else, to make you less blameworthy for doing that thing, and perhaps even no longer blameworthy at all for doing it? In a recent paper, Benjamin Matheson (forthcoming) argues that, in at least some such cases, the answer is affirmative. Blameworthiness, as he puts it, is terminable: once incurred, it can be diminished and perhaps even eliminated.

Matheson presents a forceful challenge to those who deny this view—interminability theorists, he calls them. However, his characterization of the dispute is flawed in several respects. I indicate here some of the main weaknesses of his case and respond, in defense of interminability, to what I see as his strongest point.

1. Properties and Predication

Matheson sees interminability theorists as holding the following view:

Blameworthiness is an interminable property—that is, it’s a property that once you instantiate it, you’ll forever instantiate it. (forthcoming: 2)

Many properties, he observes, are terminable. For example, a person can at some time instantiate the property of being a good dancer but at a later time no longer instantiate that property. The property of being blameworthy (to a certain degree, for a certain offense), he maintains, is likewise terminable.

Interminability theorists should not accept the view attributed to them by Matheson. Some will hold that death is annihilation: on dying, we cease to exist. They might well also accept that only existing things instantiate properties. They will then hold that no property is instantiated by anyone who is dead.[[1]](#footnote-1) They will nevertheless hold that some of the dead (Mao, for example) are to blame for certain things (deaths that resulted from The Great Leap Forward).

We can predicate blameworthiness of Mao for this outcome, and do so in present tense: he is blameworthy for it. If the truth of what we say hinges on the instantiation by him of one or more properties, an interminability theorist can say that it hinges on instantiation by him of certain properties in the 1950s and ‘60s, for that is when he did the things his doing which, the theorist claims, make it the case that he is blameworthy for these deaths. That he subsequently changed with respect to which properties he instantiated, and that no properties at all are now instantiated by him, it will be said, is neither here nor there as far as his blameworthiness for these deaths is concerned.

Indeed, phrasing the disagreement as one about the instantiation of properties is a red herring. Despite denying altogether the existence of properties, nominalists can take either of the positions on terminability.

Blameworthiness is not alone in being truly predicable, in present tense, to things that no longer exist. Frederick Douglas is greatly admired these days. Of course, he need not exist now for that to be so. Further, if our admiration of him is fitting—and I submit that it is—then he is admirable. We would misstate matters if we said that although he *was* admirable, he *no longer is*. The point is one that we may acknowledge without commitment to his current possession of any properties.

This is not to say that admirability is interminable. Someone who has been admirable can become less so or cease altogether to be so. Admiration of a person commonly assesses that person overall, or overall with respect to some trait or category (an admirable orator), and as persons change, correct assessments of this kind can change. In contrast, blame is a response to a person with respect to some particular action(s), omission(s), or outcome(s). The matter in dispute is whether worthiness of that response can change due to what happens later than the action(s), omission(s), or outcome(s).

Matheson repeatedly chides interminability theorists for overlooking a distinction between *becoming* blameworthy and *remaining* blameworthy. Surely they do not. Even to state the interminability thesis—that once one is blameworthy (to any degree) for a given offense, one remains so forever—requires drawing the distinction. What is in dispute is the importance of it. As interminability theorists see it, in every case, what keeps one blameworthy for a given offense is just what renders one blameworthy for that offense in the first place.

1. Evaluation

Matheson sees terminability theorists and their opponents as alike committed to ‘a conception of blameworthiness according to which if a person is blameworthy, then she is a fitting target of blame’ (forthcoming: 5). He appears to accept as well the converse of this conditional when he says, ‘the terminability theorist’s view is…that if a person ceases to be blameworthy, it means that they are no longer a fitting target of blame’ (*ibid*.). Apparently, then, he endorses the widely accepted biconditional: one is blameworthy for a given offense if, and only if, some form of blame of one for that offense would be fitting.

Blame, Matheson observes, evaluates its object. And its fittingness ‘is a matter of accurate representation or evaluation’ (forthcoming: 5). As he sees the dispute, terminability theorists and interminability theorists disagree about the nature of this evaluation.

For the interminability theorist, blame merely involves a *historical* evaluation—that is, one that looks at a person’s whole life so far and checks for any impermissible conduct. However, for the terminability theorist, blame also involves a *present* evaluation—that is, an evaluation that speaks to the present properties (things which *are* true of the person rather than things that *were* true of her) that a person has at the time they are blamed. (7)

Interminability theorists need hold no such thing. The business about properties aside, they can understand blame, in the present, to involve a present evaluation: in (now) blaming someone for something, you (now) evaluate that person as (now) blameworthy for that thing. One is (now) blameworthy if such an evaluation is correct. There need be no denial, then, that blame involves a present evaluation. Rather, what interminability theorists deny is that what happens subsequent to an offense can bear on the correctness of (present) blame’s (present) evaluation.

1. Posthumous Blame

As we have seen, Matheson maintains that blame involves a present evaluation. Interminability theorists can agree and hold that the evaluation in question can be correct even when the person blamed is deceased.

In previous work, Matheson (together with a co-author) advanced a view of blame’s evaluation that rules out the fittingness of posthumous blame, given an assumption about the dead that he shares. As he puts the view, blame attributes a present flaw to the person blamed, a flaw that ‘is to be understood in purely psychological terms—that is, the flaw is composed of the distinctive attitudes that were expressed in the action the person is being blamed for performing’ (forthcoming: 15; see also Khoury and Matheson 2018: 216). Since, as he sees it, the dead have no psychological attitudes at all, on this view of blame’s evaluation, blame of the dead always misevaluate them. It is never fitting; no one who is dead is blameworthy for anything.

Responding to an objection that I had raised (Clarke 2022: 2586), Matheson writes:

What about Clarke’s claim that we say that Hitler *is* blameworthy rather than Hitler *was* blameworthy? Even if we do sometimes speak this way, it isn’t clear we should take such language to identify anything important about the nature of blameworthiness. This seems more like loose talk. It also isn’t clear what is gained by saying that Hitler is rather than was blameworthy. We can blame him just as well either way. (forthcoming: 11)

There is something lost, I contend, by leaving it unsaid that Hitler is blameworthy: an important moral truth is left unspoken. Worse, we err morally if we deny the claim. Of course, as Matheson says, even if Hitler isn’t blameworthy, we can continue to blame him. However, if our blame of him evaluates him incorrectly, it is unfitting.

Matheson maintains that theorists who hold that death extinguishes blameworthiness can still ‘explain’ posthumous blame. ‘Even if a person’s blameworthiness doesn’t persist because they don’t persist’, he writes, ‘we can still think back to when the person was alive and fittingly blame them. When we blame a dead person, we blame them as they were when they were living’ (forthcoming: 11). It is difficult to see what he is getting at here. If blame (in the present) involves a present evaluation, and if the evaluation is, as Matheson previously said, the attribution of (current) objectionable psychological attitudes, then blaming someone now who does not now have any psychological attitudes cannot be fitting.

Matheson says that in posthumous blame, ‘our blame is about someone in the past and so they don’t need to be blameworthy in the present for our blame to be fitting’ (forthcoming: 11). I would think that the biconditional connecting blameworthiness and the fittingness of blame, which Matheson appears to accept, implies that if our present blame of someone in the past is fitting, then that person in the past is blameworthy.

Perhaps Matheson means to distinguish between, for example, *Hitler* and *Hitler in the past*, and to suggest that even if our present blame of the former is unfitting (and hence the former is not blameworthy for anything), our present blame of the latter can be fitting (and hence the latter is blameworthy for some offenses). I’m not sure I grasp what the distinction would come to. Hitler in Berlin would be Hitler; if Hitler in the past is analogous, he, too, would be Hitler. In any event, what we blame, in moral blame, are persons. Our blame of Hitler is, as it says on the tin, blame of Hitler. Matheson appears willing to allow that such blame is unfitting and that this person is not blameworthy for anything. This view, it seems to me, is badly mistaken.

1. Forgiveness

Imagine an offender fully redeemed. She has acknowledged that she did wrong, accepted blame, felt remorse, apologized, reformed her character, and made amends, including compensating the victim. What she has done since committing the offense has provided the victim with good reasons to forgive her. If forgiveness is ever fitting, it could be fitting in this case.

But forgiveness is a moral mistake when the one forgiven is not blameworthy for the offense for which one forgives. This fact presents a problem for terminability theorists. For the things that provide good reasons to forgive are just the sorts of thing that various terminability theorists say can eliminate one’s blameworthiness. And if one is not blameworthy, then forgiveness is not fitting.

Matheson suggests that forgiveness can be understood as akin to ‘an acknowledgement that a person has ceased to be blameworthy’ (forthcoming: 20). This would be a misunderstanding. Ceasing to blame because you recognize that the one you blame is not to blame is not forgiving that person; it is responding to a recognition that you are in error.

Alternatively, he suggests, it might be held that while redemption is necessary to terminate blameworthiness, forgiveness, too, is necessary. On this view, ‘it’s the act of forgiveness that changes the person’s status from blameworthy to no longer blameworthy’ (20). The proposal would accord to those with standing to forgive an extraordinary normative power. To change a blameworthy person’s status in the suggested way would be to render unfitting any and every subsequent attitude of blame, by any- and everyone, of that person (for the offense in question). Someone with standing to blame—the victim of wrongdoing, for example—might have a power to alter, by forgiving, the normative status of his or her *own* subsequent attitudes. But it may reasonably be objected—and I object—that standing to forgive does not give one the same authority over the normative status of *everyone’s* attitudes.[[2]](#footnote-2) (Cases in which several individuals have standing to forgive present a further problem; would only the last to forgive have the power to render the offender blameless?)

1. An Argument for Interminability

Matheson critiques several arguments for interminability. None, he argues, provide any support for that view; there is no positive case for it. I focus here on his response to one of these arguments, which he calls The Entailment Argument. He fails, I think, to appreciate its force.

Quoting from its source:

If one is guilty of a moral offense, one remains so without end. In this respect, moral guilt is like criminal guilt (the guilt that one acquires on committing a crime, not something that begins if and when one is found guilty by a court)….

If one is guilty of a moral offense, then one is culpable for it. And one who is culpable for an offense is to blame for it. To be to blame for something is to be worthy of blame, or blameworthy, for it. Hence, blameworthiness is forever: once blameworthy for an offense, always blameworthy for that offense. And since one is worthy of blame just in case blame would be fitting, we may add that once one is blameworthy for an offense, it will always be the case that some possible instance of blame of one for that offense would be fitting. (Clarke 2022: 2582)

Matheson omits the first paragraph of the argument, quoting only the second. His response to the portion he quotes is two-fold. On the one hand, he objects that it is question-begging. ‘Each of the responsibility concepts (guilty, culpable, being to blame, blameworthy, being a fitting target of blame) used in the argument have the same meaning’ (forthcoming: 8). On the other hand, he says, ‘the conclusion doesn’t follow because the argument fails to distinguish between becoming and remaining blameworthy’ (*ibid*.).

Of course, shorn of the first paragraph, the argument is invalid; the conclusion does not follow. But the shortcoming is not due to a failure to distinguish between becoming and remaining blameworthy; there is no such failure. Rather, the shortcoming in the argument as quoted by Matheson stems from omission of the initial premise. We cannot infer that blameworthiness is forever simply from the fact that being guilty implies being blameworthy. The further claim that being guilty is forever is required.

I do not think that the several responsibility terms employed in the argument mean quite the same thing. But if, as Matheson does, one holds this view, then one should accept that, with the initial claim of the first paragraph added, the argument is valid. If its conclusion is false, then at least one of its premises must be false. Given his view of the meanings of the key terms, it would seem that Matheson must reject the first premise; he must, that is, hold that being guilty is terminable.

Matheson does not argue directly for this claim. The closest he comes is his claim, when clarifying the thesis of terminability, that ‘it’s…important to make clear that terminability theorists don’t hold that ceasing to be blameworthy amounts to being exculpated’ (forthcoming: 5). Exculpation, he says, ‘implies that someone was never in fact blameworthy’ (*ibid*.). But he does not deny that ceasing to be blameworthy implies no longer being culpable. There is, then, no objection to The Entailment Argument here.

What about being guilty? To my ear, ‘I was guilty of that offense, but I am no longer guilty of it’, (when the offense in question is some *particular* misdeed, rather than some *kind* of offense) is off, and off because it cannot be true. If I am no longer guilty of the offense, then I am not guilty of it. And ‘I was guilty of that offense, but now I am not guilty of it’ cannot be true. Similarly, if I am not guilty of an offense, then I am innocent of it. And ‘I was guilty of that offense, but now I am innocent of it’ cannot be true (again, as long as it is some particular misdeed that is in question).

One could contest these claims. Matheson does not consider them. Failing to do so, he is not justified in declaring that ‘The Entailment Argument…fails’ (forthcoming: 9).

1. A Challenge to Interminability

If one is blameworthy for something, then some attitude of blame toward one, for that thing, would be fitting. Matheson presents a forceful challenge to interminability when he asks: in the case of a redeemed wrongdoer, what attitude of blame could remain a fitting response?

Suppose that someone commits a minor wrong—a theft, say—for which she is to blame. Suppose that subsequently she acknowledges that she did wrong, feels remorse, accepts blame, apologizes to and compensates her victim, reforms her character such that misdeeds of this sort are no longer live options for her, and is forgiven by and reconciles with her victim. Call this offender Redeemed Wrongdoer. If blameworthiness is interminable, then some blaming attitude toward her for the theft remains fitting. What could it be?

A blaming attitude is not merely a judgment that someone is blameworthy; one who has fully forgiven and ceased to blame will normally retain such a judgment. A blaming attitude, in contrast, is one of holding an alleged offense against the one blamed. The attitude might be a form of anger, such as resentment, but it need not be. It can be an alteration in one’s thoughts, feelings, and intentions toward the one blamed, attitudes that partly constitute one’s relationship with that person.[[3]](#footnote-3) It can consist in dispositions of various sorts to speak or act against the offender.[[4]](#footnote-4) What attitude of holding against, in response to Redeemed Wrongdoer for her offense, could remain fitting? Matheson considers several possibilities and rejects them all.

The fitting response could not be an expectation of payment of moral debts incurred by committing the misdeed. Since Redeemed Wrongdoer has paid all that she owes, it would not be fitting to expect her to pay more. Nor, Matheson argues, could it be an attitude of condemnatory disappointment. Redeemed Wrongdoer is worthy of hope that she will henceforth live up to relevant normative standards or ideals. And ‘once a person is again a worthy candidate for others to have normative hope in, it seems that condemnatory disappointment is no longer a fitting…response’ (forthcoming 18). Nor would it be fitting to distrust Redeemed Wrongdoer because of her past offense, for she has shown that she is now trustworthy. And since these milder forms of holding against would be unfitting, he maintains, indignation would be as well.

Suppose that although Redeemed Wrongdoer and her victim have patched things up, *you* haven’t confronted her about the offense. Despite knowing of her redemption, you have something to say to her. Should the opportunity arise, you intend to let her know, in no uncertain terms, what you think of what she did. Should you encounter other interested parties who are unaware of her past offense, you intend to tell them about it. Until you get satisfaction, you are not prepared to go on in your relationship with Redeemed Wrongdoer as if she never committed the offense. Something remains to be resolved in your relationship with her. It would seem that you still hold the offense against her, despite knowing of the subsequent events. And it does not seem to me that your attitude need be unfitting.

Attitudes of blame are relational, in that whether they are fitting can (and often does) depend on the nature of relationships between the one blaming, the one blamed, the victim, and perhaps others (one’s audience, for example). A fitting response by me to mistreatment of a close family member might well not be one that would be fitting were I responding to similar mistreatment of an unknown someone long ago and far away (even if I am equally well informed about the two incidents).[[5]](#footnote-5) In the case of Redeemed Wrongdoer, it might be unfitting for the victim, having forgiven and reconciled with her, to have the attitude that I suggest you might have. But that does not imply that it is unfitting for you to have that attitude.

Might it be objected that if the offender has not patched things up with you, then she is not, after all, fully redeemed?[[6]](#footnote-6) Redemption does not require that one have squared things with everyone who might blame one. In any case, one’s worthiness of blame for a given offense does not hinge on there actually being someone in a position to respond with fitting blame. If there could be someone in such a position, then one is blameworthy for that offense. If interminability is correct, then forever there could be.

Matheson has in several respects misconstrued interminability, and he has failed to blunt the force of several considerations that favor it. Although he has raised a forceful challenge to interminability, the challenge can be met. Blameworthiness, we may reasonably believe, is interminable.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**References**

Bennett, C. (2018) ‘The Alteration Thesis: Forgiveness as a Normative Power’, *Philosophy &*

*Public Affairs*, 46: 207-33.

Clarke, R. (2022) ‘Still Guilty’, *Philosophical Studies*, 179: 2579-96.

Fritz, K.G. and D.J. Miller (2022) ‘A Standing Asymmetry between Blame and Forgiveness’,

*Ethics*, 132: 759-86.

Khoury, A. and B. Matheson (2018) ‘Is Blameworthiness Forever?’, *Journal of the American*

*Philosophical Association*, 8: 700-20.

Matheson, B. (forthcoming) ‘Blameworthiness is Terminable’, *Philosophical Quarterly*.

Scanlon, T.M. (2008) *Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, Blame*. Cambridge, MA:

Harvard University Press.

Sher, G. (2006) *In Praise of Blame*. New York: OUP.

Warmke, B. (2016) ‘The Normative Significance of Forgiveness’, *Australasian Journal of*

*Philosophy*, 94: 687-703.

*Florida State University, USA*

1. Matheson holds that some properties instantiated by us are interminable, by which he means instantiated by us forever (forthcoming: 3). However, if death is annihilation (and if only existing things instantiate properties), then he is mistaken on this point; for any property that anyone of us instantiates, someday it will no longer be the case that that person instantiates that property. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In forgiving, you can change the normative landscape, cancelling certain obligations that the one who wronged you acquired in committing that offense, waiving your rights to demand fulfillment of these obligations. For views of forgiveness as a normative power, see Warmke (2016), Bennett (2018), and Fritz and Miller, (2022). An interminability theorist can accept such a view; she simply denies that the power extends to rendering unfitting any and every subsequent blaming attitude (for the offense in question) by any- and everyone. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Scanlon (2008: ch. 4) sets out an account of blame on which attitudes of this sort can be instances of blame. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Sher (2006: ch. 6) proposes that such dispositions are commonly partly constitutive of blame. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Scanlon’s account (2008: ch. 4), on which blame is a response to a perceived impairment of relations, provides an explanation of why blame is relational in this respect; but one need not embrace Scanlon’s view to accept the point here. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A referee for this journal suggested this objection. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Thanks to Ben Matheson and two referees for this journal for their comments on earlier versions of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)