**Still Guilty**

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Abstract: According to what may be called PERMANENT, blameworthiness is forever: once you are blameworthy for something, you are always blameworthy for it. Here a prima facie case for this view is set out, and the view is defended from two lines of attack. On one, you are no longer blameworthy for a past offense if, despite being the person who committed it, you no longer have any of the pertinent psychological states you had at the time of the misdeed. On the other, you can cease to be blameworthy if you sufficiently experience guilt or remorse, suffer enough punishment, or are forgiven for your misdeed. Although several points made in support of the second challenge are accepted, they are entirely consistent with PERMANENT. Neither line of attack, as so far presented, undermines the plausibility of this view stemming from the prima facie case.

Suppose that you do something for which you are blameworthy. For how long will you be blameworthy for that thing? On one view of the matter, which may be called PERMANENT, the answer is, “Forever.” Once you are blameworthy for something, you are always blameworthy for it.[[1]](#footnote-1) Even if blame by this or that person can cease to be appropriate—perhaps because that person has blamed you enough—and even if, at some point, all things considered no one should blame you any longer, you remain worthy of blame; some possible instance of blame of you, by someone, for that offense would be fitting.

Not everyone agrees. As some see it, blameworthiness for a misdeed can be extinguished. Two quite different rationales for this view have been advanced. On one, you are no longer blameworthy for a past offense if, despite being the person who committed it, you no longer have any of the pertinent psychological states you had at the time of the misdeed, such as those that motivated your conduct then. On the other, you can cease to be blameworthy if you sufficiently experience guilt or remorse, suffer enough punishment, or are forgiven for your misdeed.

I am not persuaded by arguments that have been advanced for either of these claims. I set out here a prima facie case for PERMANENT. I then take up and respond to the two indicated lines of argument. The first is marred by confusion concerning the kind of being that can be blameworthy; as well, it relies on a principle that, if death is annihilation, leaves blameless (that is, not worthy of any blame for anything) the worst villains of the past. The second has more going for it. An offender’s feeling of guilt or a wronged person’s resentment can become unreasonable, perhaps unfitting, if it persists unabated; perhaps it can come to pass that, all things considered, no one should blame a certain offender any longer. However, these points are consistent with PERMANENT; they can be accepted by its proponents. Moreover, as commonly formulated, this second line, too, has the unwanted implication that the no-longer-existing dead are blameless.

Some preliminary remarks will clarify the discussion to follow. First, the blameworthiness in question here is worthiness of *moral* blame. Being worthy of blame of this kind for something is a way of being *morally* responsible for that thing. Thus, it is not causal responsibility or criminal responsibility that is at issue.

Some writers distinguish two, three, or many kinds, varieties, or faces of moral responsibility.[[2]](#footnote-2) Most recognize a kind one’s bearing which can render one a worthy object of, among other things, reactive emotions such as guilt, resentment, and indignation. I take the blameworthiness at issue here to include worthiness of responses such as these.[[3]](#footnote-3)

No specific view of what blame of the relevant kind comes to will be presumed. I do maintain that it suffices to blame someone that one has a certain kind of psychological attitude—a blaming attitude—toward that person. The attitude need never be expressed in any way; one who has such an attitude but engages in no conduct expressing it nevertheless blames. It thus suffices to be blameworthy that one is worthy of being the object of some such attitude.

Often it is appropriate to express to someone who is blameworthy one’s blame of her. It might sometimes be appropriate even to do so with the aim of bringing the offender to recognize her wrongdoing and feel guilty for it. But there need not in every case be anyone whose business it is to do so. And it need not even be possible to do such a thing; the offender might be long dead. The impossibility of guilting Pol Pot in this way has no bearing on the fittingness of our blame of him.

Blaming attitudes are multifarious. They include reactive emotions that can be strongly felt, but blame (of the kind at issue) for a minor offense need not be. And our blame of historical figures for their crimes, even when we recognize these to be immense, is often quite calm. Further, blame can persist in a dormant state for years, for most of its duration involving no affect at all. As can many psychological attitudes, blame can be a standing state that is only occasionally occurrent.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Blaming attitudes are intentional states: each is *about* something or other. I accept the widely held view that blame appraises the one blamed as possessing a certain evaluative property, and that blame is fitting just in case its appraisal is correct. I rely on no particular claim concerning what blame’s appraisal comes to. I shall, however, argue against two views of it, namely, that blame attributes to the blamed person possession (at the time the blame occurs) of certain psychological states connected to those possessed at the time of the offense, and that blame represents the one blamed as (at the time the blame occurs) deserving to suffer. Blaming attitudes, I argue, can be fitting even if the blamed person lacks, at the time she is blamed, the indicated psychological states and even if, at that time, she deserves no further suffering for the offense in question.

It bears emphasizing that attitudinal blame that is fitting when one is blameworthy in the relevant respect is not simply a judgment that there is a blemish, demerit, or debit on one’s moral record or ledger. In blaming someone for something, in the sense at issue here, you hold that thing against her. Having fully forgiven a wrongdoer, you might no longer hold her offense against her despite continuing to accept the judgment about her record. Angry indignation is one way of holding something against someone, but it is not the only way.

Given this view of the blame of which a blameworthy person is worthy, PERMANENT is far from a trivial thesis. In contrast, if the blame at issue *were* simply a judgment that there is a negative mark on an agent’s record, and one were worthy of such a judgment just in case it would be true, then, assuming (as would seem to be the case) that the marks were indelible, PERMANENT would be secured.[[5]](#footnote-5) With the relevant blame construed as indicated here, PERMANENT makes a significant claim.

Finally, note that PERMANENT does not make the (plainly false) claim that once one is blameworthy for a given offense, one forever merits sanction or punishment for that offense. A blaming attitude is not a sanction, and having such an attitude is not punishing the one who is blamed.[[6]](#footnote-6) Indeed, the expression of blame need not be, and commonly is not, a sanction or a punishment. We do not sanction or punish the long-dead for their long-ago misdeeds when we express to one another our blame of them.

1. A Prima Facie Case for PERMANENT

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). On completing one’s sentence or being pardoned, one might owe nothing more for one’s offense, but one is not therein exculpated. Similarly, those who atone or are forgiven for their moral offenses remain guilty of having committed them. One might *feel* all of the guilt or remorse that one deserves to feel, and one might be forgiven by all whom one wronged in the offense; but nothing that anyone does can exculpate the guilty.[[7]](#footnote-7)

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.

This I take to be a prima facie case for PERMANENT. Blame, here, is to be understood as indicated in my preliminary remarks. It suffices to blame someone that one has a blaming attitude toward that person, and it suffices to be blameworthy that one is worthy of being the object of such an attitude. If the blameworthy remain forever worthy of being objects of blaming attitudes, that suffices for the truth of PERMANENT.

I shall not say more in direct support of this thesis. My strategy is largely defensive: to respond to the two lines of challenge indicated in the introduction. I argue that neither, as it stands, undermines the plausibility of PERMANENT lent to it by this prima facie case.

1. Persons and Their Stages

Andrew Khoury and Benjamin Matheson reject PERMANENT. An agent, they argue, can cease to be blameworthy for a past offense for which she was previously to blame. Praiseworthiness, too, can be extinguished. And “this applies to moral responsibility in general, given that moral responsibility is normally taken as the extent to which one is praiseworthy or blameworthy” (2018, p. 223). You can become no longer responsible for past conduct of yours for which you were once to blame. You did it, and when you did you were blameworthy for doing it, but you are not now responsible for doing it.

The authors formulate their key claims, they say, “in a way that naturally accords with a four-dimensionalist ontology in which the subject of an attribution of blameworthiness is a person at a time” (2018, p. 207). Throughout the paper they consider whether “*S* at [time] *T*,” “Hitler in 2018,” and “Leon-530” (Leon at 530 years after his birth) are blameworthy for various things done by *S*, Hitler, and Leon, respectively, at earlier times. *S* at *T*, they say is “a time-slice of *S*” (208); and Leon-30 (Leon at 30 years after his birth) and Leon-530 are “two stages of Leon” (214).[[8]](#footnote-8)

There is confusion here. On a four-dimensionalist view that takes persons to be space-time “worms” having temporal parts, it is the *worms*, not their proper temporal parts, that are blameworthy for their misdeeds. For the proper parts are not persons, and things that are not persons cannot be blameworthy in the sense at issue. Granted, a person will be blameworthy in virtue of the possession of certain properties by some of its proper parts; but the properties that these parts individually possess will not include that of being blameworthy.[[9]](#footnote-9)

One might hold that a person just *is* a stage, an instantaneous temporal part of some perduring thing; none of us, then, exists for longer than an instant. But this is not Khoury and Matheson’s view. They take personal identity to be numerical sameness (2018, p. 209). And they allow that there can be a person *A* at time *t*1 and a person *B* at (later) *t*2 such that *A* is personally identical with *B*. The thing that would be personally self-identical here is a person that exists at (at least) two different times, not two person-stages existing at different times; plainly, the latter are non-identical.

Khoury and Matheson say that they intend their argument to be neutral on whether persisting persons perdure (with temporal parts present at different times) or, instead, endure (being wholly present whenever they exist). They suggest that for the pertinent claims,

rather than attaching the temporal index to the subject one may hold that the temporal index attaches to the predicate [yielding expressions such as ‘is blameworthy-at-*t*’]…. Alternatively, one may hold that instantiation itself is temporal [‘is-at-*t*’], or appeal to a temporal sentential operator [‘It has been (or will be) the case that’]. (2018, p. 207)

But the remark leaves the confusion in place. For on their preferred version of four-dimensionalism, the subjects of predications of blameworthiness should not be understood to be temporally indexed stages; it is persons, and not their proper parts, that are blameworthy.

The confusion is avoidable. Whichever metaphysics of persistence we adopt, we can intelligibly ask Khoury and Matheson’s question. Can blameworthiness diminish and be extinguished over time? If so, under what conditions does it do so?

1. What Blame Attributes

Khoury and Matheson argue that blameworthiness diminishes, and is eventually extinguished, as the offender ceases to have psychological states directly connected to pertinent states she possessed at the time of her offense. These might include beliefs, desires, and intentions on the basis of which she acted then. Perhaps they include as well memories of performing that past deed. The notion of connection here is that characterized by Derek Parfit (1984, pp. 205-206). In the case of beliefs, desires, and intentions, direct connection is simply continuation. In the case of memories, it is a matter of matching in content and being caused, in the right way, by one’s past experiences. Hence, as you lose the states that motivated a past action for which you were blameworthy, and as you forget having performed that action, you become less blameworthy for it, and you can eventually cease altogether to be blameworthy for it. (As they observe, your identity with the offender might survive such changes.) Indeed, as Khoury and Matheson see it, you can cease altogether to be responsible for a past offense that you committed.

In favor of this view, they offer two examples and a theoretical claim. The first case involves an agent, Brian, who commits a misdeed for which he is, at the time of commission, blameworthy. He subsequently suffers severe brain damage, which leaves him without the capacities required for moral agency. Since no nonmoral agent can be blameworthy, they say, Brian is no longer blameworthy for his past offense. In the second case, Leon has drunk water from a well that confers great longevity. At the age of 30 he commits a mass murder for which he is to blame. Half a millennium later, though psychologically and biologically continuous with his younger self, he has the character of a moral saint, with none of the distinctive psychological features he had at the time of the killing and no memory of having committed that deed. At this later time, Khoury and Matheson contend, Leon is no longer blameworthy for his murders.

In support of the recommended judgment about Brian, Khoury and Matheson point out that only a moral agent can be blameworthy. But there are two ways to understand this claim. It might say that one can be (non-derivatively) blameworthy for what one does only if one is a moral agent at the time of doing it. (The parenthetical qualification is needed to allow for derivative responsibility for misdeeds committed, for example, after one has rendered oneself morally incompetent with the purpose of committing them.) On this reading, the claim provides no support for the intended judgment about Brian, for it is assumed that he had the requisite capacities at the time of his offense. A reading on which the claim *will* provide such support has it that one can be blameworthy at time *t* only if one has, at *t*, the capacities required for moral agency. But Khoury and Matheson provide no argument in support of the claim so understood. And it bears noting that on this second reading, the claim would leave all of the dead blameless, on the assumption that they no longer exist, for then they no longer possess the required capacities. (I say more on this point shortly.)

Leon, in his old age, remains a moral agent. Even if, all things considered, no one should any longer blame him, why think that he is no longer worthy of blame—or even responsible—for the murders he committed? Khoury and Matheson offer a principle concerning the nature of blame, and worthiness of it, to support their judgment. Blame, they say, has intentional content. In particular:

the intentional content of blame involves the attribution of a flaw to the subject. That is, blaming involves thinking or representing the subject to have a flaw. And a necessary condition of the subject being a worthy target of blame is the truth of this thought or accuracy of this representation. (2018, p. 222)

Leon would remain blameworthy only if he were flawed. But, they say, he is not.

Leon has committed mass murder. (Khoury and Matheson agree.) That is a pretty big flaw. Leon acquired it when he committed the offense, and he retains it 500 years later, however oblivious to that fact he has become. Similarly, in his diminished state, Brian has a flaw, that of having committed an unexcused wrong. He acquired it as soon as he committed the wrongful act, and he retains it in his diminished state.

A more specific thesis about blame would be required to serve Khoury and Matheson’s purpose. One that would do is that blame attributes to the blamed person possession, at the time of blaming, of flawed attitudes directly connected to those alleged to have motivated the misdeed in question (which might lie in the past). Apparently Khoury and Matheson have something of this sort in mind; they say, “diachronic blameworthiness [blameworthiness at a later time for an earlier misdeed] is a function of the extent to which the later person is distinctively psychologically connected, in the relevant way, to the author of the act” (2018, p. 216). In his diminished state, Brian has none of the psychological states that moved him to commit his offense. In his old age, Leon has no attitude that moved him when he carried out his killings. Hence, on this view of its content, blame of these agents at these subsequent times would be inaccurate. The agents would then not be worthy of such blame.

So formulated, the claim stands in need of support. Worse, it has an incredible consequence.[[10]](#footnote-10) Death, if it is annihilation, extinguishes all of one’s psychological attitudes. The claim in question then implies that death likewise extinguishes blameworthiness. But in blaming the villains of the past, we do not represent them as now having bad attitudes—we are not so confused—and we do not always misrepresent them. Our blame of them is not always unfitting. They have not ceased to be worthy of blame.

Khoury and Matheson insist that their view does not “conflict with the coherence of posthumous blame” (2018, p. 209). But what they proceed to accept is not posthumous blame but, rather, posthumous judgments of past blameworthiness. They say:

For example, assuming that Hitler met the conditions of blameworthiness, it is true now and forever that Hitler in early 1945 is blameworthy, for he existed then and instantiated the properties that ground blameworthiness. The referent of the subject of the attribution is Hitler as he existed in early 1945. But Hitler in 2018 [the publication year of their paper] is no more blameworthy than the present king of France is bald. Thus, when *T* refers to a time at which *S* does not exist then the description ‘*S* at *T*’ fails to secure reference, and hence any statement of the form ‘*S* at *T* is blameworthy’ is not true. (209)

Note, first, that blaming is not the same thing as attributing blameworthiness. One can do the latter without doing the former; one might no longer blame someone whom one has forgiven, without giving up the judgment that the offender is to blame. Here Khoury and Matheson discuss not posthumous blame but posthumous judgments of blameworthiness.

Further, they do not accept that one can be posthumously worthy of blame. If we bracket the confused suggestion that it is *stages* of persons, and not *persons*, who are blameworthy, their claims come to the following. It is true that Hitler *was* blameworthy for his atrocious deeds, but it is false that he *is* blameworthy for them. We can correctly attribute past blameworthiness to him, but present-tense attribution of blameworthiness to him is false. I maintain that this claim is simply mistaken. Our current blame of Hitler can be entirely fitting. He need not exist now, or now possess any capacities or psychological states, for that to be so.

On an eternalist view of time (which, given their preferred view of persistence, Khoury and Matheson would seem to favor), Hitler does exist—not now (if death is annihilation), but back then. Hence there is no lack of referent of his name. (Presentists, too, I would think, will want to allow reference to the once-but-no-longer-existing.) The question, then, is what can be truly predicated of him. One thing that we can truly say is that he is dead. We can truly say, as well, that he is the subject of numerous biographies and the object of many of our attitudes. Some of our attitudes toward him are fitting; our true beliefs about him are. If our blame of him can be fitting, he is blameworthy. He need not exist now for any of this to be so.[[11]](#footnote-11)

What is at issue with a present-tense attribution of blameworthiness is the normative status of possible current attitudes and behavior toward someone, where this status is determined by possession of properties by that person now or in the past. Hitler’s past possession of certain properties provides the relevant normative status for blame of him now and henceforth. In blaming him now, we need make no mistake about his current attitudes or capacities, and the fittingness of our blame does not depend on any such thing.

There might be no point in blaming Brian, and Leon’s later saintly character and complete amnesia of his past wickedness might provide good reasons not to blame him in his old age.[[12]](#footnote-12) It might be that all things considered, no one should blame either of these agents. But blame can be fitting even when there is no point to it, and even when all things considered no one should blame. Neither of these considerations, then, shows that these agents have ceased to be blameworthy.

1. Desert of Suffering

A quite different, and more commonly advanced, rationale against PERMANENT is the idea that one can become less blameworthy for some misdeed, and even cease altogether to be blameworthy for it, by suffering enough (and in the right way) for what one has done, or by being forgiven by those one has wronged. Andreas Carlsson writes:

There seem to be certain things a victim or a wrongdoer can feel or do that might change the wrongdoer’s status as blameworthy. A wrongdoer might experience guilt, atone, apologize, and make reparations. A victim might forgive. Such actions and emotions seem to be reasons for why the victim should stop feeling resentment, or at least for resentment to diminish and for why the wrongdoer should stop feeling guilt for their action, or at least for guilt to diminish. Moreover, these reasons seem relevant to the agent’s blameworthiness, and not merely to the overall justification of continued blame. (2022, p. 176)

Carlsson takes this consideration to count against any view on which one is blameworthy just in case some blaming attitude toward one would be correct, the correctness of such an attitude is correctness of its content, and the content of blaming attitudes is such that, if correct, it remains forever so.[[13]](#footnote-13) He proposes, instead, that “for S to be blameworthy for X just is for S to deserve guilt for X” (2017, p. 104). “Guilt” here is the *feeling* of guilt, and, Carlsson observes, “to feel guilty is to suffer” (91). As a wrongdoer can come to deserve less suffering of guilt over time, and even come not to deserve to feel guilt any longer, her blameworthiness can diminish and eventually be extinguished.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Douglas Portmore presents the same feature as an advantage of his view. “To be blameworthy,” he holds, “is just to be someone whom it is fitting to blame, where [blame’s] fittingness is purely a matter of the accuracy of its representations” (2022, p. 61). Blame represents the blamed person as, among other things, “not having suffered all the guilt, regret, and remorse that she deserves to suffer in recognition that she has violated [a] legitimate demand” (50). As an offender feels guilt, regret, and remorse for her misdeed, the remaining suffering of these feelings that she deserves is diminished, and “after a sufficient amount of self-reproach, it ceases to be appropriate to feel guilt anymore” (2019, p. 416). Blame is then no longer fitting—its representation is no longer accurate—and the agent is thus no longer blameworthy for the past deed.

Several other accounts, though not advertising the fact, have a similar implication (given some reasonable assumptions). On Gideon Rosen’s (2015) “alethic conception of responsibility,” to be blameworthy for something is to be an appropriate object of resentment or indignation for that thing. Such a reactive emotion is said to be appropriate just in case the thoughts implicit in it are true. One of the thoughts implicit in resentment and indignation, Rosen maintains, is retributive: it is the thought that the blamed person deserves to suffer for what she has done. Assuming (as seems evident) that one might suffer all that one deserves for some offense, further resentment or indignation can become inappropriate, and one can thus cease to be blameworthy for the past misdeed. Further, Rosen stipulates that “to say that *X* is morally responsible for *A* is to say that *X* is either morally praiseworthy or blameworthy for *A*” (2015, p. 66). Since, on ceasing to be blameworthy for an offense one would not become praiseworthy for it, one would, given this stipulation, cease to be responsible for it.

A. P. Duggan maintains that “blameworthiness implies guiltworthiness” (2018, p. 297); “an agent is morally responsible in a liability sense for a transgression just in case s/he deserves to feel moral guilt for that transgression (307). If one can feel all of the guilt that one deserves to feel for a given offense, the view has it that one then ceases to be blameworthy for it.[[15]](#footnote-15)

1. Paying One’s Debt

Herbert Morris writes: “When we think of what it is to feel guilty…we think not only of painful feelings but of something that is owed; and pain is somehow connected with paying what one owes” (1976, p. 90). It might be thought that in committing an offense for which one is to blame, one thereby incurs such a debt, one payable in the currency of suffering of one kind or another. If one is, further, said to be blameworthy just to the extent that the debt remains unpaid, we get a Debt Model of blameworthiness. On this view, undergoing the owed suffering pays down one’s debt and can eventually pay it off. It might be allowed, as well, that the debt can be cancelled by forgiveness. Once one is free of debt incurred by commission of the misdeed—either by having paid it off or by having had it cancelled—one is no longer blameworthy for the offense.

Stated so bluntly, a Debt Model will, I suspect, find few takers (though Portmore quotes the passage from Morris without objection).[[16]](#footnote-16) It is notable, though, that on the views under consideration, blameworthiness would follow the same trajectory as it does on a Debt Model: it could diminish and be extinguished, due to the same thing, the wrongdoer’s suffering.

Taking blameworthiness to entail desert of *punishment*, and feelings of guilt or acts of atonement to be self-punishment, would yield a Punishment Model, on which blameworthiness would again follow this same trajectory. For as one received more punishment (from oneself or from others), the remaining punishment that one deserved would diminish, and one could eventually deserve no more. Indeed, a popular conception connects deserved punishment to debt; having completed one’s sentence, it is often said, one has paid one’s debt to society.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Rosen sometimes (e.g., at 2015, p. 84) characterizes what he thinks the blameworthy deserve as suffering from punitive or retributive sanctions. But I do not see that any of these theorists regard feelings of guilt as self-punishment, and it would be a mistake to do so. Punishment is either an act of punishing or some condition deliberately brought about by such an act. But one can suffer a feeling of guilt without having performed any such act (and, indeed, without anyone’s having done so). Likewise, one can atone without having a self-punitive aim.

Blameworthiness for an offense is more closely analogous to what is determined at the guilt phase of a trial than to what is determined at the sentencing phase. An offender who has served her sentence is no less guilty of her crime than she was when she committed it, as is one who has been pardoned. Though they may owe no further debt to society, and deserve no further punishment, they have not been exculpated.

Carlsson accepts that *being guilty* is a matter of having done wrong while satisfying sufficient conditions for responsibility. Being guilty of an offense will then be forever. He observes that we sometimes use ‘blameworthiness’ to refer to this status. However, he says,

“what gives the debate about moral blameworthiness its urgency is the question of whether our practices of feeling and expressing blame are appropriate at a particular time” (2022, p. 177). It is blameworthiness in the sense of being an appropriate object of attitudinal and behavioral blame, and not in the sense of being guilty of wrongdoing, that he claims to be diminishable and extinguishable.

Blameworthiness in the relevant sense can diminish and be extinguished, Carlsson maintains, because it entails desert of suffering. (The other writers discussed in section 4 agree.) I deny the alleged entailment. For one thing, if death is annihilation, the dead no longer deserve to suffer; but they did not cease to be blameworthy upon dying, even if they ceased to exist. Blaming attitudes toward the dead, and the expression of such attitudes, can be fitting. I expand on this point in section 7, after first considering a positive analogue of blame.

1. An Asymmetry

It is noteworthy that there is little attraction to a view of praiseworthiness that parallels a Debt or a Punishment Model of blameworthiness. Although one individual might praise another disproportionately for some good deed, it is not as though at some point we must all cease our praise on pain of giving more enjoyment or satisfaction than is deserved. We may fittingly praise Harriet Tubman till kingdom come, without regard to how much enjoyment she might have felt from being praised during her lifetime. Being praiseworthy is not having a credit due to one, such that having received it in full one ceases to be praiseworthy; nor is it being deserving of some quantum of good feeling in return for the good deed, having received which one ceases to deserve any more. Praiseworthiness does not follow a trajectory parallel to that of blameworthiness on these models. Once praiseworthy, always praiseworthy (for the deed in question); praiseworthiness for a given good deed is forever.

Of course, there are asymmetries between blameworthiness and praiseworthiness. For one thing, as is often observed, while blame can be well understood as an attitude as well as a kind of behavior, praise cannot. An act of moral praise expresses an attitude, but ‘praise’ does not name it; ‘moral credit’ might do better.[[18]](#footnote-18) But the views of blameworthiness in question imply an asymmetry between attitudinal blame and the attitude of moral credit. When one is worthy of the latter for a good deed, the credit of which one is worthy is not diminished by one’s enjoyment of receiving it.

A further asymmetry concerns gratuitous attitudes. To have an attitude of moral credit toward someone who in fact has done no one any favor is to have an unfitting attitude toward that person, but the attitude is merely gratuitous. It is not that the person deserves *not* to be the object of it. In contrast, to blame someone for a wrong that she did not commit is to have an attitude toward that person that is not merely gratuitous; it is not only something that this individual does not deserve, but something that she deserves *not* to be the object of. Gratuitous moral credit is not an injustice to the object of that attitude; undeserved blame is.[[19]](#footnote-19)

A view of blameworthiness as extinguishable by suffering or forgiveness implies a further asymmetry. One’s suffering for what one has done, or one’s having been forgiven, can diminish or eliminate one’s blameworthiness, whereas one’s enjoyment of moral credit cannot diminish one’s praiseworthiness. (Note that this further asymmetry is not simply an extension of the second one; praising when praise has already been enjoyed is not risking gratuity, if the object was praiseworthy to begin with.)

Surprisingly, Portmore suggests a view of the positive analogue of blame (what I have called moral credit) on which its fittingness *would* follow a trajectory parallel to that which he attributes to the fittingness of blame. In having this positive attitude toward someone, he proposes, one represents her as, among other things, “not having felt all the pride that she deserves to feel in the recognition that she has done what she ought to have done” (2022, p. 50, n. 4). Once an agent has felt sufficient pride for her good deed, any further praising attitude toward her for that act will be unfitting. But Portmore is surely mistaken here. If we now have toward Tubman the attitude that is given expression in moral praise, it is utterly irrelevant to the fittingness of that attitude how much pride she felt for her deeds.

1. The Dead

I observed in section 3 that Khoury and Matheson deny that one can be worthy of posthumous blame, if death is annihilation. The writers now under consideration appear committed to the same thing.

If the dead no longer exist, they are no longer capable of feeling guilt or experiencing any form of suffering. They then no longer deserve to undergo those experiences. One who deserves to feel guilt has a reason to feel guilty; one who deserves to experience suffering has a reason to experience—or a reason to bring it about that she experience, or a reason to permit it to be brought about that she experience—that suffering. But the no-longer-existing dead have no such reasons. Hence, they no longer deserve to suffer.

Then, given the view that one is blameworthy only if one deserves to experience some form of suffering for what one has done (and our assumption about death), it would follow that the dead are not blameworthy for anything. Our blame of them would in every case be unfitting.

Evidently it is not. Many of the dead are blameworthy for many things. Our blaming attitudes toward them are sometimes fitting; and that suffices for their being blameworthy.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Note that Portmore’s way of articulating the content of blame does not evade the objection. Rather than saying that blame represents the blamed person as deserving to suffer, he says that it represents her as not having suffered all that she deserves. But if the dead do not deserve *any* suffering, then they *have* suffered all that—and possibly more than—they now deserve. Blame, so construed, will no longer correctly represent any of them, and the view then implies that blame can no longer fittingly be directed at any of the dead; none will any longer be blameworthy for anything. Since blame of no-longer-living offenders is often fitting, we can infer that blame does not have the content that Portmore alleges.

At one point, as a way of accommodating blameworthiness of the dead, Portmore suggests an alternative, disjunctive content of blame, with it representing the blamed person as “not having suffered all that she deserves (or *deserved*) to suffer” for her offense (2022, p. 73 [his emphasis]). A non-disjunctive revision that would yield the desired implication is that blame represents its object as having done something in virtue of which she came to deserve suffering, and as not yet to have suffered all that, in doing that thing, she came to deserve to suffer in virtue of doing it. It can then accurately represent no-longer-existing dead offenders, and they can be blameworthy.

Young children can competently blame, but they can hardly think thoughts such as these. Portmore can agree. He favors a view of the intentionality of blaming attitudes on which having such attitudes does not require having sophisticated conceptual capacities. Just as a very young child—or a mouse, for that matter—can experience fear without having concepts of danger, threat, or harm, so, he suggests, a young child can blame without having the concepts that we deploy when we provide a linguistic interpretation of blame’s content (2022, p. 54, n. 10).

I doubt that *moral* blame is available to anyone who lacks moral concepts. That it is not provides an explanation of why, although young children can have such an attitude, infants and mice cannot. And it is worthiness of moral blame that is at issue here. Further, it is doubtful that the complicated state of affairs said by Portmore to be represented by blame can be represented without possession of fairly sophisticated concepts. The implausibility is only increased if we opt for a disjunctive formulation, or for the non-disjunctive formulation considered two paragraphs back, in order to allow for the persisting blameworthiness of the no-longer existing dead.[[21]](#footnote-21), [[22]](#footnote-22)

1. Reasonable Diminishment

Although I am not persuaded by the second line of argument against PERMANENT, several points that might be made in developing it are, I think, correct. However, they are entirely consistent with PERMANENT. They can be accepted by one who affirms that thesis. This section and the next are devoted to making this point.

It is normal, and we think often reasonable, to become less resentful over time of someone who has wronged you. Jules Coleman and Alexander Sarch illustrate:

Suppose that Megan, a ten-year-old girl, is playing with a ball in her front yard one day, when suddenly the ball rolls over into the flowerbed belonging to the neighbor, Mr. Anderson. No damage is done, but Mr. Anderson rushes over to the girl and lashes out at her, berating her excessively and inappropriately for what was only a harmless error. Megan leaves distraught and in tears. Anderson’s action is uncalled-for and warrants the full panoply of the reactive sentiments. Megan would be justified in resenting him; observers would be justified in feeling indignation; and Anderson himself, upon even modest reflection, should be pained by suitable feelings of guilt, even remorse.

Thirty years on, however, (and probably long before then) we should expect matters to have changed substantially. Even supposing that Anderson never apologized, atoned, or sought to make matters right with Megan, it would nevertheless be unreasonable for Megan, now forty years old and (let us imagine) with a family of her own, to feel anything like the same resentment toward him that would have been appropriate when the wounds were still fresh. By this time it is reasonable to expect that Megan would have gotten over, or largely over, what in her youth was no doubt a painful and possibly even traumatic experience. (2012, p. 107)

The fading of emotion in this way is known as accommodation. The phenomenon has been much-discussed, particularly with respect to grief.[[23]](#footnote-23) The death of a loved one may be no less a loss a decade later. But it is normal, and we think reasonable, for the emotion of grief to change over time, becoming less intense if not expiring altogether.

Accommodation occurs on the side of the subject of the emotion. But in the case of the feeling of guilt, subject and object are one. If on calming down Anderson repented his outburst, he might have felt quite guilty. It would be normal, and reasonable, for him to feel less intense guilt, if any at all, when he recalls the incident thirty years later. But just as Megan’s accommodation gives us no reason to think that Anderson has become less blameworthy, so, I contend, his own accommodation gives us no such reason.

The reasonable diminishment of a wronged person’s resentment does not imply that blame by others must diminish if it is to be fitting. The reasonable diminishment of feelings of guilt likewise lacks that implication. In neither case, then, is it implied that the offender has become less blameworthy.

There is disagreement about how to understand the reasonable diminishment of emotions. On one view, diminished grief over time is unfitting, since grief attributes loss, and the loss may remain as great as it was upon the death of the loved one. But having grieved for some time, it can be reasonable to feel an unfitting emotion (less intense grief) in response to the loss. An alternative, advanced by Oded Na’aman (2021), provides a way to see the less intense emotion as fitting even though its object (the loss that one grieves) remains unaltered.

The fittingness or correctness of an emotion is generally recognized to have at least two aspects, shape and size. To be fitting with respect to shape, the emotion must attribute to its object an evaluative property that the object actually has. To be fitting with respect to size, the emotion must be neither an overreaction nor an underreaction. Blame of someone who is innocent would be unfitting with respect to shape; extreme anger at a minor offense would be unfitting with respect to size.

The diminishing intensity of an emotion felt for some time can be seen as fitting if fittingness is recognized as having a further aspect, namely, duration. Less intense grief after a period of mourning can be fitting not because the loss has diminished but because one has grieved for some time. The consideration that provides one’s reason for grief remains unchanged, but there has occurred a change in what that consideration provides a reason for. The change is due to a change in the background conditions in which that consideration provides a reason.[[24]](#footnote-24) In the context of one’s already having grieved for some time, the loss (itself unchanged) provides a reason for less intense grief.

Similarly, on such a view, it can be fitting for a victim to become less resentful, or for an offender to feel less guilty, not because there has been a diminishment of blameworthiness, but because the emotion has already been experienced for some period of time. Although the consideration that provides a fittingness-making reason to blame has not changed, that consideration now provides (to one who has for some time blamed the offender for this offense) a fittingness-making reason for diminished blame. (Third-party blame, it will be said, can likewise fittingly diminish when it is held for some period of time.)

Emotions subject to such fitting diminishment are, in Na’aman’s terms, rationally self-consuming. “Like fire, which can be the cause of its own expiration, it is part of the rational structure of certain attitudes that they consume themselves: the longer they endure the less fitting they become” (2021, p. 251).

On either of these two ways of understanding accommodation, we can see that diminishment in the intensity of blaming emotions that it is reasonable to feel toward an offender does not imply any decrease in the degree to which she is to blame. We can thus accept some of what might be thought to favor the views under consideration without taking blameworthiness to be diminished or extinguished by the suffering of the offender.

1. The Ethics of Blame

The suggestion just offered does not address how an offender’s atonement, or a victim’s forgiveness, can provide *others* with reason to blame less. I accept that these factors *can* have this effect, though I do not think that they do so by rendering the offender less blameworthy. They figure in the ethics of blame, but not in the way that the views considered in section 4 would suggest.

A wrongdoer’s suffering of guilt can evoke our sympathy and love. We are rightly wary of being taken in by false expressions of remorse, but recognizing the real deal can soften our hearts, give us hope that the agent can be counted on to do better in the future, and leave us willing to reengage in relationship with the offender.

If we are not ourselves victims, we are likely not in a position to forgive. But an offender’s remorse can provide us with reason to forswear blame, where doing so is analogous to forgiving. And just as in forgiving one does not cease to view the offender as blameworthy, so in this third-party analogue one continues to take the offender to be blameworthy for the misdeed. She is still blameworthy, but one will no longer hold her act against her.

Similarly, if those who were wronged have fully forgiven, we might take this fact to indicate that we have reason to forswear further blame. If they are right in their attitudes, we need not be disrespecting them when we ourselves cease to blame. What *they* take as warranting forgiveness *we* may take as warranting the third-party analogue. But again, just as in forgiving they have not come to view the offender as no longer blameworthy, so in following their lead we do not.

That someone is worthy of blame is one consideration bearing on whether to blame her. But it is rarely if ever the sole consideration bearing on that question; indeed, it is rarely if ever the only moral consideration. There is a meanness of spirit in undiminished blame of someone who has experienced remorse, apologized, made amends, resolved to do better, carried out that commitment, and been forgiven by her victims. What is wrong, it may be, is not that one blames someone who is no longer blameworthy, but that, though she remains to blame for the misdeed, one should no longer blame her so much.

Such considerations are good reasons to blame less or no longer to blame at all. But they do not render one not guilty, not culpable, not to blame for the prior offense.

Might proper atonement for an offense nevertheless, without exculpating, render one no longer worthy of blame, with no possible further instance of blame by anyone for that offense fitting? (The prima facie case for PERMANENT would then go wrong somewhere along the line.) Unlike simply ceasing to deserve further suffering, having properly atoned is having completed a task, one that, if left unfinished at death, remains forever unfinished. Hence a view on which it can render one no longer blameworthy need not leave all of the no-longer-existing dead blameless. Still, for atonement to have this effect, it must not merely provide reasons *not* to blame; it must leave standing no fittingness-reason *to* blame. An opponent of PEMANANENT might, then, advance an understanding of atonement, blame, and the worthiness of blame on which this can be so. I do not see that any have yet provided such an account.[[25]](#footnote-25)

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1. For commitments to this view, see Tognazzini (2010, p. 160) and Fischer (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For these counts, respectively, see Watson (2004), Shoemaker (2015), and Zimmerman (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is a matter of debate just what conditions can render one worthy of moral blame of this kind, but it is generally agreed that the following would suffice: one violated an all-things-considered moral obligation, acting freely when one did, knowing that what one was doing was morally wrong, moved by malevolent motives, and with no history of extreme deprivation or manipulation that excused one’s conduct. In discussion of cases, it will be supposed that conditions such as these are satisfied. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Theorists of emotion (e.g., Goldie [2000, pp. 12-16]) note this possibility for emotions, and some who take attitudinal blame to be emotional (e.g., Pickard [2013, p. 615] and Menges [2017, pp. 258-259]) make the same point about blame. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Zimmerman writes: “Moral appraisability has to do with that type of *inward* moral praising and blaming that constitutes making a private judgment about a person…. Someone is blameworthy if he is deserving of such blame; that is, if it is correct, or true to the fact, to judge that there is a ‘debit’ in his ‘ledger’” (1988, p. 38). Appraisability, as characterized by Zimmerman, is *not* the kind of moral responsibility at issue in the discussion here. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This is so even in the case of feeling guilty. The feeling is unpleasant, but feeling guilty is not inflicting that suffering upon oneself. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. One might say: “I used to cheat on my taxes, but I’m no longer guilty of that.” This is not a denial of guilt for the past offenses but, rather, a claim that one no longer commits similar ones. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Khoury and Matheson also say that “Leon-530 is personally identical with Leon-30” (2018, p. 215). If these are two stages, they cannot be one self-identical thing. They might instead be genidentical, two stages of one and the same person. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Tognazzini (2010) provides a good understanding of this fact; see esp. p. 157. He responds to several arguments meant to show that responsibility is incompatible with a four-dimensionalist view of persons. Khoury and Matheson apparently take the compatibility for granted. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. More than one. For example, it would seem to imply that a serial rapist could escape responsibility for his crimes by taking a pill that, as he foresees, turns him into a serial murderer thoroughly committed to respecting others’ wishes regarding sex. Carlsson (2022, p. 182) raises a similar objection to Khoury and Matheson. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Khoury and Matheson (2018, p. 205) suggest that even theorists who hold that blameworthiness is forever will want to qualify their claim, limiting the blameworthiness of an individual to the period during which that person exists. I see no need for the qualification. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. All the same, there might be a point to blaming both: one might thereby show solidarity with their victims. A further point to blaming Leon might be to bring him to recognize what he has done. However, as I observe in the text, whether there is any point to blame is not what is issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Thus, Carlsson (2022, pp. 178-180) rejects the view that blaming attitudes represent (just) that an agent has acted wrongly, with ill will, and with control sufficient for responsibility. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Coleman and Sarch consider it “a good question whether one can diminish one’s blameworthiness for a particular action by apologizing for it, atoning, making things right, and so on” (2012, p. 106). But they take no stand on the issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Brink and Nelkin reject the idea that to be blameworthy is to deserve blame. Nevertheless, they hold, blameworthiness and desert are essentially connected, in that “one who is blameworthy is also, and for the same reasons, deserving of a setback of interests or a harmful response” (forthcoming). Assuming that one who is blameworthy for a given misdeed might be harmed all that she deserves for that offense, on reaching that point she would cease to be blameworthy. However, if there can be setbacks of interest or harms that do not involve suffering, this view, unlike those described in the text, does not make blameworthiness contingent on desert of a form of suffering. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For example, at his 2019, p. 414, n. 17; and 2022, p. 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. In pronouncing sentence on the convicted murderer of nine people shot during bible study at a Charleston, South Carolina church, Judge Richard Gergel said, “The defendant will now pay for his crimes with his life” (Hawes 2019, p. 283). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Boxer (2013, p. 5) makes a similar suggestion, as do Arpaly and Schroeder (2014, pp. 159-160). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. There might be *comparative* injustice if one accords moral credit to someone who does not deserve it while also failing to accord the credit to one who deserves it. (Thanks to Neal Tognazzini for bringing this point to my attention.) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Brink and Nelkin (forthcoming) escape this criticism if (as many think) there are non-experiential harms or setbacks of interests. For then the no-longer-existing dead might remain susceptible to harm or setbacks to their interests. They can then deserve such things and, given Brink and Nelkin’s view of blameworthiness, be worthy of blame. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Compare representation by perceptual experience. There is plausibility to the claim that there can be non-conceptual perceptual representation of an object as *green*. But it is not credible that there can be such representation of something as *a green leaf attached to a Sugar or Norway Maple greater than sixty feet tall*. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. I have discussed posthumous blameworthiness on the assumption that death is annihilation. The view that blameworthiness entails desert of suffering faces a different problem if we survive in an afterlife. Francisco Franco suffered no great remorse for his crimes during his lifetime, and most of his victims never forgave him while they lived. What has occurred since? We have no clue. If he is blameworthy only if he continues to deserve to suffer, it would appear that we are unwarranted in blaming him. But we are not. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See, for example, Moller (2007), Marušić (2018), and Na’aman (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. On the idea that background conditions can affect the reason-provision of conditions that supply reasons, see Dancy 2004, pp. 38-41; Schroeder 2007, pp. 27-31; and Scanlon 2014, p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. For comments on earlier versions of this paper, my thanks to Andreas Carlsson, Doug Portmore, Neal Tognazzini, Michael Zimmerman, Andy Khoury, and Ben Matheson. I am grateful to the University Center for Human Values, Princeton University, for funding during the period when this research began. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)