**True Blame**

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Abstract: A true-emotion view of blameworthiness holds that one is blameworthy for an offense just in case one is a fitting target of a blaming emotion in response to that offense, and a blaming emotion is fitting just in case it truly represents things. Proportionality requires that fitting blame be of the right size, neither an overreaction nor an underreaction to the offense. Here it is argued that this requirement makes trouble for a true-emotion view. Instances of blaming emotions can differ in size, and can thus differ with respect to whether they are proportional, without differing in the representations that true-emotion theorists attribute to them. The option of attributing further representations to blaming emotions, with the aim of avoiding this objection, is considered and shown to raise new difficulties for the view.

Keywords: blame, blameworthiness, emotion, fittingness, proportionality, reactive attitude

1. Introduction

We sometimes angrily confront, pointedly ostracize, castigate, or denounce those we think have committed moral offenses. Conduct of this kind may be called blaming behaviour. When genuine, such conduct expresses blaming attitudes that we hold. It is attitudinal blame that is our focus here.

Many theorists identify attitudinal blame with what Peter Strawson [1962] dubbed ‘reactive attitudes’. Several, following R. Jay Wallace [1994], take it to consist, more narrowly, in resentment, indignation, or guilt. These are emotions; we may call them blaming emotions. Though there is disagreement about whether blame always takes emotional form,[[1]](#footnote-1) it is undeniable that it often does.

Instances of emotion can be appropriate or inappropriate, in the sense that their objects can merit or not merit these responses. An emotion that is appropriate in this sense is commonly said to be *fitting*. And a number of theorists maintain that blameworthiness is to be understood in terms of the fittingness of blaming emotions. Some hold:

(BF-c) to be blameworthy is to be a fitting target of a (possible) blaming emotion.[[2]](#footnote-2)

(The parenthetical modifier indicates that there need be no actual emotion felt by anyone in order for one to be blameworthy.) So stated, the view makes a claim about what being blameworthy *consists in*. A weaker claim, advanced by others, asserts a *strict equivalence*:

(BF-e) one is blameworthy just in case one is a fitting target of a (possible) blaming emotion.

Several theorists who advance one or another of these theses add a further claim about the fittingness of blaming emotions. As they see it, emotions are partly constituted by, have implicit in them, or can be correctly interpreted as including, certain representations that can be assessed as true or false—thoughts, we shall say.[[3]](#footnote-3) And as some put it,

(FT-c) for an instance of a blaming emotion to be fitting is for the thoughts in that instance to be true.

Alternatively, what is sometimes claimed is an equivalence:

(FT-e) an instance of a blaming emotion is fitting just in case the thoughts in that instance are true.

Given the construal of fittingness in terms of truth—or, alternatively, the asserted equivalence—we may call either position an *alethic* *view* of the fittingness of blaming emotions. Combined with either view of blameworthiness articulated in the preceding paragraph, the result is what may be called a *true-emotion view* of blameworthiness. (We exhibit some examples in section 2.) In its weakest form, the true-emotion view holds that one is blameworthy just in case the thoughts in some (possible) instance of a blaming emotion toward one are true.

Here we consider such a view in light of a proportionality requirement on blame. Both blameworthiness and blame come in degrees. One can be worthy of more or less severe blame, and one can be blamed more or less severely. When one is blameworthy but is blamed too severely or not severely enough, the response is an overreaction or an underreaction. An overreaction or an underreaction is an unfitting response. To be fitting, blame must be proportional to one’s blameworthiness.

It is no simple matter to say what the severity of blame comes to; moreover, the proportionality requirement on blame is complicated by several factors. We offer some suggestions on each point, though we do not venture a fully specified statement of the requirement. Still, we argue, even without such specification, it can be seen that the requirement makes trouble for FT-e. Since FT-c entails FT-e, the trouble arises for the stronger claim as well. And since a true-emotion view of blameworthiness includes one or the other of these theses, there is trouble for such a view.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Of course, alethic views of fitting emotion are not limited to those concerned with blame, and the difficulty raised here confronts such views generally. Indeed, insofar as an alethic view of fittingness seems a natural companion to a cognitivist theory of emotion—one on which the intentionality of emotion is conceived as inclusion of a truth-assessable thought—the difficulty appears to confront any such theory. Although our focus in this paper is on blame, we return briefly in closing to the broader issue.

1. Examples of True-Emotion Views

We start by exhibiting some examples of a true-emotion view. Peter Graham maintains that ‘to be blameworthy for *φ*-ing is to be such that it would be appropriate for a blame emotion to be felt toward one on account of one’s *φ*-ing’ [2014: 408]. The paradigmatic blame emotions, he says, are resentment, indignation, and guilt. Further, ‘the blame emotions are appropriately felt just in case the propositional content of those emotions is true’ [ibid.]. The content of such an emotion felt toward someone for *φ*-ing is that ‘in *φ*-ing, that person has violated a moral requirement of respect’ [ibid.]. One is blameworthy for *φ*-ing, then, just in case this thought is true. Graham calls his view ‘the true-blame-emotion conception of blameworthiness’ [ibid.: 394].

Similarly, Jada Strabbing holds that ‘an agent is blameworthy for an action if and only if a negative reactive attitude is appropriate toward her on account of it’ [2019: 3122].[[5]](#footnote-5) She cites resentment and indignation as examples of such attitudes [ibid.: 3121]. Adopting a cognitivist view of emotions, Strabbing takes them to be partly constituted by thoughts, and she takes the relevant appropriateness of these attitudes to be their fittingness. She then proposes the ‘True-Thoughts View: an emotion is fitting if and only if its constitutive thoughts are true’ [ibid.: 3124]. Thoughts partly constitutive of reactive emotions are said to represent the agent blamed, some action, and the person experiencing the emotion, and thereby to represent all of the conditions required for the agent to be blameworthy. Among the thoughts partly constitutive of your resentment of someone for *A*-ing, for example, are that in *A*-ing she expressed insufficient good will toward you and that she could have done better (could have acted from sufficient good will).

Gideon Rosen holds that to be blameworthy for *A*-ing is to be worthy of—to merit—being blamed for *A*-ing, or (equivalently) for blame for *A*-ing to be appropriate. In the ‘focal sense’, to blame someone is to resent, be indignant, or (in the reflexive case) feel guilty.[[6]](#footnote-6) Rosen advances what he calls The Alethic View of the appropriateness at issue: ‘For an emotion to be appropriate *just is* for its ingredient thoughts to be true’ [2015: 71].[[7]](#footnote-7) Hence, ‘for it to be appropriate to resent *X* for *A* *just is* for the thoughts implicit in resentment to be true of *X* and *A*’ [ibid.]. The thoughts implicit in blaming *X* for *A*-ing are said to be that *X* *A*-ed, that it was wrong for *X* to *A*, that in *A*-ing, *X* showed an objectionable pattern of concern, and that *X* deserves to suffer for *A*-ing [ibid.: 75-84].[[8]](#footnote-8) For *X* to be blameworthy for *A*-ing, then, is for these thoughts to be true.

Douglas Portmore takes blame to be an emotion, though he allows that it need not be heated or angry. To be blameworthy, he says, ‘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: 61]. An emotion’s representations can be articulated in propositional form based on facts concerning ‘what typically elicits mental states of this kind, what normally attenuates them, what their phenomenology is like, what interpretation of their representational content rings true to those who possess them, and what sorts of act tendencies and patterns of attention are generally associated with them’ [ibid.: 54]. The emotion ‘will count as accurate in its representations if and only if the associated proposition is true’ [ibid.].[[9]](#footnote-9) In blaming an agent for *A*-ing, he holds, one represents the agent as having *A*-ed, as having violated a legitimate demand in *A*-ing, and as not having suffered all of the guilt, regret, and remorse that she deserves to suffer in the recognition that she has violated this demand [ibid.: 50]. One is blameworthy, then, just in case some blaming emotion toward one truly represents these matters.

1. Shape and Size

Paradigmatic episodes of emotion are object-directed, affective, motivating attitudes. One fears a snake, grieves the loss of a loved one, or resents a friend’s betrayal of trust. A feeling of joy is pleasant; in feeling guilt one suffers. The former can move one to leap and shout, the latter to apologize and make amends.

Instances of emotion can differ from one another in any of these respects. Fear of heights and fear of spiders differ with respect to their (particular) objects.[[10]](#footnote-10) One might feel greater fear of heights than one does of spiders. The former might more strongly motivate one to avoid or escape what one fears.

An instance of emotion can be unfitting because it presents its object as having a feature that the object does not in fact have; it is then unfitting with respect to *shape* [D’Arms and Jacobson 2000: 73]. Fear of a harmless spider is an example. An instance is unfitting, as well, if it is an overreaction or an underreaction; it is then unfitting with respect to *size* [ibid.: 74]. Road rage is a common example. A fitting emotion is fitting in both of these respects.

How severely one blames someone on some occasion would, we take it, be a matter of the size of that instance of blame. Blame is fitting only when its size is right. Exactly what is required for blame’s size to be proportional is, we think, a complicated matter, but it seems evident that one relevant factor is the seriousness of the offense. If one always blames those who cut in line as severely as one blames those who commit murder, in one or another of these cases one’s blame is unfitting.

As we shall explain, it is no simple matter to say exactly what the severity of an instance of blame comes to.[[11]](#footnote-11) But the affective and motivational aspects of that attitude hardly seem irrelevant to this question. Then, since both FT-c and FT-e find blame fitting just in case its representations are true, it may be wondered how they fare in light of a requirement of proportionality.

1. Size and Truth

A true-emotion view is what might be called a *status* account, an account of the status of being blameworthy. One is blameworthy, on such a view, just in case *some* instance of blame by *someone* would (were it to be experienced) truly represent relevant facts. No particular actual instance of blame is at issue here. You might be blameworthy for a certain misdeed despite never being blamed by anyone for anything, or even if every instance of blame of you is an overreaction or an underreaction or blames you for something of which you are innocent.

Still, proponents of true-emotion views are committed to an alethic view of the fittingness of instances of blame. On even the weakest version of the view, a given instance of blame is fitting just in case it truly represents things. Since size matters for fittingness, differences in size that make for differences in fittingness will have to be reflected in differences in blame’s thoughts. How might this go?

Some of the theorists we have discussed allude to a proportionality requirement. Graham recognizes that blameworthiness comes in degrees [2014: 403, n. 23] and maintains that there are levels of blame [ibid.: 405] that are appropriate or not, depending on degree of blameworthiness. (We take Graham to mean by ‘appropriate’ what we mean by ‘fitting’.) He does not, however, discuss how an alethic view might meet this requirement. Since he takes blame to represent the blamed person’s violation of a requirement of respect, its gradability might be said to come from its representation of the seriousness or gravity of the violation. But, as we shall explain in the next section, one’s blame of someone for a given offense can diminish over time—one can come to blame less severely—without any change in what, in blaming, one thinks about the seriousness of the offense. The size of an instance of blame, then, is not solely a matter of its representation of this matter. If instances of blame of different sizes can differ with respect to whether they are proportional without differing in their representations, the proportionality of blame is not secured by the truth of its representation.

Portmore contends that his alethic account satisfies a proportionality requirement. The intensity to which one blames someone, he proposes, is a matter of the amount of guilt, regret, and remorse that one represents the blamed person as deserving to suffer [2022: 50]. And ‘someone is worthy of being blamed to extent E for having ϕ-ed if and only if blaming her to extent E for having ϕ-ed is accurate in its representations’ [ibid.: 66]. (We assume that blaming a certain *extent* and blaming to a certain *intensity* are meant to be the same.) An instance of blame, then, will be proportional provided that it truly represents the amount of deserved suffering.[[12]](#footnote-12)

However, as we shall argue, two instances of blame can differ in size without differing with respect to the amount of suffering that the blamed person is represented in them as deserving. If one of these instances would be fitting while the other would be an overreaction or an underreaction, the proportionality requirement will not have been met in the proposed way.

1. Affect, Motivation, and Representation

How affect, motivation, and thought figure in the size of an instance of emotion, and how they are related to each other, are complicated matters. Nevertheless, it is apparent that differences in affect or motivation do not always make for corresponding differences in how blaming attitudes represent the target of one’s blame. You might feel more passionate blame, and be more strongly motivated by your blame, in response to a friend who has deceived you than in response to a foreign prince for the years-ago murder of a journalist. But you need not, in blaming these agents, take the friend to have violated a demand more stringent than that which you take the prince to have violated—that would be absurd—and the suffering that, in blaming them, you represent the latter as deserving might well be much greater.

To clarify: a blaming attitude represents things, and since blame is a personal-level attitude, when your blame represents that *p*, it may be said that in having that attitude *you* represent that *p*. Now, when you blame someone, you might have *additional* attitudes that represent the same matters, but represent them differently. This possibility is realized in cases of recalcitrant blame, when, for example, one’s blame represents someone as having committed an offense while one judges that the person did no such thing. But this possibility is beside the point here. What matters is that differences in affect or motivation do not always make for corresponding differences in how blaming emotions represent their objects, and thus they need not make for differences in how, *in blaming*, the blamer represents these things.

Other examples illustrate the point. Consider:

Sue and Tim are neighbours. Both are awakened early Saturday by their mutual neighbour Al, who is clearing his driveway with his leaf blower. Sue is angry. She marches next door and gives Al what for. Tim is annoyed. He resolves not to invite Al to the upcoming poker game he is hosting.

Sue and Tim need not disagree, in the representations of Al that are involved in their respective blaming attitudes, about the seriousness of the offense, the disrespect shown by Al’s action, his ability to have done better, or what he deserves. Though they need not, in blaming Al, represent him differently, they blame him differently, perhaps because they have different temperaments.

If your child and her schoolmate commit an offense together, you might, in blaming them, represent them as deserving equal punishments, having violated equally stringent requirements, and so forth.[[13]](#footnote-13) But your blame of your child might well have greater emotional intensity and motivational force, given the difference in your relationship to the two offenders. For example, you might be moved to discipline your child but not moved to do much of anything vis a vis the other.

Differences in temperament, in one’s relationship with the offender, and in spatial or temporal distance from the offense can make for differences in affective and motivational aspects of blaming emotions without making for corresponding differences in how blameworthy one, in blaming, represents the target of one’s blame to be. This possibility should be accepted by true-emotion theorists, even if, as Portmore does, they take affect and motivation to be among the factors that figure in determining the representational content of a given instance of blame. For Portmore also includes among these factors what interpretation of blame’s representational content rings true to the blamer; and it need not ring true to you that, in blaming the friend and in blaming the prince, you take the friend to have violated a more stringent requirement than that which you take the prince to have violated, or that you take the friend to deserve to suffer more guilt, regret, and remorse than that which you take the prince to deserve.[[14]](#footnote-14)

However, in the examples discussed so far, it is not clear that we have differences in the size of blame—the severity of blame—that correspond to the differences in affect and motivation. In the first case, we might say that you blame the prince more severely than you blame the friend, despite the greater affect and motivation of your blame of the latter. And it might be that Sue does not blame Al more severely than Tim does, she just blames differently. Proponents of alethic views of the fittingness of blaming emotions might take comfort in this observation.

But a difference in the size of blame sometimes does correspond closely to a difference in degree of affect and motivation; and such a difference in size need not involve any difference in blame’s representation of the gravity of the offense or the suffering or punishment the offender deserves. Consider a case from Jules Coleman and Alexander Sarch:

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: 107]

Megan might have ceased altogether to blame Anderson, but suppose that she has not. Rather, her blame has greatly diminished. At the start it was felt with considerable intensity; now it is just the slightest thing. It then seems that she blames him less severely than she did thirty years ago.

However, at forty she need not, in blaming Anderson, represent him as less blameworthy for his outburst than she did at ten. She need not, in blaming him, take the offense to be any less serious, Anderson to have shown any less ill will, him to have been any less capable of doing better, or him to deserve any less in the way of guilt feelings. (Megan might still, in blaming him, represent him as deserving of a pained acknowledgment of his wrongdoing, which might be all that, in blaming him at the start, she took him to deserve.) The diminishment of her blame appears to be largely, if not entirely, a matter of change in its affect and motivation and not change in how it represents the indicated things.

Over time, then, blame can change in size without any evident change in the thoughts that true-emotion theorists take to be involved in blame.[[15]](#footnote-15) What should be said about the fittingness of such a change?

1. Time and Fit

Let us suppose that Megan strongly resented Anderson right after his outburst, and that thirty years later her blame of him is very mild. If the earlier emotion was fitting, is the later one unfitting, an underreaction, or has what would be a fitting response from her changed with time? Would strong resentment now be unfitting?

Different views can be taken of the matter. One is that although it is reasonable in cases like this for one’s emotional response to diminish, the diminished emotion is unfitting, and the response that was initially fitting remains so. The later emotion, on this view, is a reasonable underreaction.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Alternatively, it might be said that, not time itself, but things that happen over time commonly diminish what is fitting. For example, Coleman and Sarch suggest that among considerations that make it correct, fitting, or appropriate for Megan’s resentment to have diminished or ended after thirty years are that ‘memories fade; Megan becomes an adult and grows up both mentally and emotionally; she moves away from the neighborhood; she takes on the responsibilities of parenthood herself; and so on’ [2012: 109]. As they see it, the stronger emotion that was appropriate earlier is not appropriate later (it would be an overreaction). Proportionality of blame, on this view, would appear to be sensitive not just to the severity of the offense but also to what has happened since the time of the offense (with the relevant events not limited to the offender’s atonement).

Another view along this second line is that the duration of an emotion can change the size of that emotion that is fitting. Oded Na’aman [2020, 2021] maintains that various emotions, including anger, resentment, grief, and amusement, can fittingly diminish in intensity even when the facts that provide reasons bearing on the fittingness of these responses remain unchanged. The background condition of having experienced a certain emotion for some time can have the normative effect of changing what a reason-providing fact provides a reason for.[[17]](#footnote-17) Whereas a fact might have earlier provided a reason for severe blame, when blame has persisted for some time, that same fact may provide a reason for less severe blame. Emotions subject to such an effect are said to be *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: 251].

If the thoughts that Megan has in blaming Anderson—those partly constitutive of, implicit in, or correctly said to be the content of her blame—have not changed, then an alethic view of the fittingness of blame can agree that her diminished later blame is fitting. The trouble for the view is that Megan might have had *undiminished* later blame that also represented things just as did her earlier blame. The true-emotion theorist must then say that *either* later attitude would be fitting. But if Megan’s blame must diminish in size to remain fitting, that cannot be correct.

Indeed, a true-emotion theorist cannot maintain either that fitting blame by Megan must remain undiminished over time or that her blame must diminish in severity if it is to remain fitting. For her later response could represent things just as did her earlier response, whether it has diminished or not. The true-blame theorist must then regard it as irrelevant to the fittingness of her later blame whether it has diminished. But as the proportionality requirement observes, size matters for fittingness.

It might be objected that Megan’s blame could not have remained unchanged in its representational content unless it had diminished in size. Had its size remained unchanged over the years, it would have to have later represented the offense as more serious, or Anderson as deserving more suffering, than was earlier represented. If undiminished later blame would have been unfitting, a true-emotion view can account for this fact.[[18]](#footnote-18)

We deny the alleged necessity. Sometimes people hold grudges. One who blames longer than is fitting, or whose blame remains undiminished when fitting blame would diminish, need not (in her blaming attitude) come to represent the misdeed as increasingly serious, or the blamed person as deserving ever more suffering. The offense continues to bother her, but this continuation does not necessitate the indicated change in her blame’s representations. So things could have been with Megan. After all, blaming attitudes often remain *fittingly* undiminished in size without representing offenses as increasingly grave or offenders as deserving ever more suffering. Continuing blame of the prince for the years-ago murder might illustrate this possibility. One’s blame of him might remain as severe as ever without changing in content. Even if undiminished later blame by Megan, unlike one’s later blame of the prince, would have been unfitting, it need not have represented things differently than did her earlier blame.

In short, there is no general requirement to the effect that a persisting emotion must diminish in size over time if it is to remain unchanged in its representational content. In the absence of such a general requirement, we see no reason to think there is a special requirement of this sort in cases like Megan’s.

Alternatively, it might be objected that Megan’s blame cannot have diminished in size without changing in its representations. (Someone pressing this objection might take the later blame to be unfitting, its included thought false.) But if the thoughts in blame are just those identified by the theorists discussed in section 2, the possibility of blame that diminishes in size without changing in content seems undeniable. Indeed, it seems commonly realized when we blame for a given offense over a long period of time.

It can be granted that, as Portmore contends, correct articulation of the representational content of an instance of blame requires taking into account the affective and motivational aspects of that state. However, as Portmore acknowledges, other things must also be taken into account. And a case was made in the preceding section that differences in blame’s affect and motivation do not necessitate differences in its representation of the seriousness of the offense, the disrespect shown by the offender, her ability to have done better, or what she deserves. We may imagine that it would not ring true to Megan that, in blaming Anderson thirty years on, she takes him to have violated a much less stringent requirement, or to deserve much less, than she did in blaming him right after his outburst. She feels her blame much less strongly, and it motivates her much less. That seems to be what the lesser size of her later blame comes to.

Rosen suggests, in passing, a way in which the motivational aspect of blame can affect its fittingness, in a manner consistent with an alethic view of the latter.

In any given case of resentment or indignation, the belief-like thought in question makes reference to the desire for payback implicit in that very token of the emotion. The desire points to some more-or-less determinate sanction, and the thought is a thought to the effect that *that* desired sanction is deserved. The proposal thus links a cognitive element of the emotion—a belief-like thought—to a non-cognitive element—a desire, thereby allowing the non-cognitive element to contribute to the appropriateness conditions of the emotion. [2015: 83, n. 27]

But what matters here is the *content* of the desire, *what* is desired, not the *strength* of the desire. And it is a familiar fact that strength of desire can change without a change in what is desired. If Megan has come to desire less strongly that Anderson suffer for what he did without desiring that he suffer less, the proposal does not capture the respect in which she blames less severely. If her earlier blame was fitting when blame of that size thirty years later would be unfitting, the proposal fails to explain this fact.

Strabbing suggests two ways in which conative aspects of blame might figure in its appropriateness. She suggests, first, that although conative states partly constitutive of reactive attitudes might be relevant to whether such attitudes are *appropriate*, they are not relevant to whether these attitudes are *fitting*. Second, she suggests that such conative states might possess their own representational content. If disproportionately strong blaming attitudes are unfitting, the lack of fittingness might be due to incorrect representation by their conative constituents [2019: 3124].

The first of these suggestions cannot be right if the conative aspect of blame can affect its size, for fitting blame must be of the right size. Regarding the second suggestion, desire is indeed about something—one desires this or that—but the correctness of desire is not a matter of the truth of its content. The suggested view of the fittingness of blaming attitudes would then no longer be wholly alethic.

Further Thoughts

We have argued that, taking the representational content of blaming emotions to be as proposed by proponents of a true-emotion view, the view has trouble in cases of persisting blame over time. It cannot say either that blame must remain undiminished in severity or that it must diminish in severity if it is to remain fitting. For it might do either without a change in its representational content. In effect, the view implies that size does not matter for fittingness, when evidently it does.

An obvious strategy to deal with the problem is to take the thoughts involved in blaming emotions to include something further, something that will have changed when and only when the size of blame has changed. If later blame truly represents these further matters only when it has changed in size, its continuing fittingness might be said to require that it diminish.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Coleman and Sarch suggest that over the years following the incident with Anderson, Megan constructs a narrative of her life ‘in which the event’s significance is reduced’ [2012: 110]. She might think the severity of the offense unchanged but find it less important to her, less significant in her life as now lived. This much seems plausible. Taking up this suggestion, a true-emotion theorist might propose that a blaming emotion includes some thought about this matter. What would make severe blame unfitting thirty years after the incident would be its false representation of the (undiminished) significance of the misdeed in Megan’s life.

There are ways in which one’s blame is, in some instances, about oneself. Evidently this is so when one blames oneself; it is clearly so, as well, when one blames another for wronging oneself. However, we doubt that blame is about the importance of the offense in one’s life. It reflects one’s sense of this matter, but it is about the offense. Moreover, attributing to blaming emotions representations of this matter creates new problems for a true-emotion view.

The kind of importance at issue cannot be said to be wholly subjective. It cannot be just a matter of how much the blamer cares about the offense. A blaming attitude might be an unfitting overreaction despite truly representing that one cares a great deal about some offense if that offense is, in fact, a minor slight. Conversely, one’s blame might be an unfitting underreaction despite truly representing that one cares little about an offense if the offense is, in fact, grave. Similarly, the relevant importance cannot be just a matter of how large the offense figures in one’s own narrative of one’s life, for, again, blame that truly represents this fact might be an overreaction (or an underreaction) if one’s narrative is itself skewed.[[20]](#footnote-20)

On the other hand, to attribute to blaming emotions representations of the objective importance of offenses in the blamers’ lives risks the implication that these responses rarely correctly represent things, and thus are rarely fitting. For the objective importance of offenses in our lives is something that we are hard pressed to judge correctly even with careful consideration. (The judgment is particularly difficult if the importance of an event in one’s life can depend, in part, on future happenings.) That our blaming emotions commonly correctly represent this matter seems doubtful.

In any event, it does not appear that there is any simple proportionality of fitting blame to the objective importance in one’s life of offenses to which one responds. One’s blame of the prince for the murder of a journalist might be fittingly severe even if that offense is of little objective importance in one’s life. (The murder occurred years ago and far away, and it might be that neither the offense nor the perpetrator poses any threat to oneself or anyone with whom one is closely related.) What matters to the proportionality of severe blame in this case is how terribly wrong the crime was, not whether it is important in one’s own life. (It might be said that the great wrongness of the offense is what makes it objectively important in one’s life, but the importance seems idle in determining what blaming response is fitting.)

A similar problem would attend the proposal that blame represents an ongoing threat posed by a claim implicit in the offending act.[[21]](#footnote-21) Severe blame of Pol Pot is fitting even if no one is any longer threatened by his crimes; and if anyone remains so threatened, that fact seems not to be what renders severe blame fitting (the gravity of the crimes does that).

A different tack would be to hold that a blaming emotion includes the thought that it—itself, with its specific intentional, affective, and motivational character—is a fitting response to its object. Then only resentment, indignation, or guilt that is fitting with respect to size will include a true representation of things. But with this move the truth of the thoughts included in blaming emotions would be grounded in, and thus explained by, the fittingness of these emotions, for that fittingness will be included in any truthmaker for such thoughts. Fittingness will not then have been explicated in terms of truth. This move is thus unavailable to true-emotion theorists who endorse FT-c, for that thesis explicates the fittingness of blame in terms of its truly representing things. And the move would leave FT-e utterly uninformative. For we are told nothing about the fittingness of blame by a claim that an instance of blame is fitting just in case it is true that it is fitting.

1. Conclusion

A true-emotion view of blameworthiness holds that to be blameworthy is to be a fitting target of a blaming emotion (or that these two are equivalent), and that for a blaming emotion to be fitting is for it to truly represent things (or that these two are equivalent). Proportionality requires that fitting blame be of the right size, neither an overreaction nor an underreaction to the offense. The requirement makes trouble for a true-emotion view, since the size of blame does not seem to be just a matter of how it represents things. Instances of blame, it appears, can differ in size without differing in the relevant representations they include; and it appears that at a given time one instance can be fitting and the other not. The difference in fittingness will not then be a matter of a difference in truth value of the included representations. A true-emotion view must reject these appearances.

One strategy that might be pursued by a true-emotion theorist is to identify some further thought in blaming emotions, changes in which can account for the differences in fittingness that we have observed. We considered in section 7 two proposals of this kind. While we have not shown that none can succeed, we indicated difficulties that this strategy faces.

Alethism about the fittingness of emotion is an attractive view, explicating something that might be thought obscure in terms of something generally regarded as clear (or, at least, taking the former to be coextensive with the latter). However, insofar as proportionality figures in the fittingness of emotions such as amusement, fear, or grief, difficulties analogous to those that we have raised regarding blaming emotions appear to confront alethic views of the fittingness of these emotions as well. There is, then, reason to consider alternative conceptions of fittingness, not just of blaming emotions, but of emotions generally.[[22]](#footnote-22)

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1. Sher [2006: 88] and Scanlon [2008: 160], among others, deny that blame is always emotional. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In the next section we cite assertions of this and the subsequent named theses. In brief, BF-c is asserted by Graham, Portmore, and Rosen, BF-e by Strabbing, FT-c by Rosen, and FT-e by Graham, Portmore, and Strabbing. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Proponents commonly stress that these representations are not judgments or beliefs, for the subject of a blaming attitude need not accept them. The possibility of recalcitrant blame is thus allowed. See Graham [2014: 393], Rosen [2015: 71-2], Strabbing [2019: 3124], and Portmore [2022: 55]. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Coleman and Sarch [2012: 121-27] raise trouble for the thesis we call BF-e (and thus for BF-c), without specifically targeting, as we do, the claims FT-c or FT-e. Indeed, they aim to cast doubt on any view that takes blameworthiness to be strictly equivalent with the appropriateness of reactive attitudes, however appropriateness might be construed. Since our argument is more narrowly focused, it might succeed even if theirs does not. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Strabbing distinguishes two kinds of moral responsibility, attributability and accountability. The target of the account she offers is a mode of what she calls accountability. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Rosen [2015: 67, n. 5] allows that one can blame if one is disposed to (but does not currently) feel such an emotion or if one judges it appropriate to feel one; such cases are characterized in terms of the focal sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Rosen considers and rejects what he calls The Fittingness View of the appropriateness of emotion. He takes fittingness to be a primitive and sui generis relation. ‘Jokes are funny when they merit amusement; problems are interesting when they merit interest, etc. But there is no way to say in more basic terms what it is for a response to be appropriate’ [2015: 70]. However, if the fittingness of an emotion is construed in terms of the truth of thoughts implicit in it, then Rosen’s Alethic View is a fittingness view. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Like Strabbing, Rosen maintains that we can answer the question of what conditions must be satisfied to be blameworthy by determining what thoughts are implicit in blaming emotions. In the case of Rosen’s view, however, we would need further to determine the conditions for deserving to suffer for one’s wrongdoing. Portmore also advertises this feature of his view. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In previous work (e.g., his 2019), Portmore had characterized the representation included in emotion as *thought*. In his 2022, he notes that in experiencing an emotion, one need not have any *occurrent* or *conscious* thought that things are as represented in the emotion [2022: 53], and he maintains that one need not possess all of the concepts that figure in a correct articulation of the representation [ibid.: 54, n. 10]. Still, the view is that if one’s emotion is correctly interpreted as representing that *p*, then, in experiencing that emotion, one represents that *p*, and the emotion is fitting just in case this representation is true. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The object at which an emotion is directed is often called its *particular* object; the property it appraises that object as having is called its *formal* object. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Blame is often a persisting state that only occasionally occurs as a conscious episode. Persisting states of blame can differ with respect to how frequently they occur as conscious episodes. However, a difference of this kind is *not* a difference in the severity or size of blame with which we are concerned in this paper. It may be that there is something normative amiss even with blame that is fitting with respect to both shape and size if it occupies too much of the blamer’s mental life, but that question lies beyond our concerns here. (We thank a referee for raising this issue.) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Portmore also maintains that ‘someone is worthy of being blamed to extent E for having ϕ-ed only if E is proportionate to the stringency of the demand that she violated in ϕ-ing’ [2022: 66]. His view on this point is complicated by the fact that, as he sees it, as one suffers more guilt, regret, and remorse for a given misdeed, one deserves less further suffering for it. The extent of blame of which one remains worthy is then diminished, though of course the stringency of the demand that one has violated has not changed. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The difference between your relationships to the two offenders will likely make for some difference in your representations of them. For example, you might represent *your* child, but not your neighbor’s, as deserving punishment by *you*. We doubt that this difference need make for a difference in the sizes of your two blaming attitudes. We do not find that proponents of true-emotion views discuss this question. (We thank Justin D’Arms for raising the issue.) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Portmore observes that blame need not be heated or hostile. ‘When we blame some historical figure for some long past misdeed, we may be quite calm and sedate. For we may just calmly disapprove of what that figure has done while believing both that she did thereby violate a legitimate demand and that she did not suffer all the guilt, regret, and remorse that she deserved to suffer for having done so’ [2022: 73]. Although Portmore refers here to what one *believes*, on his view, *one’s blame itself* will have the indicated representational content. And (Portmore should agree) it can calmly represent a major offense and desert of great guilt. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Might the change in representation be a change in some further thought not identified by the true-emotion theorists we have discussed? We consider this possibility in section 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Callard [2018] examines an argument—the ‘eternal anger argument’—that yields this view of the matter. She eventually rejects it. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. A distinction between facts that provide reasons and background conditions relevant to whether those facts do so is drawn by Dancy [2004: 38-41], Schroeder [2007: 27-31], and Scanlon [2014: 48]. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This objection was suggested by a referee for this journal. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Might a true-emotion theorist take the diminishment of blame over time to be commonly *un*fitting? Only if it is held that blame’s representational content commonly changes as it diminishes over time, such that the later representations are false. We have not seen good reason to think that this is so. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. We thank an editor of this journal for making this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Hieronymi [2001] maintains that resentment includes such a judgment. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For comments on previous versions of this paper, we are grateful to Justin D’Arms, Peter Graham, and Doug Portmore. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)