

Blaming Reasonable Wrongdoers Matthew Talbert

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Abstract

“Reasonable wrongdoers” reasonably, but wrongly, take themselves to act permissibly. Many responsibility theorists assume that since we cannot reasonably expect these wrongdoers to behave differently, they are not blameworthy. These theorists impose a Reasonable Expectation Condition on blame. I argue that reasonable wrongdoers may be blameworthy. It is true that we often excuse reasonable wrongdoers, but sometimes this is because we do not regard their behavior as objectionable in a way that makes blame appropriate. As such, these cases do not support the proposition that wrongdoers are excused just because they reasonably take themselves to act permissibly. For the relevant support, we should consider cases in which a reasonable wrongdoer’s behavior is unambiguously objectionable by our moral lights. But here again we fail to find decisive support for the Reasonable Expectation Condition since it is not obvious—independent of a prior commitment to this condition—that such wrongdoers are not blameworthy. After laying out the above argument, as well as offering a positive account of why reasonable wrongdoers are sometimes blameworthy, I turn to consider objections. The most important of these is that it is simply unfair to blame those who reasonably take themselves to behave unobjectionably and who can’t be expected to behave otherwise.

1. Introduction

Our judgments about blameworthiness as well as our blaming responses often track our judgments about the wrongfulness of others’ behavior. This obvious feature of our blaming practices can conflict with a proposal that many find nearly as obvious, namely, that a person is blameworthy only if it was reasonable to expect her to refrain from the behavior for which she is blamed. This latter proposal imposes a Reasonable Expectation Condition (REC) on blame.¹ How should we assess the blameworthiness of a wrongdoer who does not meet this condition? I will argue that the Reasonable Expectation Condition is less well supported than is often supposed and that we can have good grounds for blaming those whom we regard as wrongdoers even if we recognize that they do not meet this condition.

My focus will be on *reasonable wrongdoers*: wrongdoers who reasonably believe that their behavior is permissible. According to proponents of REC, such wrongdoers are not blameworthy because it is unreasonable to expect them to omit behavior that they reasonably take to be

¹ Compare the Reasonable Expectation Criterion discussed by FitzPatrick (2017) and Rudy-Hiller (2020).

permissible.² I grant that reasonable wrongdoers can't reasonably be expected to omit their behavior, but I will argue that they may nonetheless be blameworthy.

My argument emphasizes the obvious feature of our blaming practices indicated in this essay's first sentence: we blame others in light of our own moral perspectives, and we tend to blame those whom we take to be wrongdoers. I aim to emphasize the subjective and perspectival nature of blame: the way it arises out of, and is justified in light of, a given perspective on what counts as wrongdoing. And I will argue that it is the moral perspective of a blamer, rather than of the blamed, that settles—from the blamer's moral perspective, and that of those who share it—whether another is blameworthy.

2. Blame and Blameworthiness

Along with most of the authors I discuss in this paper, I assume the influential Strawsonian perspective that takes moral blame to involve being subject to negative reactive emotions such as resentment and indignation.³ I also assume that for an agent to be blameworthy is for these blaming emotions to be appropriately directed toward that agent. So, when are these emotions, these blaming responses, appropriate?

I said in the Introduction that our blaming responses track our judgments about wrongdoing. But this is not quite right since we may take someone to be a wrongdoer without taking ourselves to have grounds for resenting them. For example, we may take a person to be both a wrongdoer and to be excused from blame. This can happen if we think that, while a person's behavior was wrong, it was not *objectionable in a way that is relevant to blame*. It is more accurate, then, to say that we tend to blame those whose behavior we take to be objectionable in a blame-relevant way.

When is behavior objectionable in this way? The Strawsonian perspective suggests that it is when behavior expresses unjustified ill will or lack of due regard for ourselves or for others or for some important value. In what follows, when I describe behavior as "objectionable," I will mean that it is objectionable in this blame-relevant way.

² See, e.g., Gideon Rosen's claim that "[i]t is unreasonable to expect people not to do what they blamelessly believe they are entitled to do, and it is unreasonable to subject people to sanctions [i.e., blame] when it would be unreasonable to expect them to have acted differently" (2003, 74-5). For similar views, see FitzPatrick (2008 and 2017), Fricker (2010), Levy (2003), Wolf (1987), and Zimmerman (1997).

³ The view derives from Strawson (1962). Resentment is the blaming attitude that *A* takes up toward *B* on *A*'s own behalf; indignation is the blaming attitude that *A* takes up toward *B* on someone else's behalf.

Our judgments about whether behavior is objectionable are related to our judgments about blameworthiness in various ways. When we judge that a person has *not* acted objectionably, we are likely to judge that she is not blameworthy: that is, not a proper object of negative reactive emotions. And when people disagree about whether an individual's behavior is objectionable, they are also likely to disagree about that individual's blameworthiness. Finally, when we judge that another has acted objectionably, we have, to that extent, reason to judge that she is blameworthy: such a judgement at least makes sense relative to our assessment of the other's behavior.

Now whether a person *is* blameworthy, as opposed to merely being judged to be so, will depend on whether her behavior is *actually* objectionable. So, my claim that reasonable wrongdoers can be blameworthy requires more than that our blame can be well-grounded relative to our own moral perspective; it also requires that reasonable wrongdoers' behavior can be actually objectionable. This is a licit assumption in this context since proponents of the Reasonable Expectation Condition accept that the behavior of reasonable wrongdoers can be genuinely objectionable. These authors simply hold that, while reasonable wrongdoers may act in ways that are objectionable, they are not blameworthy because of how their perspective on their own behavior affects what can be reasonably expected of them.⁴

In contrast, my view is that a wrongdoer's perspective on her own behavior, even if reasonably held, is typically immaterial to the question of whether she is blameworthy. I suggest that if a person judges that another has treated her objectionably and concludes that the other is blameworthy, this conclusion isn't called into question by the fact that the one she blames has a different view on the matter. And if we, as onlookers, share the blamer's judgment that she was treated objectionably, we should also see her blame as appropriate.

But here is a problem. We sometimes revise our judgments of blameworthiness when we realize that a wrongdoer reasonably took herself to act unobjectionably. Don't these cases support the idea that reasonable wrongdoers are not blameworthy? In the next section, I will argue that some of these cases do not provide such support because it is not facts about *the wrongdoer's*

⁴ I've said that whether an agent is actually blameworthy depends on the actual moral quality of her behavior. But my focus will be on the way that *our judgments* about this quality make blame fitting from our moral perspective, and also on the way that the judgments of those with whom we morally disagree can make their blame intelligible even when we regard it as mistaken. It's worth keeping in mind that there may be no judgment-independent facts about whether behavior is objectionable, and so no judgment-independent way in which people are blameworthy. But even in this case we can still make sense, along the lines I suggest, of why we blame others (because we judge certain behaviors objectionable) and of why we sometimes reject others' blame (because they blame—intelligibly, from their perspective—for behavior that we do not find objectionable).

moral perspective that explain our revised judgments about blameworthiness in these cases. Rather, we revise our judgments in these cases because *we* come to regard the wrongdoer's behavior as not fully objectionable. In discovering why a wrongdoer thinks their behavior unobjectionable, we may ourselves come to see it as less expressive of ill will or lack of regard than we had originally supposed.

So, the cases I have in mind don't give us reason to think that a wrongdoer's reasonable assessment of her behavior should, by itself, alter our judgment about her blameworthiness. If we want a case that supports this view, we must look elsewhere: we should look at cases in which a wrongdoer is intuitively not blameworthy and this is clearly because of how she views her own behavior and how this affects what can be expected of her. So, to ensure that it is facts about the wrongdoer's moral outlook that explain why we withhold blame in a given case, we should make sure that this explanatory work is not done by features of our own moral outlook. That is, we should consider cases in which a wrongdoer regards her behavior as unobjectionable, and yet *we* regard it as unambiguously so.

If a reader feels that wrongdoers in such cases are not blameworthy, this would give them reason to accept REC. But I will argue that these cases are precisely ones in which there isn't clear pressure—independent of a prior commitment to REC—to conclude that a wrongdoer is not blameworthy. In other words, the cases that would provide the clearest support for the blamelessness of reasonable wrongdoers threaten also to be counterexamples to this proposition.

I suggested at the beginning of this section that for an agent to be blameworthy is for blaming emotions to be appropriately directed toward her. So, the issue of blameworthiness—on a broadly Strawsonian view—comes down to the appropriateness of emotions like resentment. When are emotions appropriate? In an influential 2000 paper, D'Arms and Jacobson say they follow the dominant theoretical trend in characterizing emotions as “evaluative presentations” (66). “Emotions,” they say, “present things to us as having certain evaluative features,” and whether an emotion is appropriate or “fitting” will depend on “the correctness of these presentations” (D'Arms and Jacobson 2000, 72). Elsewhere, D'Arms and Jacobson (2003) suggest that the emotion of resentment presents another as having wronged us. However, for reasons given above, it would be more accurate to say that resentment, and thus blame, presents another as having acted objectionably, as having treated us with ill will or lack of due regard.

A rather quick argument now suggests itself. We have reason to blame reasonable wrongdoers because they are capable of acting in ways that we find objectionable, which makes our resentment of them fitting. I'll spend the next few sections trying to motivate this perspective independently of this too-quick argument. After responding to some initial objections in Section 6, I will return in Section 7 to the question of fitting resentment and I will consider the supposed retributive nature of blame. I will respond to the objection that resentment (and thus blame) represents its object as worthy of suffering. If this were correct, then reasonable wrongdoers might not be blameworthy because they may not deserve to suffer and would therefore fail to be fitting objects of resentment.

3. Fricker's Schoolmaster Example

Many philosophers think it inappropriate to blame wrongdoers for behavior that they reasonably took to be unobjectionable and that they therefore could not reasonably have been expected to avoid. Presentations of this view differ, but Miranda Fricker captures several features that they often have in common.

Fricker says that "it is non-controversial to claim it as a condition on appropriate blame that the agent could *reasonably be expected* to have refrained from the action or omission for which she is blamed" (2010, 165). This conjecture is motivated by reflecting on cases in which individuals hold objectionable beliefs and values that are part of the received wisdom of their cultures. These individuals are excused from blame because their cultural or historical position generates in them a "moral-epistemic incapacity" in virtue of which it is not reasonable to expect them to avoid certain types of wrongdoing (2010, 165).

Fricker applies this perspective in the following example:

imagine a traditional schoolmaster of two or three decades past, who regularly caned boys as punishment. In tune with the general collective moral consciousness of the time, he conceived his practice as a proper part of school discipline, at least for boys—perhaps he even sincerely regarded it as good for them. He was not disproportionate, did not take sadistic pleasure in it, was not engaged in any self-deception, willful moral blindness, or pre-emptively defensive rationalization. He may or may not have disliked having to do it, but in accordance with the attitudes of his day he ingenuously judged it the morally right thing to do. (2010, 165)

Fricker allows that it is "appropriate to judge this schoolmaster's actions as morally bad" but she believes that "it would be inappropriate to blame him for what he did" (2010, 165-166). This is

because “the *routine* moral thinking of the time deemed it permissible, even morally desirable,” to act as the schoolmaster did, and “agents can only be blameworthy in relation to the forms of moral thinking that were routine in their own time” (2010, 166).

Given the details provided, perhaps we should agree that Fricker’s schoolmaster avoids at least some degree of blame. However, the grounds for this assessment may have little to do with the schoolmaster’s sincere, culturally supported belief that he acted permissibly. If we regard the schoolmaster as less than fully blameworthy, I suspect this is because we do not take his behavior to be entirely objectionable in ways that would make resentment appropriate. While the schoolmaster behaves wrongly, it is not clear to what degree his behavior is objectionable in the blame-relevant sense because it is unclear whether his behavior is explained by an objectionable lack of concern for others. A natural reading of the case suggests that we are not meant to attribute such unconcern to the schoolmaster in any high degree.

In fact, Fricker suggests that the schoolmaster might have been motivated by his sense of what was *good* for his students. This helps to make the schoolmaster’s belief that he behaved permissibly more understandable, and it also makes him less clearly blameworthy in our eyes. Of course, we will want to know *why* the schoolmaster thought canings were good for students, and it will matter how well his thinking about good-making properties matches our own. It would be one thing if the schoolmaster thought that caning boys is good for them because it develops a virtue like fortitude; it would be something else if he thought that harsh punishment is good for boys because it turns them into bullies. This difference will matter for our assessment of blameworthiness to the degree that we ourselves find it unobjectionable to foster fortitude, and we take the opposite view of the aim of turning boys into bullies.

That the schoolmaster judges his behavior to be permissible may give us reason to expect that we will find something not entirely objectionable in his motives and ends. But we can imagine cases in which the schoolmaster judges his behavior to be unobjectionable and yet we find it unambiguously repugnant. Suppose that the schoolmaster believes that it is permissible to treat students sadistically regardless of whether this promotes anything that he (or we) would recognize as good for the students. In this case, I suspect that the schoolmaster’s conviction, even if it were culturally supported, would contribute little to excusing him in our eyes. This is because we would find nothing redeeming in the schoolmaster’s behavior, seeing it instead as substantially

characterized by motives and sentiments that we find objectionable in the way that makes the negative reactive attitudes involved in blame appropriate.

4. Reasonable Expectations and Reasonable Ignorance

I have suggested that we sometimes excuse reasonable wrongdoers, like Fricker's schoolmaster, not because *they* think they behave permissibly, but because *we* don't find their behavior fully objectionable. Examples meant to illustrate how a wrongdoer's own moral perspective furnishes grounds for excuse should avoid the reading I gave to Fricker's example. Such cases should feature wrongdoers whose behavior is characterized by values, motives, and ends that are, as nearly as possible, entirely objectionable in our eyes, and yet whom we still regard as unfit targets of blame.

Some may doubt that those who commit the most serious wrongs can ever genuinely regard their behavior as permissible. This is a fair concern, but I set it aside since proponents of the Reasonable Expectation Condition accept that even the worst wrongdoers (slaveowners, Nazis, etc.) can reasonably take themselves to behave permissibly. But what does it mean to say that a wrongdoer reasonably takes herself to behave permissibly or that it is not reasonable to expect her to avoid moral ignorance? In Fricker's example, the story is something like this: the schoolmaster reasonably forms false moral beliefs insofar as he has attended to the (misleading) evidence before him, such as the routine moral thinking of his time and place. And insofar as the schoolmaster forms his beliefs reasonably, it is unreasonable to expect him to have accurate views about what is permissible.

When accounts along these lines go into more detail, they may refer, as Gideon Rosen does, to epistemic obligations that apply to belief formation (2003, 70; 2004, 301). One who fulfills these obligations "has been neither negligent nor reckless in the management of his opinion"; as a result, any ignorance that he suffers "is blameless and so is the act done from ignorance" (Rosen 2003, 63). This applies to moral ignorance as well as to factual ignorance, so a slaveowner might act in "blameless moral ignorance" of the wrongness of slavery and it would then "be a mistake for us to blame the slaveholder—to feel anger or indignation directed at him for his action" (Rosen 2003, 66).

But moral ignorance will be blameworthy for Rosen if it stems from a culpable violation of an epistemic norm. When are such norm violations culpable? Perhaps only when they are—or are appropriately related to—*knowing* norm violations. The reasoning here is as follows: if an

epistemic norm is violated in ignorance, we must search for the grounds of culpability for this ignorance, and this buck-passing will stop only when we reach a knowing norm violation. On this basis, Rosen (2003 and 2004) claims that culpability for moral ignorance—and blameworthiness for actions done in ignorance—arises only as a result of knowing (that is, akratic) wrongdoing. Michael Zimmerman (1997) and Neil Levy (2003) defend similar views.

William FitzPatrick is attracted to Rosen’s core intuition that “it is unfair to blame someone for an action done out of ignorance that he cannot fairly be blamed for having” (FitzPatrick 2008, 601). But FitzPatrick argues that moral ignorance can be culpable even if it does not arise from knowing wrongdoing. On FitzPatrick’s view, morally ignorant wrongdoers will be blameworthy if their ignorance resulted from the (akratic or non-akratic) exercise of epistemic vices that it was reasonable to expect them to avoid (FitzPatrick 2008, 609).⁵

FitzPatrick thus allows for the blameworthiness of a wider swath of morally ignorant wrongdoers than Rosen does. But he still holds that such wrongdoers are not blameworthy if they act on reasonably acquired moral beliefs and values. We see this in FitzPatrick’s discussion of “Daniel,” a young man who holds, and acts upon, “virulently anti-homosexual beliefs” because he was raised in a community where such views were universally accepted and promoted (2017, 34). FitzPatrick allows that Daniel “acts badly” and that “it is appropriate for those subject to his vitriol to feel offended and hurt” (2017, 35). But Fitzpatrick judges that someone like Daniel is not blameworthy for his moral ignorance (given how it resulted from his “radically impoverished background”), and so neither is he “blameworthy for the behavior that straightforwardly issues from it” (2017, 35).

There may be other ways of spelling out what things such as “reasonable expectations” and “reasonable ignorance” come to, but we now have the basic elements of how several contributors to this debate use these and related concepts. In the next section, I shall take their usage to be the relevant one for the purposes of assessing a new case.

5. A Hard Case for the Reasonable Expectation Condition

Consider the following passage from Pekka Hämäläinen’s book on the Comanche empire, a political, military, and economic power that stretched across large parts of the American southwest and northern Mexico during the eighteenth century. The passage cites the observations of Andres

⁵ See Talbert (2017) for my objections to FitzPatrick’s account.

Varo, a Franciscan friar, regarding Comanche participation at trade fairs in the Spanish province of New Mexico. Among other activities, such as slave-trading, captives held by the Comanche were ransomed at these fairs:

even more shocking to Varo [than the complicity of Spanish governors in the slave trade] was the Comanches' behavior at the fairs. Before handing over female captives, he reported, they "deflower and corrupt them in the sight of the innumerable assemblies of barbarians and Catholics . . . saying to those who buy them, with heathen impudence: 'Now you can take her—now she is good.'" The horrified priest attributed such acts to Comanches' "unbridled lust and brutal shamelessness," but it is likely that the public rapes were a way to generate markets for captives. The serial rapes were a graphic forewarning of the horrors captive women would—at least supposedly—endure in Comanche hands should Spaniards refuse to ransom them. Brutality, in other words, helped legitimize slave markets in Spanish eyes. (Hämäläinen 2008, 45)

It's worth noting that while the practice alleged above is shocking, history records many cases in which sexual violence has been used to achieve political and military ends: the use of rape as a weapon of terror and ethnic cleansing in Rwanda and Bosnia are well-documented recent examples. But even if the facts are as Varo says, we may wonder whether the Comanche viewed the behavior described as permissible and whether such a belief was encouraged in their larger cultural context. Again, it is worth consulting history: many atrocities have had sincere defenders, and entire political and cultural groups have, at different times and places, viewed members of other groups as permissibly targeted for enslavement, rape, or extermination.⁶ It's not unrealistic, then, to consider a (perhaps fictional) version of the case in which the Comanche thought their behavior permissible, and not as a result of akrasia or epistemic vices but because this thought was widely accepted in their cultural context. On this version of the story, the Comanche would be reasonably ignorant wrongdoers in the sense described in the previous section.

The Comanche have views about how captives may be treated that are (I assume readers agree) objectionable, but by hypothesis, they are not at fault for having these views. Philosophers who conclude on these grounds that the Comanche are not blameworthy tend to focus on the

⁶ There's no shortage of examples. Staying within the American context, an obvious one is the politically popular genocide of the native population; see Madley (2016) for the case that "genocide" is the correct term. Another obvious example is the institution of slavery in the southern United States. Many southerners regarded slavery as permissible. I will cite only Alexander Stephens, Vice President of the Confederate States of America, who claimed that the Confederacy's "cornerstone rests upon the great truth, that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery . . . is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is . . . based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth" (Harrold 2008, 61).

processes by which reasonable wrongdoers acquire their moral perspectives. I suggest that we focus on something else, on how victims of reasonable wrongdoers might view the wrongs done to them.⁷ How should the Comanches' captives have viewed their treatment? I suggest that they may reasonably have viewed it as morally objectionable in a way that makes the emotional responses involved in blame appropriate. If readers agree that it would have been appropriate for the captives to view their treatment this way, then they should regard the Comanche as blameworthy—that is, as worthy objects of the captives' blaming responses. (This should be so even if readers do not feel appropriately positioned themselves—historically and culturally—to blame the Comanche.)

And if the Comanche are not blameworthy, how might we explain this to the victims themselves? Consider the plausibility of the following attempt, modeled on a passage from Rosen (2004, 306):

Through no fault of their own, the Comanche found themselves believing that all things considered, their treatment of you was justified. Given that they found themselves in this state, they can hardly be faulted for what they did. We can fault them for what they did only if we can fault them for thinking that their actions were permissible. Since by hypothesis, it is not their fault that they held this view, you have no option but to conclude that they are not blameworthy for their bad actions.

Perhaps no one would actually *say* this to the captives, but if you believe that reasonable wrongdoers are not blameworthy, perhaps this is what you should think about the captives' case. Or, if this seems too unsympathetic, we might say that while the Comanche are not blameworthy, it is nevertheless *understandable*—though not appropriate—that their victims would blame them. In this way, the captives might at least themselves avoid blame for inappropriately blaming the Comanche. But I don't think either of these responses does justice to the moral significance that the captives' treatment plausibly had for them and that it presumably has for us.

As I've said, I think it is reasonable for the captives to view their treatment as objectionable in a way that makes blaming responses appropriate. Despite their moral ignorance, the Comanche acted deliberately, in awareness of the effects of their actions on others, and without a justification for their actions that the captives should accept.⁸ In sum, the Comanches' behavior manifested

⁷ For discussion of a victim-centered approach to blame (in the context of sexual violence in war) see Talbert and Wolfendale (2019, pp. 105-108).

⁸ Assuming Varo's account is accurate, it is possible that the Comanche practice he described could be explained or interpreted in such a way that it comes to seem less objectionable in our eyes than it initially appears. Whatever the

disregard for the captives' welfare and interests, and this gives the captives reason to see that behavior as objectionable in the blame-relevant sense.

Perhaps the Comanche sincerely viewed female prisoners as available for sexual violence, and perhaps they unavoidably held this view because their social context unambiguously supported it. This might mean that the Comanche were not at fault for seeing their actions as unobjectionable, but it would not mean that the captives had reason to see their actions this way. The fact that the Comanche were not at fault for having their moral views does not entail that their behavior was expressive of less disregard than would otherwise have been the case. Therefore, considerations that explain why the Comanche were plausibly not at fault for their moral ignorance do not necessarily give the captives reason to forswear the blaming attitudes typically aroused by significant moral disregard.⁹

I have spoken of the Comanches' "moral ignorance," but the matter can also be cast as a conflict between moral perspectives: that of the Comanche and the captives. I have emphasized the captives' side in this disagreement, but I am not suggesting that their perspective determines how *we* assess the Comanche and their blameworthiness. Rather, my point is that if we find that our perspective on what counts as objectionable aligns with the captives', then, given *our own* moral outlook, we should take their blame to be appropriate.

An opponent might say that I have merely emphasized the objectionable nature of the Comanches' conduct. And how does that settle their blameworthiness? After all, proponents of the Reasonable Expectation Condition can admit that the behavior in question is objectionable. They just think that more is required for blameworthiness: the Comanche must also have been at fault for their ignorance about the quality of their behavior. But suppose that the Comanche were at fault in this way. I do not see how this would transform their case from one that doesn't feature blameworthiness into one that does. The Comanche would of course be blameworthy in this modified version of the case, but as I see it, the aptness of the captives' blame would still be explained by features that were present in the original version: the moral quality of the Comanches' behavior.

historical merit of such an account, it should be avoided in the present context so that the case is not open to the reading I gave to Fricker's schoolmaster example.

⁹ The point here is related to Hieronymi's (2004, 135) suggestion that blaming attitudes "are *simply* reactions to ... the importance of a display of ill will or disregard" and are shown to be unfair only on a showing of the absence of these properties.

6. Initial Objections

My account emphasizes the role that blamers' views about what is objectionable play in justifying their blaming responses. Here is a worry about this approach. Consider a society in which women are expected to defer to men. If a woman in this society fails to defer to a man, she is understood to treat him objectionably. Is such a woman blameworthy?

The thing to note here is that if *you* do not believe that a woman treats a man with objectionable disregard just because she fails to defer to him, then you have no reason to think that the woman in question is blameworthy. This is compatible with seeing that the woman is intelligibly blamed from a perspective that accepts another set of values. But insofar as you take those values to be mistaken, you will reasonably reject conclusions about blameworthiness that reflect those values.

Now consider a context of shared moral values. Suppose that *A* has apparently compelling—but, we realize, misleading—evidence that *B* treated her objectionably. We may share *A*'s views about when behavior is objectionable, and we may regard *A*'s blame as fitting from her point of view, but conclude that *B* is not blameworthy because we see that the standard for objectionable behavior (that we share with *A*) is not met in this case.

A second worry is that my account presupposes such a close connection between wrongdoing and judgments of blameworthiness that it can't accommodate recognition of blameless wrongdoing.¹⁰ This objection doesn't get much traction against my view. It was partly in order to forestall it that in Section 2 I shifted the focus from wrongful behavior to behavior that is objectionable in the blame-relevant sense. I do not claim that all wrongdoing is blameworthy: there can be wrongdoing that is excused because it is not relevantly objectionable.

I am not even committed to the claim that all objectionable behavior is blameworthy, or to the claim that just because you take another to have acted objectionably, you have subjective grounds for blame. You may judge that a person has acted objectionably, but if this judgment is formed in haste or on flimsy evidence, you may lack grounds for blame even from your own perspective. And in addition to depending on whether one's behavior is objectionable, blameworthiness may also depend on whether one was subjected to brainwashing or suffers from delusions, or on whether one has the general capacity to make sense of moral considerations, and

¹⁰ For this sort of argument, directed against views related to the one defended here, see Levy (2005).

so on.¹¹ My claim is only that *satisfying the Reasonable Expectation Condition* and *not being a reasonable wrongdoer* are not among the additional conditions that apply to blameworthiness.

7. Retribution and Fitting Resentment¹²

I've spoken throughout this paper of the appropriateness or fittingness of blame and resentment. But what, exactly, makes resentment a fitting emotional response, and is it fitting in the case of reasonable wrongdoers?

Many accounts interpret blame in terms of resentment, but few have given detailed attention to the conditions under which resentment is appropriate. Recent exceptions include Peter Graham (2014), Gideon Rosen (2015), and Jada Strabbing (2019), all of whom assume that an emotion is fitting if certain thoughts—constitutive of the emotion in question—are true. So, if fear of *X* involves the thought “*X* is dangerous,” then fear of *X* will be fitting only if this thought is true of *X*. Applying this perspective to blame and resentment, we get something like Rosen’s “Alethic View”: “For *X* to be morally blameworthy for *A* just is for it to be appropriate to resent *X* for *A*, or in other words, for the thoughts implicit in resentment ... to be true” (2015, 72). Graham and Strabbing make similar claims.

If the authors just mentioned take emotions *in general* to be partly constituted by particular thoughts that represent the world as being a certain way, then their views conflict with D’Arms and Jacobson’s (2000) approach, which I briefly described at the end of Section 2. As D’Arms explains in a recent paper critical of Rosen’s Alethic View, the perspective that he and Jacobson developed accepts “that emotional fittingness is a matter of correctness, while denying that it is a matter of representational accuracy,” and in particular their view denies that the fittingness of an emotion is a matter of the truth of some thought or belief (2022, 108).¹³

But this disagreement need not delay us here because D’Arms and Jacobson’s account of *resentment* matches what Rosen, Graham, and Strabbing say quite well. For D’Arms and Jacobson,

¹¹ Reasonable wrongdoers may have difficulty avoiding false moral beliefs, but I assume that they can fulfill the conditions on blameworthiness just mentioned. These agents may have moral blind spots, but they are not generally insensitive to moral considerations. The average slaveowner or Nazi was not literally a psychopath.

¹² I thank two anonymous reviewers for this journal for encouraging me to include the material in this section, as well as for their suggestions about how to proceed.

¹³ I thank Robert Pál-Wallin for bringing D’Arms’ recent paper to my attention and for discussing the fittingness of emotions with me. D’Arms admits that it’s not unreasonable to read his and Jacobson’s 2000 paper as giving an account of fittingness in terms of representational accuracy; he notes that D’Arms and Jacobson (2023) aims at avoiding this mis-interpretation (D’Arms 2022, 123 n. 27).

resentment is a sort of moralized anger: a “cognitive sharpening” of that more basic non-cognitive emotional kind. As a cognitively sharpened emotion, resentment does have a “constitutive thought,” something along the lines of: *I was wronged* (2003, 143).¹⁴

Graham, Rosen, and Strabbing all suggest that resentment is partly constituted by a similar thought. Graham says, “the content of a blame emotion felt toward a person for φ -ing is that ... that person has violated a moral requirement of respect” (2014, 408). Rosen says that “resentment of X for A involves” the thoughts “It was *wrong* for X to do A” and “In doing A, X showed an objectionable pattern of concern” (2015, 77). Strabbing says, “the following thought partly constitutes resentment: in doing A, S expressed insufficient good will toward me” (2019, 3127).

So, is it appropriate to blame—to feel resentment toward—reasonable wrongdoers? As I suggested at the end of Section 2, on the account considered here, it seems it often will be appropriate. Reasonable wrongdoers can exhibit a lack of respect, an objectionable pattern of concern, or insufficient good will. So, any of these plausible candidates for the constitutive thought involved in resentment can be true of reasonable wrongdoers.

Yet despite understanding blameworthiness in terms of fitting resentment, Rosen is a prime example of one who thinks it inappropriate to blame reasonable wrongdoers. Why is this? The explanation is that Rosen takes resentment to involve more than just the thought that another treated us with disregard or ill will; he says it also involves “*the retributive thought*” that “X deserves to suffer for doing A” (2015, 83). But this thought is false of paradigmatically blameless agents such as “children and impaired adults” (Rosen 2015, 84). Rosen says that these agents do not deserve to suffer for violating moral requirements because “it is unfair to sanction someone for violating a moral rule if he substantially lacked the capacity to recognize and respond to the reasons for complying with it” (2015, 84). I assume that Rosen would say something similar about reasonable wrongdoers: the thought that they deserve to suffer is false, so they are not blameworthy, not fitting objects of resentment.

Similarly, Strabbing argues that resentment of S is partly constituted by the thought that “S could have done better,” where this “is understood to mean that S could have acted with a better quality of will” (2019, 3129). Strabbing gives the example of Nora, a woman who “resents her

¹⁴ This account is carried over to D’Arms and Jacobson (2023) where they describe resentment as “an emotion that by definition requires thinking oneself to have been morally wronged” (109, note 6).

cold and critical mother for not expressing love to her as a child” (2019, 3129). However, when “Nora learns that her mother’s parents were also cold and critical” and that her youthful mother “felt overwhelmed with the responsibility” of parenting, she “feels compassion for her mother rather than resentment,” now thinking “although my mom made a lot of mistakes, she did the best that she could” (Strabbing 2019, 3129). Nora’s mother, then, is not a fitting target of Nora’s resentment because Nora no longer believes something that would, on Strabbing’s account, partly constitute the feeling of resentment: that her mother could have done better.

Is Rosen right that resenting someone *requires* thinking that the person deserves to suffer? It may be true that feelings of resentment are often accompanied by such a thought, but as D’Arms suggests, it seems that “[p]lenty of people are committed to the theoretical position that no one deserves to suffer, and this does not immunize them to resentment” (2022, 119 n. 20). We can imagine such people experiencing the moralized anger of resentment simply because they take themselves to have been treated objectionably.

This suggests that resentment need not involve Rosen’s retributive thought. Or, if we insist that it does, then I suggest that there is a closely related emotional syndrome that does not involve the retributive thought, but only the more basic thought—which may be accurately held of a reasonable wrongdoer—that another has acted objectionably. Call this emotion resentment*.¹⁵ Minimally, my claim is that reasonable wrongdoers can be blameworthy in the sense that they can be appropriate objects at least of resentment*. Perhaps reasonable wrongdoers do not deserve to suffer, but there is a form of resentment, and thus of blame, that does not presume that they do.¹⁶

Now return to Strabbing’s example of Nora. Suppose that Nora still feels toward her mother the moralized anger of resentment even though she believes that her mother could not reasonably have been expected to act better. On Strabbing’s view, Nora is making a sort of mistake: she experiences an emotion that is at odds with her belief. On my view, though, Nora may appropriately feel a more limited form of resentment than what Strabbing has in mind; this form

¹⁵ See Talbert (2014) and Hieronymi (2014) for discussion of something along the lines of resentment*.

¹⁶ An anonymous reviewer for this journal wonders whether there’s merely a verbal dispute between me and Rosen. Rosen thinks resentment is not fitting in the case of reasonable wrongdoers, and I think that something else, resentment*, is fitting. But since these things are not identical, perhaps there’s no real conflict between us. I take the disagreement to be more substantial since I regard resentment* as a serious form of moral blame characterized by a type of morally offended anger that I assume Rosen would find inappropriate in the case of reasonable wrongdoers. In addition, I suspect that what I call resentment* is the fundamental form of the emotion in question (and thus the more basic form of moral blame), and that Rosen’s “resentment” is a derivative cognitive sharpening (to use D’Arms and Jacobson’s phrase) of this more basic form.

of moral anger is partly constituted by the (true) thought that her mother showed Nora insufficiently good will. This emotion is a type of moral blame that seems to me entirely fitting on Nora's part, and it is compatible with her belief that her mother was victimized in ways similar to Nora herself.

I've argued that reasonable wrongdoers can be blameworthy in that they can be fitting objects of resentment, or at least resentment*. Since we're talking about the fittingness of experiencing an emotion, concerns about the fairness of adverse, retributive responses don't seem especially pressing here (Rosen's interpretation of resentment aside). As Graham puts it, "[a]s blaming someone consists in feeling certain emotions toward her, it is not a form of adverse treatment at all" (2014, 391).

However, I also believe that it can be appropriate for a victim of a reasonable wrongdoer to *express* their blaming emotions. I take it to be often appropriate for a victim to protest the wrong done to them, to insist—perhaps in the face of the one who wronged them—on their views about their own moral standing and the objectionable nature of the treatment they received.¹⁷ I do not argue that any harsher treatment than this is permissible, but we may think that expressions of resentment are already harsh treatment, which raises questions about whether such treatment is fair, particularly if it cannot be avoided.

Given this concern, we should focus on the sort of harsh treatment and potential suffering at issue here. Rosen claims that in resenting, we want the object of our resentment to “suffer *in recognizing* what she has done”; “expressions of resentment” aim, he says, “to induce this sort of pain-in-recognition” (2015, 82). Assume that this is correct. How does it apply to reasonable wrongdoers? One possibility is that a victim's expressed blame fails to induce in a reasonable wrongdoer painful recognition of the wrong they have done. After all, the wrongdoer's mistaken moral perspective will tend to militate against such recognition. But in this case, concerns about the fairness of the suffering at which resentment is said to aim have little purchase.

Another possibility is that the reasonable wrongdoer *is* brought to painful moral recognition partly through expressions of resentment and moral objection. I suggested in the last section (in note 11) that we should not think of reasonable wrongdoers as morally insensible psychopaths. It may not have been reasonable to expect such a wrongdoer to recognize the moral status of their

¹⁷ For accounts of blame as moral protest, see Hieronymi (2001), Talbert (2012), and Smith (2013).

behavior at the time of action, but it does not follow that there is no chance that they will respond constructively, perhaps after a time, to moral criticism and objection.

Suppose, then, that a reasonable wrongdoer is brought to the painful recognition that they have treated others objectionably. Should we see this pain—the pangs of guilt—as unjustly inflicted? Presumably, the person who feels such guilt will not think so. From their perspective, they have simply recognized a painful moral truth. This will be our perspective too, at least if we agree that the person in question really did fail to treat others with due regard. We might try to reduce the guilt feelings of the wrongdoer, emphasizing, for example, that when they did all those horrible things, they were acting in accordance with social norms that they couldn't help but accept. This might have some effect, but if the wrongdoer really has come to regard their former behavior as morally horrible, it is unlikely to completely extirpate unpleasant feelings of self-recrimination. Indeed, were our reformed wrongdoer to be entirely free of such feelings, we might well doubt their new moral awareness.

Given the above considerations, I am not greatly moved by fairness-based concerns about the potentially painful effects of expressions of blame in cases of reasonable wrongdoing. The pain arises only for someone that we will regard as having come to moral recognition. We might take such moral improvement to justify the pain associated with it, and the reformed wrongdoer may well view their painful guilt feelings the same way: as a wholly appropriate response to past wrongdoing. In addition, I find a sort of unfairness in the idea that those whom we regard as having been wronged are required to stifle expressions of their moral emotions. If forced to choose between the right of one whom I take to have been wronged to express a moral conviction to that effect, and the right of the one who wronged them to not be painfully informed of the nature of their actions, I would choose the former.

There's a final point I'll make in the face of the intuition that it is unfair to blame those from whom we can't expect better behavior. Such blame is sometimes unfair, but when is this most obvious? Perhaps the clearest cases of unfair blame involve wrongdoing that is explained by external coercion or by the wrongdoer's blameless ignorance of the consequences of their action.

In a case where coercive pressure is applied to an agent, it can be unreasonable to expect them to refrain from the action that the pressure aims to elicit, and even if that action is wrong, we may find it inappropriate to blame the coerced agent. But it is not clear that the unreasonable expectation explains the lack of blameworthiness. A coerced agent does not act as she pleases, so

her behavior should not have for us the significance that it might have had in the absence of coercion. In particular, we won't take a coerced agent's behavior to be objectionable in the blame-relevant sense if we don't take it to be explained by objectionable attitudes and motives. But in this case, the agent's behavior lacks the most basic element of blameworthiness independently of whether they could reasonably have been expected to behave differently. Something similar can be said of one who is non-culpably unaware that their action will cause unjustified harm. The action may be wrong and the agent blameless, and it may also be unreasonable to expect them to have refrained from the action, but their blamelessness is most directly explained by the fact they did not act with objectionable disregard for the consequences of their actions.

If these scenarios are the ones in which the unfairness of blame is most clear, they don't give us reason to think that it is unfair to blame reasonable wrongdoers *just because* we can't expect better of them. And they certainly don't give us reason to think that blame is unfair in the cases I have urged us to focus on: cases in which the behavior of reasonable wrongdoers is, by our lights, wholly objectionable. I conclude that it is at least not "non-controversial," as we saw Fricker say, that it is unfair to blame those who can't be expected to behave better.

8. Conclusion

Some responsibility theorists assume that if a wrongdoer reasonably takes herself to act permissibly, then we can't expect her to omit her wrongdoing, and she is therefore not blameworthy. These theorists impose a Reasonable Expectation Condition on blame, and I have argued against this imposition.

My argument emphasizes the fact that we blame others in light of our own moral perspectives. And I have suggested that it is the moral perspective of a blamer—in particular what they take to be objectionable—that settles for the blamer (and those who share her moral commitments) whether another is blameworthy. By contrast, a wrongdoer's perspective on her own behavior—whether she regards it as objectionable or not—is typically immaterial to judging her blameworthiness. That is, it is irrelevant to thinking about whether she is an appropriate object, on account of the action in question, of the emotional responses involved in blame.

I'll close by briefly emphasizing the ways in which my view bears on issues of practical significance. For one thing, the view I have outlined makes it clear how we can make sense of the blaming practices of those with whom we have entrenched and systematic moral disagreements.

Our blame is informed by our values, and so those with different values may blame and excuse differently from us. We can make sense of these divergent practices by noting that they hinge on what some other person or group takes to be objectionable. In this way, blaming practices that are, by our lights, mistaken may still remain intelligible to us as blaming practices.

I have also tried to make sense of moral blame *across* significantly divergent moral perspectives. I have argued that allowing for such blame is a crucial element of moral respect for those that we regard as victims.¹⁸ I am particularly interested here in systematic harms to victims. These are harms that occur in the context of society-wide practices such as slavery or as a result of norms and institutions that perpetuate racism or sexism within a society. I also have in mind atrocities that occur in war, such as the systematic use of rape as a tool of ethnic cleansing (as mentioned in Section 5). In cases of systematic wrongful harm, wrongdoing is supported by widely-accepted norms that are enforced via education and indoctrination. In this context, we are quite likely to encounter reasonable wrongdoers. And these systematic harms are also among the greatest enormities of any age.

To disallow blame on the part of victims in cases like these does a great disservice to them. For one thing, it fails to do justice to the moral nature of the treatment to which victims have been subjected. I worry that to ask the victim of ethnic cleansing, for example, to excuse their victimizer because the latter is in the grip of a view according to which the victim's suffering is justified by sectarian goals comes close to asking the victim to accept a false moral perspective, which may indeed be the perspective of their victimizer. It asks the victim to not view the treatment they received as objectionable and as open to the sort of moral anger involved in blame. Honoring the perspectives of those we regard as victims, and respecting the moral quality that we ourselves assign to the wrongs done to them, requires, I think, acknowledging the validity of their expressions of moral anger—in other words, their blame.¹⁹

¹⁸ For development of this point, see Talbert and Wolfendale (2019, pp. 105-108).

¹⁹ I wrote an initial draft of this paper ten years ago, and I have presented versions of it at a number of conferences and workshops over the years. I'd like to thank participants at these events for their questions, and I would like to thank Shane Gronholz and Santiago Amaya for presenting comments on the paper at events in 2013 and 2014 respectively. For written comments, I am very grateful to Dan Miller, Ben Mitchell-Yellin, Justin Snedegar, Steven Sverdlik, and András Szigeti. Finally, I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for *Res Publica* as well as one of the editors of the journal, Sune Lægaard, for their helpful comments.

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